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2 Major Medical Conditions: Prevention, Detection, and Treatment

Ask someone what they fear most, and if they think for a few seconds, they'll probably tell you that they dread the prospect of developing a major illness, like heart disease, stroke, or cancer. And in the scheme of things, it's easy to see why personal illness is more stressful than getting fired from your job or suffering a financial collapse.

Yet if you're like most people, you probably don't spend a lot of time worrying about major illness—how you'll survive, how you'll pay the bills, how your family will manage, or whether or not you'll be able to get around the way you're accustomed to. Mostly, you just keep your fingers crossed or pray you'll never have to deal with debilitating medical problems.

A little thought now—and some simple preventive action—can help head off major diseases, though. At the very least, detecting a problem early can save you lots of time, money, and pain—perhaps even save your life. And if you do develop a major medical condition, knowing something about your treatment options can help you minimize its negative impact on your health, your lifestyle, and your finances. (Needless to say, professional medical advice is not only useful and wise at every stage of disease, it's often essential. Consult your doctor if you develop a problem.)

This chapter gives capsule descriptions of 28 major medical conditions and explains what you can do about them. Think of this section as a map to guide you through the medical maze that can confront you if you develop a health problem.

50 Alzheimer's Disease: Making Up for Poor Memory

Mysterious and frustrating, Alzheimer's afflicts nearly four million Americans, about 10 percent of the over-65 population, and 45 percent of those 85 years or older. (In rare instances, it strikes earlier than 65.)

No one knows what causes Alzheimer's disease. Some research hints that a virus is the culprit. Nevertheless, the end result is the death of brain cells that control intellect—the way your brain receives and processes information.

Symptoms of Alzheimer's include:

- Brief attention span
- Decreased bowel or bladder control (rarely)
- Depression
- Disorientation
- Forgetfulness (especially about recent events)
- Inability to handle minor tasks, or to speak clearly
- Irritability, hostile behavior, or paranoia
- Lack of spontaneity
- Mental deterioration
- Neglecting to perform routine tasks

If someone you care about shows signs of Alzheimer's disease, see that they get medical attention to confirm (or rule out) the diagnosis. Not everything that looks like Alzheimer's is Alzheimer's. Brain tumors, blood clots in the brain, severe vitamin B₁₂ deficiency, hypothyroidism, and some drug side effects can mimic Alzheimer's disease. (Unlike Alzheimer's, these problems can be treated.)

Prescription medicines (brand names Aricept, Cognex, Exelon, Reminyl, etc.), if given in the early stages of the disease, may help with memory in some persons. Sometimes medications to treat depression, paranoia, and agitation can minimize symptoms, but will not necessarily improve memory.

It's especially helpful to put structure in the life of someone who's in the early stages of Alzheimer's. Some suggestions include:

- Maintain daily routines.
- Post reminders on an oversized and prominently displayed calendar.
- Make “to do” lists of daily tasks for the person with Alzheimer's to complete, and ask him or her to check them off as they're completed.
- Put things in their proper places after use, to help the person with Alzheimer's find things when he or she needs them.
- Post safety reminders (like “turn off the stove”) at appropriate places throughout the house.

Also, see that the person with Alzheimer's eats well-balanced meals, goes for walks with family members, and otherwise continues to be as active as possible. Alzheimer's victims should wear medical identification tags.

51 Angina: What It Tells You About Your Heart

The symptoms of angina are:

- Squeezing pressure or heaviness or mild ache in the chest.
- A feeling that you're choking or shortness of breath.
- A feeling of aching in the chest muscles, jaw, one or both arms, neck and/or back.
- A sensation of heaviness, tingling, or numbness (most commonly in the left arm).
- A feeling of gas in the upper abdomen and lower chest.

Many people who experience angina for the first time fear they're having a heart attack. Here's why angina and heart attack are mistaken for each other.

- Both can be caused by a buildup of fatty plaque (atherosclerosis) in the heart arteries, blocking or slowing delivery of blood to the heart.
- In both, the pain can be felt in the chest, arms, shoulders, and/or neck.

- Both may be brought on by extreme physical exertion.
- Both are most prevalent in men who are 50 and older and women who are past menopause.

But there is a key difference. A heart attack leaves damaged or injured heart muscle in its wake; angina does not. Rather, anginal pain is a warning sign of a potential heart attack. The discomfort indicates that the heart isn't getting enough blood.

A doctor can diagnose angina as stable or unstable based on: your description of the painful episode; tests such as a stress test (a measurement of heart function taken while you exercise on a treadmill); and observation for a day in the hospital. Unstable angina, a symptom of coronary artery disease, requires immediate attention

Exertion or physical work is associated with an angina attack. So is walking rapidly uphill, emotional shock, anger or excitement, and hurrying up the stairs.

High blood pressure, obesity, diabetes, high cholesterol, smoking, or a family history of atherosclerotic heart disease increase the odds of angina. (See Tip 57 for a description of heart attack signs.) If you've experienced angina, the following steps can head off further attacks.

- Consult your doctor or cardiologist. He or she will probably prescribe nitroglycerin or another medication to temporarily dilate, or widen, the coronary arteries. Nitroglycerin takes effect within a minute or two. A low-dose daily aspirin may also be prescribed.
- Don't smoke. Nicotine in cigarettes constricts the arteries and prevents proper blood flow.
- Avoid large, heavy meals; eat lighter meals throughout the day.
- After eating, rest or engage in some quiet activity.
- Minimize exposure to cold, windy weather.
- Lower your cholesterol level, if high. Follow a low-fat, low-saturated fat diet. Take lipid-lowering medicines if prescribed.
- Avoid sudden physical exertion, such as running to catch a bus.

52 Arthritis: Easy Exercise for Creaky Joints

Arthritis robs some 40 million Americans of their freedom of movement by breaking down the protective cartilage in the joints. By destroying cartilage, arthritis results in pain and decreased movement.

The following can be warning signs of arthritis. If any of these symptoms are present, consult your doctor.

- Stiffness
- Swelling in one or more joints
- Deep, aching pain in a joint
- Pain that comes with joint movement
- Tenderness, warmth, or redness in affected joints
- Fever, weight loss, or fatigue that accompanies joint pain

Many forms of arthritis exist. Three of the most common are osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, and ankylosing spondylitis.

Osteoarthritis is a painful degeneration of the cartilage in the weight-bearing and frequently used joints. As far as researchers can tell, this kind of arthritis is typically brought on by genetics and wear and tear on the joints. It can also follow an injury to the joint. Osteoarthritis often affects older people and is the most common type of arthritis. Brief pain and stiffness at the beginning of the day are typical.

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) results in chronic inflammation of the fingers, wrists, ankles, elbows, and knees, causing pain, swelling, and tenderness. Morning stiffness lasting longer than an hour is very common. RA affects women more often than men, striking in their thirties and forties.

Ankylosing spondylitis generally affects young men between the ages of 15 and 45 and is characterized by a stiff backbone, accompanied by low back pain.

If your doctor does diagnose arthritis, he or she may prescribe medication (usually aspirin or a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug), rest, heat or cold treatment, and some physical therapy or exercise, depending on what kind of arthritis you have. The goal is to reduce pain and improve joint mobility.

Among those treatments, exercise is perhaps the most important, whether it is some form of stretching, isometrics, or simple endurance exercise. Exercise seems to provide both physical relief and psychological benefits. For example, it prevents the muscles from shrinking, while inactivity encourages both loss of muscle tone and bone deterioration. Too much exercise, however, will cause more pain in those with rheumatoid arthritis. So if you have arthritis, consult your physician, a physical therapist, or a physiatrist (a doctor who specializes in rehabilitative treatment) to assist you in developing an exercise program.

One form of exercise that's effective and soothing is hydrotherapy, or movement done in water. It allows freedom of movement and puts less stress on the joints because nearly all of the body weight is supported by the water. Doctors highly recommend swimming, too.

But remember, hydrotherapy—or any form of exercise—should never produce pain. One message that can't be emphasized enough is, "Go easy." If you begin to hurt, stop and rest or apply ice packs.

The following exercise suggestions may provide relief.

- Choose exercise routines that use all affected joints.
- Keep movements gradual, slow, and gentle.
- If a joint is inflamed, don't exercise it.
- Don't overdo it. Allow yourself sufficient rest.
- Concentrate on freedom of movement, especially in the water, and be patient.

53 Cancer: Look for Clues That Can Save Your Life

What do cancer and lightning have in common? The answer: Most people think they come out of the blue—either they strike you down, or (if you're lucky) they don't. But that's where the similarity ends. Far more people die from cancer than get hit by lightning—it's the second leading cause of death in the United States (heart disease is first). Current estimates say that 1 in 3 of all Americans will develop some kind of cancer in their lifetimes, the most common forms being cancer of the skin, prostate, breast, lungs, colon and rectum, urinary tract, and uterus.

Of course, that means 2 in 3 of us won't get cancer. Luck is only part of the explanation. Cancer-free people may be doing something right—like not smoking, eating the right foods, drinking little or no alcohol, or protecting themselves from workplace chemicals. Cigarette smoking is estimated to be responsible for more than 85 percent of all lung cancer deaths. Diet is thought to be a factor in 35 percent of all cancers. And other lifestyle factors that increase the risk of cancer include alcohol use, work-related exposure to dangerous chemicals, and exposure to radiation. (But whether or not you practice preventive measures against cancer, it's a good idea to be alert to early possible signs of the disease. If you can detect cancer early and get proper treatment, your chances for survival increase considerably.)

Check with your doctor if you notice any of the following symptoms.

- Any change in bladder or bowel habits
- A lump or thickening in the breast, testicles, or anywhere else
- Unusual vaginal bleeding or rectal discharge or unusual bleeding from any part of the body
- Persistent hoarseness or nagging cough
- A sore that doesn't heal
- Noticeable change in a wart or mole
- Indigestion or difficulty swallowing

54 Cataracts: New Ways to Restore Vision

Imagine a thick cloud covering the lens of one or both eyes and you'll have a pretty good idea of what it's like to have cataracts. Vision dims, even in broad daylight. Nighttime vision is glazed. Sometimes you see double and your eyes are sensitive to light. Your pupils may appear milky white. (Fortunately, cataracts are painless.)

Other symptoms to be alert for:

- Cloudy, fuzzy, foggy, or filmy vision
- Colors are dull and more difficult to distinguish.
- Glare from lights becomes bothersome, especially at night.
- Glasses that were worn for close work are no longer needed. (This phenomenon is referred to as "second sight.")

The most common cause of cataracts is the aging process. Overexposure to ultraviolet (UV) light, specific damage to an eye, and some diseases, such as diabetes can also lead to cataracts. If the vision loss caused by a cataract is only slight, surgery may not be needed. A change in your glasses, stronger bifocals, or the use of magnifying lenses, and taking measures to reduce glare may help improve your vision and be enough for treatment.

Modern cataract surgery is safe and effective in restoring vision. Ninety-five percent of operations are successful. For the most part, surgery can be done on an outpatient basis or involve no more than an overnight hospital stay.

A person who has cataract surgery usually gets an artificial lens at the same time. A plastic disc called an intraocular lens is placed in the lens capsule inside the eye. Other choices are contact lenses and cataract glasses. Your doctor will help you to decide which choice is best for you.

While alcohol abuse is the most common cause of cirrhosis, hepatitis, taking certain drugs, or exposure to certain chemicals can also produce this condition.

Doctors recognize the following as signs of advanced cirrhosis.

- Enlarged liver
- Yellowish eyes and skin, and tea-colored urine (indicating jaundice)
- Bleeding from the gastrointestinal tract
- Itching
- Hair loss
- Swelling in the legs and stomach (indicating fluid accumulation)
- Tendency to bruise easily
- Mental confusion

Cirrhosis can be life threatening, so get medical attention if you suspect your drinking habits may have gotten out of hand or you have any of the above symptoms. And needless to say, you (or anyone you suspect of having cirrhosis) should abstain from alcohol.

57 Coronary Heart Disease: Eight Ways to Avoid the Deadliest Health Problem

Every year, about 1.1 million Americans have heart attacks—one every 20 seconds. Nearly 460,000 of these heart attacks are fatal, making it the nation's number one killer. Fortunately, heart disease claims fewer and fewer lives each year, thanks to growing public awareness of the benefits of exercise and good nutrition and recent advances in medical treatment of heart disease.

To avoid heart disease, follow these steps:

- Have your blood pressure checked at each office visit, at least every two years, or as advised by your doctor. To control high blood pressure, follow your doctor's advice.
- If you smoke, quit. Nicotine constricts blood flow to the heart, decreases oxygen supply to the heart, and seems to play a significant role in the development of coronary artery disease.

- Ask your doctor to check you for diabetes, which is associated with atherosclerosis. Follow his or her advice if you have diabetes.
- Maintain a normal body weight. (People who are obese are more prone to atherosclerosis, high blood pressure, and diabetes, and therefore coronary heart disease.)
- Eat a diet low in saturated fats and cholesterol. (Saturated fats occur in meats, dairy products, hydrogenated vegetable oils and some tropical oils, like coconut and palm kernel oils.) High-saturated fat, high-cholesterol diets contribute to the fatty sludge that accumulates inside artery walls.
- Follow the “DASH” (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet. Access www.nhlbi.gov for information on the DASH diet.
- Get some form of aerobic exercise at least three times a week for 20 minutes at a time. Sitting around hour after hour, day after day, week in and week out with no regular physical activity may cause circulation problems later in life and contributes to atherosclerosis. (See chapter 3, Get Fit, Stay Fit, for tips on walking, bicycling, and other kinds of aerobic exercise.) Consult your doctor before starting any new exercise program.
- Reduce the harmful effects of stress by practicing relaxation techniques and improving your outlook on daily events. Stress has been linked to elevated blood pressure, among other health problems. (See chapter 6, Success over Stress.)
- Get regular medical checkups.

You should also know the signs of a heart attack so you can get immediate medical attention if necessary, before it's too late. They are:

- Chest pressure or pain (may spread to the arm, neck, tooth, or jaw)
- Feelings of chest tightness, squeezing, or heaviness that last more than a few minutes, or go away and come back.
- Chest discomfort with: Shortness of breath; nausea; sweating for no reason; fast or uneven pulse; lightheadedness; or fainting.
- Unusual or atypical chest pain.
- An uneasy feeling in the chest with; Unexplained anxiety, fatigue, or weakness; persistent cough with pink, blood-tinged mucus; or swelling in the lower legs or ankles.

If you think you're having a heart attack, call 911, chew on a regular aspirin, and get emergency medical care.