

Preventive Medicine

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There is a story about a community on the coast of Oregon which stands on a bluff, overlooking the ocean. Now, the Oregon coast is known for its rugged and picturesque beauty, and many people come to the bluff to enjoy the beautiful view. Of course, being a rugged coastline, there are dangers associated with getting too close to the edge; and every season a few people fall from the bluff to the rocky beach below. This was bad for tourism, so the town folks devised a system of medical emergency response, unlike any other in the surrounding communities. After that, when people fell, their chances of survival were much greater. The cost of this, however, was taxing on the small resources of the community and so a tourist tax was levied in order to defray expenses of the emergency response system. This in turn caused the tourist trade to drop off. It was at one of the town meetings where this dilemma was being discussed when one of the children asked a simple question. Wouldn't it be less expensive to simply put up a railing so people wouldn't get too close to the edge and fall?

This example illustrates the dilemma in which we find ourselves when it comes to our present health care system. While we have spent hundreds of millions of dollars on health care research and diagnosis, the number of cases of cancer and other chronic degenerative diseases continues to rise. Additionally, the U.S. ranks very high among the industrialized nations in infant mortality rates. Clearly, preventive health care measures have not been addressed by our health care system, so it becomes necessary for individuals to take control of their health. The prevention of disease and the cultivation of health do not have to be an involved and complex endeavor left up to the health care system to implement. Rather, it is a simple task once all of the parameters have been examined and should be left to the people it affects most, the medical consumer.

Naturopathic physicians are educated from the onset of their medical school careers to stress prevention. Prevention of disease is extremely important for the future health and well being of all of us. This is because as we get older our "safety net" of bodily defense mechanisms becomes smaller and we are more susceptible to the ravages of disease and effects of aging. Most of us want to have a quality of life in our older years and if you ask most people, it is not the quantity of years that matters to us but the quality of the years we live that are.

It may be surprising to you to learn that most of the diseases of old age do not occur because we are older but have their beginnings in the period between 40 to 65 of age. This is when most of the diseases of old age begin as sense of dis-ease, which will be largely ignored because we have failed to recognize the warning signs and thus have not taken charge of our own health. It is the low energy, the weight gains, the difficulties we have with our sleep patterns, bowel function and digestion, and the accepted concept that we must be on prescription medications to lower our cholesterol's or help our hearts or blood pressure because we are getting older! This certainly is NOT normal! It is only recently in the history of mankind that we take drugs to help us maintain our normal activities of daily living. Unless we wish to become a repository for prescription medications in our later years, it is imperative that we take responsibility for our health into our own hands and institute preventive measures early in life so that it becomes part of our every day routine.

People do not necessarily need to visit a physician in order to develop a prevention plan for themselves. It may be helpful to do so, if the nature of the dis-ease or disease is such that certain activities or nutrient regimens may be detrimental. An example of this might occur with someone who is taking certain supplements in large dosages over a long period of time for a specific illness or condition. Or someone who is on certain prescription medicines which require the help of a physician versed in natural medicines to help discern what types of medicines are best for them. Despite the relative safety of vitamins, minerals and herbal medicines compared to prescription drugs, long term use of some supplements can cause an imbalance in the body and lead to a disruption of normal function.

How does one go about developing a preventive medicine program? Below are some common sense guidelines to help patients develop, initiate, and follow through on an individualized program of disease prevention and health enhancement.

* Identify the areas in your life which lead to health problems and make a list of them. These can be things such as stress, chronically high lipid and cholesterol levels, or the ravages of some chronic disease, such as kidney disease or lupus. Often the body will communicate with the conscious mind by reacting negatively to certain stressors. This helps us to identify that, what is happening is not good. An example of this can be an increase in stomach discomfort or muscle pains with exposure to a stressful situation.

* Arrange them in order of most important to least important, or highest to lowest priority. For example, it might be more important that you work on having fewer colds

and flu's over the next year than trying to gain or loose ten pounds, or have your mother-in-law move out.

* Identify all of the resources available you can use in the program. An example for the prevention of colds and flu's could be to educate yourself about what constitutes a cold or flu, what natural supplementation is available over-the-counter, and the best dosage and timing for those supplements in order to help get you through it quickly. And lastly, identify what you can do during the rest of the year to prevent further viruses and prepare yourself for the next cold and flu season.

* Set goals for yourself, but do not set goals so high they are unattainable. Remember, the body takes some time to heal and will do so at its own pace. In general, it takes about a month of healing for every year one has had an illness, the time being a bit longer in the elderly and shorter in younger age groups. In cases with irreversible pathology, a complete healing is less likely, but varying degrees of health improvement can be expected.

* Do not become discouraged if you don't progress at the pace you think you should. One of the things I do frequently is ask patients to look back to where they began and compare it to where they are now. Invariably, they are so much better that they have forgotten what it was like when they were very ill. It is quite common for us to think our health is not improving when we're no longer very sick because the changes are more subtle.

Resolving issues around diet, lifestyle, prevention of disease and reduction in stress is a highly individual endeavor. The most important aspect of making changes in these areas of your life is recognizing that changes need to be made. Once the intent to make the changes has been established, things seem to follow in the necessary order. You may choose to work with a health care professional or to proceed on your own in the beginning, seeking help when you are at an impasse, and do not know what to do next. It is important to find a health care professional that has the skills to best serve your needs. While one of the tasks of a health care provider is to teach, it's a two way street. We're all on a similar learning path and benefit from mutual interactions. I learn much from my patients, which enables me to be a better doctor. What is most important for you in this endeavor is to become more aware of your own healing process and to begin to take charge of your health and well-being. Taking control of your own health care can be very empowering and can provide you with a quality of life you have probably never imagined.

