

WHEN A MAN'S HEALTH IS A WOMAN'S ISSUE*By Elisabeth M. Cotton, MD, Overlake Bellevue Clinic*

So many men come to my practice with a health concern that should have been addressed earlier, but they delayed coming to the doctor because of reluctance to avail themselves of medical care. Certainly there are many exceptions, but as a generalization, it seems men seek medical help less frequently for problems, and there seem to be fewer male patients in my office for routine preventive care. A recent

survey by the American Academy of Family Physicians seems to support this impression. Thirty-six percent of men surveyed said they only go to the doctor if they are extremely sick and 92 percent said they wait at least a few days to see if they feel better before seeking care. One-quarter of those surveyed said they are healthy and have no reason to go to a doctor at all.

What's wrong with this picture? The unfortunate reality is on average, American men live unhealthier and die younger than American women. According to the Centers for Disease Control, in 1920, women outlived men only by one year. Today, figures show the life expectancy gap has widened, and women are living five years longer. Anyone, male or female, is at a greater risk of disease or death without regular medical care, but the male risk appears higher because of several possible contributing factors: unhealthy behaviors, more dangerous occupations and less insurance coverage. We also have some misguided social pressure on men to not complain or seek help for physical pain and discomfort.

One of the biggest problems contributing to male mortality is the lack of monitoring for specific diseases that can take root earlier in life, such as heart disease, cancer



and depression. On average, men start to show symptoms of heart disease 10 years earlier than women start to show symptoms. This means men should undergo annual physicals beginning at age 30. During these physicals your doctor will review your risks for heart disease. If these symptoms are significant they can often be controlled through diet, medication and exercise. Always consult with your physician before embarking on any diet or exercise program.

Lung cancer is the leading source of cancer death for both men and women, and while that rate has been dropping since the 1980s, it still claims 160,000 lives each year. Tobacco is responsible for 90 percent of lung cancer cases. If you are struggling to quit smoking, ask your family doctor for help; there are new treatments that make it easier to stop. Prostate cancer is the most common cancer found in men, and it is the second leading type of cancer death in men, after lung cancer. As is true for most cancers, early detection is critical. Men should have a prostate physical exam and blood test annually starting at age 50. For high-risk groups (those with a family history and African Americans) testing should begin earlier. Older age is a risk factor for prostate cancer, but it does occur

in younger men, and in these cases, the tumors are usually more aggressive.

The incidence of depression is significant in men. The National Institute of Mental Health states six million men suffer from depression each year, and the symptoms are often unrecognized and untreated because they can differ from women's symptoms. Typi-

cal signs of depression in men include work burnout, risk-taking behaviors, midlife crises, alcohol/drug abuse, anger and aggression. It is critical to seek immediate outside help for depression. Waiting can make the disease harder to treat, or tragically result in suicide.

In the American Academy of Family Physicians survey, nearly 80 percent of the men who responded said their spouse/significant other influences their decision to go to the doctor. This supports what many patients have said to me over the years about their wives' or partners' roles in encouraging an office visit. For female readers in this position, I would encourage you to help your partner actively improve his quality of life and extend his life span. But most important, I urge male readers of all ages to take charge of their health, seek help when needed, and don't neglect preventive measures like regular screenings.

HELPFUL WEB SITES

www.menshealthnetwork.org

www.overlake.staywellknowledgebase.com

www.aafp.org