

An Ounce of Prevention

Is breast cancer inherited? My answer is an emphatic no.

Stress: The Silent Killer

Q. I work in newspapers, and everyone I interact with is always stressed. Is all stress bad? How can I manage it?

-J.S., Atlanta, Georgia

A. When we feel stress, a chemical reaction occurs, and the adrenal glands release hormones. Normally you will feel a boost of energy but later will feel really tired.

God placed this mechanism in us for our survival. He gave it so we'd have that extra burst of strength and speed we'd need in demanding situations.

In this sense, stress is not bad. The problem lies with high levels of stress that go unmanaged for a long time. This can be very dangerous to your health.

Stress can be physical or emotional. Physical stress might include exposure to an extreme temperature. Emotional stress could be realizing you haven't enough money to pay your rent.

Most prolonged stress is emotional. Primarily it stems from a traumatic experience the person is unable to cope with. Stress like this can keep a person in a continual state of "fight or flight," and over a long period of time this provokes pathologies, including heart disease and cancer.

More than 80 percent of my patients experienced a traumatic event within three years of their cancer being diagnosed. A

job layoff, divorce and death of a child top the list.

I am not a big fan of managing stress with prescription drugs. Most of these medications address the symptoms but not the causes. They can be addictive and cause long-term damage to the immune system and organs. Instead, I prescribe exercise, a healthful diet and vitamin supplementation.

Yet most important of all is your spirituality. I encourage you to pray.

This may sound like something your pastor says, but I want you to consider the role prayer plays in relieving stress. Prayer can be therapeutic on both natural and supernatural levels.

In the natural sense it is documented that prayer causes the whole body to relax (haven't you ever dozed off while praying)? Prayer also works just because people believe it will (scientists call this a "placebo effect," but I refer to it as a "faith effect").

In the supernatural sense prayer can be empowering if it's done in the name of Jesus. Each day, set aside a specific time for prayer therapy. Get in a quiet place for about 10 minutes and talk to Jesus about your daily activities.

List the stressful things in your life and turn them over to God one by one. Keep a journal of how Jesus helps you have victory in each of them. And don't forget to visit your doctor regularly!

Q. I have arthritis. Is it safe for me to take a prescribed, steroid-based medication for this?

-M.G., Dallas, Texas

A. As a doctor, I wouldn't be very popular if I said pharmaceuticals are not safe. What's being prescribed to you is the standard treatment.

However, I do have suggestions for some natural alternatives

that you may want to consider. Why not ask if your doctor will oversee your use of natural supplements? The goal would be to lower your dosage of prescription drugs.

A good friend of mine, Dr. Sheldon S. Hendler, is the author of the Physicians' Desk Reference for Nutritional Supplements. This is the book physicians refer to for indications that will help them determine the use of vitamins and natural substances in treating illnesses.

It states that both shark cartilage and glucosamine combined with chondroitin sulfate may have some anti-inflammatory qualities, though there is not enough scientific evidence to verify if either have pain-relief or anti-arthritic mechanisms.

My personal experience with shark cartilage and glucosamine is that many of my patients have been able to completely substitute steroids with them. That's good because prolonged use of steroids can be devastating to your health.

If you decide to seek natural alternatives, the use of them must be administered under medical supervision. Vitamin and herbal remedies can be as powerful as pharmaceuticals and can overload your liver and kidneys. But, in my experience, they can be less damaging long term than medications, if used correctly.

A Healthy Heart

The most important factor in whether or not you develop heart disease is the food you eat.

Before You Start a Diet

Q. I want to lose weight and keep it off. A lot of people are trying high protein, low carbohydrate diets—eating meat but skipping bread, potatoes and pasta. Do these diets really work?

D.M., San Diego, California

A. It's great that you want to lose weight. Being overweight increases the risk of heart disease, diabetes and cancer. But you need to be careful how you shed those pounds.

High protein, low carbohydrate diets are the subject of many heated discussions by everyone from health nuts to university professors. And these diets are growing in popularity and acceptance.

Are they effective? Yes they are, but you should approach them with caution. Here's why they work.

The simple sugars found in starches such as white breads and pastas stimulate the pancreas to produce a lot of insulin. Insulin is the remarkable hormone responsible, among its many other functions, for controlling the level of sugar in the bloodstream. When the body's cells become saturated with sugar, insulin converts the excess (carbohydrates) into fat.

Protein-rich foods do not stimulate the production of insulin. Therefore in the absence, or lack, of carbohydrates in the cells, the body quickly starts to consume stored fat as energy. The result? You start to lose weight—and inches.

But before you set out to stuff yourself with meat and cheese, consult your doctor. Find out first if you are a proper candidate for such a diet.

I recommend you eat a balanced, moderately portioned diet and couple it with one hour a day of light exercise. Walking, for instance, is essential to weight loss, and it will decrease your probability of heart disease significantly.

Also, avoid processed foods and those proscribed in the Bible, such as pork. Take a fiber supplement and multivitamin every day, too.

The important thing about being at your correct weight is not looking great. It is about living longer and stronger by lowering your risk of disease.

To determine if you are overweight or obese, use this formula to calculate your Body Mass Index (BMI): Multiply your weight in pounds by 705, then divide the answer by your height in inches—then divide that answer by your height in inches.

A BMI between 18 and 25 means healthy weight, between 25.1 and 30 means overweight and above 30 means obesity.

Weight control is vitally linked to longevity of life. If you dream of being around to see your grandchildren grow up, or to serve the Lord for decades, you'll need to get your weight under control.

Q. I've heard that diabetes is genetic, especially if a person's father or mother has it rather than a grandparent. Is this true?

G.G., El Mirador,
Yucatan, Mexico

A. Many of my patients ask me if they will get diabetes if one of their parents has it. People can have genetic predispositions for certain diseases, but I believe a person inherits bad habits more than bad genes.

For example, if your father has diabetes and you live exactly like him, eating the same diet, your probability of getting

diabetes is high.

But it is more for this reason—because your lifestyle is like your parent's—that you may have a higher risk of developing it yourself.

Studies indicate that people who exercise and eat a diet low in refined flour and sugar have a lower risk of developing diabetes. Americans, for example, maintain diets high in sugar, ingesting about 170 pounds of it per person annually.

Still, the best news is that you are aware of your need to do something to lower your risk for this disease. If one of your parents has it, you are at a distinct advantage because you know you need to take precautions to protect yourself.

I recommend that you talk with your family doctor and ask for advice on what would be the most healthful course of diet, exercise and lifestyle for you. Taken together, these three things can decrease your probability of getting the disease.

You have a lot of power for lowering your risk. You are not predestined to be diabetic just because a family member is.

Francisco Contreras, M.D., oversees Oasis of Hope Hospital, a cancer-care facility in Mexico widely known for alternative-treatment methods. He is the author of several books on health, including the new *The Hope of Living Long and Well* (Siloam Press), available at .