

Maleness can be hazardous to your health

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By Eileen Beal

At the Men's Health Summit held at The Cleveland Clinic last November, Dr. George Tesar, Chairman of The Clinic's Department of Psychiatry and Psychology, was only half-joking when he opened his presentation by stating that "just being male is a major health hazard."

Studies back him up. Not only are men more apt to put themselves in situations that are hazardous to life and limb, they (the same people who wouldn't dream of not giving their car a weekly wash, a 3000-mile oil change, a semi-annual tune-up, and a 6,000-mile tire rotation) are also slackers when it comes to dealing with taking care of Number One.

It's a guy thing

Men don't like to admit they have a health problem; even when they admit to one, they don't like talking about it; and they *really* don't like going to the doctor, says Mary Ann Caston, RN, Director of Central Operations at Benjamin Rose. The latter is probably due to what she calls "the fear factor."

"Men don't have much experience with physicians or the healthcare system," she explained, "so there is a lot of worry and apprehension about going in to see a doctor, or for a check-up."

Playing Mr. Ostrich (i.e. if I don't acknowledge a problem, it's not there) has serious health consequences. "When men do finally go to see a physician they are usually sicker and have fewer treatment options. And they need more care, too," says Dr. Elizabeth O'Toole, who heads up the Geriatrics and Palliative Care Section in the Department of Medicine at MetroHealth Medical Center and serves as the Medical Director at Judson Retirement Community in University Circle.

Men also die 6-7 years younger than women and they suffer higher mortality rates for the top 10 causes of death (see list). For instance, the death rate from melanoma, a form of skin cancer that, left un-diagnosed and un-treated, can spread [metastasize] to other parts of the body, is 50% higher in men than women, despite the fact that women are 50% more likely to get the disease.

Putting together a (health) game plan

But the news isn't all bad. There are many things men can do now to up their chances of living a long and healthy life.

Get in touch with your body by doing monthly self-checks—a mole patrol, a testicle check, a foot inspection, etc. The earlier you start doing them the better, says Dr. O'Toole because "you'll get in the habit and keep doing them in your 60s and 70s."

Since an ounce of prevention is worth a ton of cure, start scheduling *regular* physical check-ups. Minimally, a physical should include blood and urine tests and screenings for: eye and oral health; diabetes; cardiovascular health; genital and colorectal health; sexual health; and mental health. There's no consensus in the medical or insurance

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communities about which tests are absolutely necessary, however, after age 50, most physicians recommend (and many insurers pay for) all the above tests on a yearly, three-year, or five-year basis.

The road to wellness is paved with lifestyle changes says Dr. O'Toole, so make them now. "Even," she stresses, "making changes in your 60s isn't too late."

These changes—in diet, exercise habits, weight, stress levels, use of alcohol and tobacco, etc.—will improve quality of life in the here-and-now and substantially telescope the time spent ill and/or disabled later on. Diet and exercise changes are extremely important, Dr. O'Toole stresses, because they can help stave off or lessen the impact of diabetes, which research has shown has disastrous effects on the health of those hoping to age healthily.

And, finally, become your own healthcare advisor. That doesn't mean you have to get a medical degree, but it does mean you have to partner-up with your physician, get a handle on your family's medical history, and do some serious research and reading. Books (see list) are good for getting a general feel for health-related topics, but when you want focused or specific information your best bet is the Internet (see below).

SOURCES AND RESOURCES:

Books:

Complete Guide to Men's Health, American Medical Association

Johns Hopkins Medical Guide to Health After 50, Simeon Margolis, MD

Looking After Your Body: An Owner's Guide to Successful Aging, Marianne Wait, ed.

Total Health for Men, Neil Wertheimer, ed.

The Male Body: An Owner's Manual, K. W. Caine and P. Garfinkel, eds.

Newsletters:

Men's Health Advisor, The Cleveland Clinic (\$39/yr)

Focus on Health Aging, Mount Sinai School of Medicine (\$39/yr.)

Health After 50, Johns Hopkins Medical Center (\$28/yr.)

Websites:

Alliance for Aging Research (AFAR) www.agingresearch.org

MedlinePlus www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/healthtopics.html

Men's Health Network www.menshealthnetwork.org

Merck Manual of Geriatrics www.merck.com/pubs

NOAH-On-line Health Library www.noah-health.org/english/qksearch.html (click on men's health)

Tackling Men's Health www.nfl.com/tacklingmenshealth

Top 10 Man Killers

1. Heart attack
2. Stroke
3. Cancer (lung, trachea, bronchial tubes)
4. Emphysema and chronic bronchitis
5. Pneumonia
6. Traffic accidents
7. Suicide
8. Stomach cancer
9. Colon and rectal cancers
10. Cirrhosis of the liver

Eileen Beal, MA, is a freelance healthcare writer specializing in geriatric issues. *Successful Aging* is provided by Benjamin Rose (www.benrose.org), a non-profit social service agency for older adults.