



May 8, 2010 – Grand Rapids, MI

Adherence

As I was doing some research for a new audio, I discovered an interesting editorial in the *New England Journal of Medicine* titled “Thinking Outside the Pillbox—Medication Adherence as a Priority for Healthcare Reform” (1). I’ll talk about the article and then what the implications are for preventive healthcare.

Medication Adherence

Every day I talk with people who would like to avoid taking medications, eliminate the medications they’re now taking, or at least reduce their meds. I understand. But the authors make a compelling point as it relates to medications:

Poor adherence to treatment regimens has long been recognized as a substantial roadblock to achieving better outcomes for patients. Data show that as many as half of all patients do not adhere faithfully to their prescription medication regimens—and the result is more than \$100 billion spent each year on avoidable hospitalizations. Nonadherence to medication regimens also affects the quality and length of life.

Really? Half of all patients aren’t taking their meds as prescribed? That’s a lot more than I’d have guessed.

People may stop their medications for a variety of reasons: they don’t like the side-effects, they miss taking them because they don’t make an effort to remember, or they can’t afford them so they quit taking them or take less than the required dose. But the net effect of poor adherence is that complications arise and hospitalizations occur as a result—sometimes even death.

Actions have consequences, and often lack of action does, too. For example, if you don’t want to take your blood pressure medications, you can expect your blood pressure to go up. That will increase the strain on the heart, along with the damage to blood vessels that leads to cardiovascular disease, kidney disease, and damage to the eyes. Poor adherence leads to increased medical costs later. And as I keep reminding you, those higher costs are ultimately shared by all of us. The complications from skipping our meds is one element of the mushrooming healthcare costs here in the U.S.; I’m becoming more and more convinced that we owe it to our families and neighbors and all the other taxpayers to be as healthy as we can be, thus reducing our impact on healthcare costs.

If the cost of medications is keeping you from taking them as you know you should, discuss it with your family doctor. He or she contends with that issue every day and can often help you find a way to solve the problem. If side effects are the issue, discuss that as well; often a different medication will have fewer or more tolerable side effects. If remembering is the problem, there are ways around that, too. Write yourself a note, set an alarm on your watch or phone or computer, and leave the medications where you can’t miss seeing them. Do whatever you have to do to stay on track with your meds.

Lifestyle Adherence

If the adherence to medication is poor, the adherence to a healthy lifestyle is worse in many cases. We exercise intermittently instead of every day. We eat vegetables once or twice a week. We take our supplements when we remember to take them but miss them a lot of the time. This is no different than what’s going on with medications.

We get a little benefit from changing our lifestyle—and then slip back to our old habits. Sometimes it can be months of doing something positive, and then it's gone. And we wonder why we don't feel good.

Ponder this the rest of the weekend. What lifestyle changes have you made a permanent part of your life, and which ones are you just playing around with? Let me pick one area, but it could apply to all. If you're going to take a probiotic because you want a benefit from it, take it every day. Is your digestive system going to stop what it's doing just because you forgot your probiotics? You're going to keep eating, aren't you? Then if you want your digestive system working at optimal levels, take your probiotics every day or whatever schedule you've set. The same applies to exercise, eating less to lose weight, reducing sodium intake to lower blood pressure, or any other lifestyle habit; you must adhere to the change if you want the benefit. That includes taking whatever medications your doctor has prescribed.

If you work on adhering to your improved lifestyle, you might just find that you'll need to rely less and less on medications. It depends on one thing:

What are you prepared to do today and every day?

Dr. Chet

Reference:

1. N Engl J Med. 2010. 362;17:1553-1555.

WGVU FM 88.5/95.3 **npr** ***Straight Talk on Health***

Hear Dr. Chet's take on the latest health news and research—listen to *Straight Talk on Health* at 7 p.m. Sunday in the Eastern Time Zone on WGVU-FM 88.5 or 95.3, or listen live via the Internet by going to www.wgvu.org and clicking on "Listen Live" in the gray bar at the top.

The health information in this message is designed for educational purposes only. It's not a substitute for medical advice from your healthcare provider, and you should not use it to diagnose or treat a health problem or disease. It's designed to motivate you to work toward better health, and that includes seeing your healthcare professional regularly. If what you've read raises any questions or concerns about health problems or possible diseases, talk to your healthcare provider today.

Subscribe to the Message from Dr. Chet at DrChet.com — © Chet Zelasko PhD LLC