

Taking Responsibility for Your Health: A Review

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Abstract: As common infectious and parasitic diseases such as malaria and the HIV/AIDS pandemic remain major unresolved health problems in many developing countries, emerging non-communicable diseases relating to diet and lifestyle have been increasing over the last two decades, creating a double burden of disease and impacting negatively on the already over-stretched health services in these countries. This shift in disease patterns from acute to chronic diseases makes self-care both a logical necessity and an appropriate strategy. This paper aims at studying the various self-care activities essential for promoting health and preventing diseases. This article reviews relevant literatures from Google search, medical journals, books and health survey reports. Self-care activities comprise observance of simple rules of behavior relating to diet, sleep, exercise, weight, alcohol, smoking and drugs. Others include attention to personal hygiene, cultivation of healthful habits and lifestyle, undergoing selective medical examinations and screening, accepting immunization, reporting early when sick and accepting treatment, undertaking measures for the prevention of a relapse or the spread of the disease to others.

Keywords: Health, Disease, Responsibility, Self-care.

INTRODUCTION

Health is one of those terms which most people find difficult to define, although they are confident of its meaning. Therefore, many definitions of health have been offered from time to time.

The widely accepted definition of health is that given by the World Health Organization in the preamble of its constitution, which is – ‘Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’. In recent years, this statement has been amplified to include ‘the ability to lead a socially and economically productive life’ [1, 2].

We all know the popular saying ‘health is wealth’. One possible interpretation of this saying is, being free from illness and pain has a richness of its own. In other words, being sound in body is of more value than any material possession someone can have [3]. It deals with the importance of taking care of oneself or taking responsibility for one’s health.

Although health is now recognized as a fundamental human right, it is essentially an individual responsibility and this means that it is not a commodity that an individual can bestow on another. No commodity or state programme of health services can give health. This means that health has to be earned and

maintained by the individual himself, who must accept a broad spectrum of responsibilities which can be termed- Self-care. Self-care is defined as those health generating activities which are undertaken by individuals in promoting health, preventing diseases, limiting illnesses and restoring health. These activities are undertaken without professional assistance, although individuals are informed by technical knowledge and skills [2].

Long ago, Henry Sigerist, the medical historian stated that- ‘The people’s health ought to be the concern of the people themselves’. They must struggle for it and plan for it. The war against diseases and for health cannot be fought by the physicians alone. It is a people’s war in which the entire population must be mobilized permanently’ [2].

Self-care activities comprise observance of simple rules of behavior relating to diet, sleep, exercise, weight, alcohol, smoking and drugs. Others include attention to personal hygiene, cultivation of healthful habits and lifestyle, undergoing selective medical

examinations and screening, accepting immunization, reporting early when sick and accepting treatment, undertaking measures for the prevention of a relapse or the spread of the disease to others[2].

Whereas common infectious and parasitic diseases such as malaria and HIV/AIDS pandemic remain major unresolved health problems in many developing countries, emerging non-communicable diseases (chronic degenerative diseases) relating to diet and lifestyle have been increasing over the last two decades, creating a double burden of disease and impacting negatively on the already over-stretched health services in these countries. These non-communicable diseases include hypertension, ischemic heart disease, cerebrovascular disease (stroke), cancers, type 2 diabetes mellitus, osteoporosis and neuropsychiatric disorders [4]. By 2005, chronic diseases contributed approximately 60% (35 million) of the 56.5 million total reported deaths in the world and approximately 46% of the global burden of disease. In 2011, the figure has risen to 63% and the proportion of the burden of chronic diseases is expected to increase to 57% by 2020 [5]. The shift in disease patterns from acute to chronic diseases makes self-care both a logical necessity and an appropriate strategy[2].

Scientific evidence increasingly supports the view that alterations in diet have strong effects, both positive and negative on health throughout life. The 1992 International Conference on Nutrition specifically identified the need to prevent and control the increasing public health problems of chronic diseases by promoting appropriate diets and healthy lifestyles [5]. Foods which are unhealthy and high in calories gradually take a toll on one's health leading to weight gain, heart diseases and high blood cholesterol [6]. Fruits and vegetables in season are rich in fibers, mineral salts and vitamins and should be consumed regularly. Daily intake of fresh fruits and vegetables in adequate quantity (400–500 grams per day), has been recommended to reduce the risk of ischemic heart disease, stroke and high blood pressure [4]. Breakfast is the most important meal and should never be skipped as breakfast increases concentration, makes one more active and helps in weight control as it increases the metabolic rate [6]. The American Heart Association Journal Circulation reports that the Harvard School of Public Health researchers studied the health outcomes of 26,902 male health professionals aged 45 to 82 over a 16 year period. They discovered that the men who skipped breakfast had a 27% higher risk of heart attack or death from heart disease than those who honored the morning meal. According to the scientists, skipping breakfast may make you hungrier and more likely to eat larger meals, which leads to a surge in blood sugar. Such spikes can pave the way for diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol levels, which are all risk factors that can snowball into a heart attack [7]. It is important to have the last meal of the day at least a

couple of hours before bedtime as this prevents obesity and other severe health complications. Also, late night snacking might result in indigestion which interferes with sleep. Reduced salt consumption promotes health as high salt intake may lead to stroke and heart diseases in the future [6].

The human body is a machine and just like any machine requires rest and recharging. Most individuals, usually burdened by the monotony of work, tend to sleep less and focus more on their tasks. The thing is, one cannot really focus if the person has not had a good night's sleep. Getting a minimum of 8 hours of sleep daily relaxes the mind and enhances health [6]. It facilitates learning, improves concentration and information retention, and gives the brain a much needed rest from the hustle and bustle of our hectic lives. In a nutshell, sleep is essential to our short and long term health. Research shows that sufficient sleep plays an important role in weight management and decreases the risk of metabolic disorders such as insulin resistance and diabetes as well as other sleep related problems [8].

After a good night rest, never break a fast with starch or heavy carbohydrates. Liquids are the best way to break a fast, and water in the morning, essentially large amounts of water about 1.5 liters (which is equivalent to 5 to 6 glasses of water), immediately after awaking on an empty stomach, has amazing therapeutic effects for a multitude of health conditions- ranging from pain, ulcer, asthma, respiratory tract infections, diabetes mellitus, hypertension, cancer, digestive problems etc.[9, 10]. Drinking water on an empty stomach in the morning purifies the colon and allows for better absorption of nutrients in the body [9]. It helps with weight loss, as it boosts body metabolism by up to 24%. Water therapy hydrates the cells and helps in blood and muscle cell production. It flushes and balances the lymphatic system and this leads to increased immunity. High dosages of water help to purge the body of toxins through the bowels and will leave one with a glowing skin [9]. It is essential not to eat or drink anything else for one hour after drinking water in the morning [10].

Exercise in the form of workouts, aerobics, walking, jogging, skipping, etc, regulates heart rate, improves blood circulation, releases muscle tension and it is an effective way for boosting health and for keeping energy flowing at optimum levels. Exercising early in the morning is an energy booster and provides enough energy for working hard throughout the day. Exercises as simple as push-ups or crunches can go a great way in building health [6]. Fresh air helps to improve the immune system, so a morning walk enhances good health. A study has shown that individuals who never did any exercise lost about seven years of life compared to the ones who did [6].

In the 20th century, approximately 100 million people died worldwide from tobacco associated diseases such as cancers, chronic lung disease, diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. While tobacco consumption is falling in most developed countries, it is increasing in developing countries by about 3.4% per annum [4]. There is an urgent need for smokers to quit smoking, as breathing becomes easier and lung function increases by up to 10% soon after quitting. The skin appearance of the individual improves, owing to improved skin perfusion. The risk of a heart attack and lung cancer falls tremendously. Also, quitting smoking reduces the risk of getting other conditions which although not life-threatening, can cause unpleasant problems eg. Fertility problems, cataract, skin diseases, gum diseases, tooth loss, osteoporosis, etc [11].

Alcohol consumption has increased in the last decades, with the major part of this increase imputable to developing countries. Excessive alcohol consumption is associated with esophageal cancer, liver disease, epilepsy, road traffic accidents and other hazards [4]. For men aged over 40 and for women past the menopause, it is thought that drinking a small amount of alcohol helps to protect against heart disease and stroke. The exact amount is not clear, but it is a small amount. It has been recommended that people should not consume more than 14 units of alcohol in a week, these units should be spread out through the week, and the consumers should have at least two alcohol free days in a week [12]. Pregnant women or women trying to conceive should not drink alcohol nor smoke cigarette.

The human body is designed to experience stress and react to it. Stress can be positive, for instance when one gets a job promotion or is given greater responsibilities. This keeps the body alert and ready to avoid danger. Stress on the other hand can become negative when a person faces continuous challenges without relief, or relaxation between challenges. As a result, the person becomes overworked and stress related tension builds. Stress also becomes harmful when people use alcohol, tobacco or drugs in order to relieve their stress. Unfortunately, instead of relieving the stress and returning the body to a relaxed state, these substances tend to keep the body in a stressed state and cause more problems. Seventy-five percent to 90% of all doctor's office visits are for stress related ailments and complaints. Stress can play a part in problems such as headaches, high blood pressure, heart problems, diabetes, skin conditions, asthma, arthritis, depression and anxiety [13]. Stress management can be made by making changes in life style, taking break at work, practicing time management and learning certain coping skills.

Early diagnosis and treatment are the main interventions of disease control. The earlier a disease is diagnosed and treated, the better it is from the point of

view of prognosis and preventing the spread of the disease to other people or the occurrence of long term disability from the disease. Early diagnosis and treatment although not as effective and economical as the various preventive measures mentioned above, may be critically important in reducing the high morbidity and mortality from the major non- communicable diseases. For certain communicable diseases eg. Tuberculosis, leprosy, sexually transmitted diseases, early diagnosis and treatment are the only effective mode of intervention [2].

There is this saying- 'Prevention is better than cure'. This means that preventing a disease is much better than taking drugs to get cured from the disease. This shows the need for every individual to make more effort in taking responsibility for his/ her health, as no one can take care of your health better than you.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

Health is essentially an individual responsibility and has to be earned and maintained by the individual himself. There is an urgent need for every individual to make more effort in adopting self- care activities for the promotion of good health.

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