

Self-Care for You and Your Family

T*his publication introduces you to the basic ideas of self-care. It outlines important steps you can take to become a better health care consumer for yourself and your family. It is only an introduction designed to encourage you to become positive about the idea of self-care and to give you some ideas on how to start protecting your health.*

What Is Health?

Health is more than the absence of disease. Health is a condition of being at our best physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually. When we're healthy, we've achieved balance in our lives between the many competing demands of work, family and friends, time to contribute to our communities, and taking care of ourselves. Health is a positive state of well-being.

What Affects Our Health?

Many factors affect our health. Some, like our genetic make-up or our environment, we have little or no individual control over. But many important factors we **can** control. In fact, our health depends very much on the habits, daily decisions, and lifestyle routines that we choose for ourselves and our families. Our eating habits, physical activity, tobacco use, safety

precautions, and efforts to follow physicians' advice are just some of the choices we make that have a great impact on our health. It is important to learn to make rational and informed choices, and to exercise control over our health and health care decision-making.

What Is Self-Care?

Self-care is an attitude of believing in ourselves—believing that we are each important, entitled to quality health care, and that we are a critical resource in achieving quality health care.

Self-care is **not** an attempt to replace doctors or other health-care providers; we need their talent, training, and wisdom. Self-care is about becoming active participants in our own health and health care. Self-care provides a framework for us to look at our own health and that of our families, and then to work with health-care providers to prevent

and jointly care for health problems.

You can compare the idea of self-care to the way you keep your automobile in top condition.

- We make sure our tire pressure is correct and we have enough oil.
- We take our cars in for routine maintenance checks.
- Occasionally, we fix minor problems such as flat tires or broken windshield wipers.
- Sometimes we have problems we can't diagnose or repair by ourselves, so we work with a mechanic.
- And, every once in a while we might need emergency service.

Five Guidelines for Self-Care

- 1** Practice healthy behaviors and lifestyles.
- 2** Get routine checkups that will prevent illness or catch it in the earliest stages.
- 3** When you can, take care of minor illnesses yourself so that small problems don't grow and you save time and money.
- 4** Work closely with your doctors and other health-care providers to help them diagnose and treat your illnesses.
- 5** Use emergency medical services when necessary.

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This information is not intended to provide advice on personal medical matters or to substitute for consultation with a physician.

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Practice Healthy Behaviors and Lifestyles

What Are Healthy Behaviors?

Here are some of the most important things you can do to stay healthy:

Immunize

Immunizations protect against disease. Know what shots your children need. Don't wait until they enter school because many shots are needed by the age of two. Don't forget that adults need certain immunizations too.

Be Physically Active

Keep moving. Moderate exercise like regular walking can make us feel better and protect us from some diseases. Gardening, dancing, bike riding, and swimming are fun ways of getting physical activity.

Eat Well

Following the Food Guide Pyramid will help you have more energy and protect yourself and your family against illness. Eat a lot of grains, fruits, and vegetables. Eat moderate amounts of meat. Limit your fat, sugar, and sodium. Set a good example for your children. If you're pregnant, plan to breast-feed.

Control Stress

Stress is a normal part of our lives. Our reactions to stress can contribute to illness. We all need to learn to release the tension that comes from stress.

A few ideas to relieve tension are to take naps, talk out problems and negative feelings, cry, exercise, laugh, learn techniques to relax your body and quiet your mind, and reduce the sources of stress.

Always contact your caregiver when you need professional medical attention.

Be Tobacco-Free

Tobacco is still the single biggest cause of preventable illness and premature death in the United States. More than 1,000 people die daily of smoking-related diseases. If you don't smoke or chew tobacco, don't start. If you do smoke or chew, try to quit. Call your local American Cancer Society, the Cancer Information Service, or your local American Heart Association if you want help quitting. Remember, children suffer from second-hand smoke. Also, if you use tobacco your children are more likely to use tobacco.

Do Not Abuse Drugs and Alcohol

Alcohol and drug abuse can contribute to numerous physical, emotional and mental health problems, including: liver disease, poor nutrition, unplanned pregnancy, auto and boating accidents, family violence such as spouse-abuse and child-abuse, depression, suicide, and homicide. Alcohol and drug abuse during pregnancy can have very harmful results for the baby.

Be Safe

Remember that many "accidents" are not accidents—they are preventable injuries.

- Make sure your home is safe for children and older people.
- Drive safely and have everyone in the car use a seat belt.
- Know and practice all the rules for firearm safety. It's best to not have a gun in your home. If you do, be sure it is kept in a locked place unloaded with the

ammunition stored in a separate place.

- Practice safe sex. It can mean the difference between health and illness, life and death.

- Keep all poisonous products and medicines out of the reach of children, especially children between 1 and 4 years old.

- If you have elderly, feeble relatives living with you, be sure that all medications are clearly labeled in big letters and that your house is free of objects that could cause falls.

Respect Yourself and Keep a Good Outlook on Life

A new field of study, psychoneuroimmunology, looks at how the brain communicates with the rest of the body. They are finding evidence that state of mind can affect the immune system's ability to heal the body. So, stop negative self-talk, identify what you are good at, think about the things you can control in your life, laugh, spend time with friends, and try to look at life changes as challenges instead of threats.

Practice Peace

As long as people are individuals and have differences, there will be conflict. Sometimes conflict can be healthy because it helps us to look at things differently. But uncontrolled conflict can lead to violence. Self-respect and respect for others contribute to a strong foundation for cooperation. Learn ways of managing conflict and seek non-violent ways of solving conflict in your family, at work, at school, and in the community.

Get Routine Checkups

Do You Have a “Medical Home” for Routine Checkups?

A “medical home” is a place where you go for well-child visits and annual checkups, a place where the doctors and other health care providers know you and your family.

If you are in managed care, you automatically have a medical home. You are assigned a primary care provider (usually a family practitioner, a general practitioner, an internist, a pediatrician, a nurse practitioner, or a physician’s assistant) who will help you make decisions about what to do if further follow-up is required.

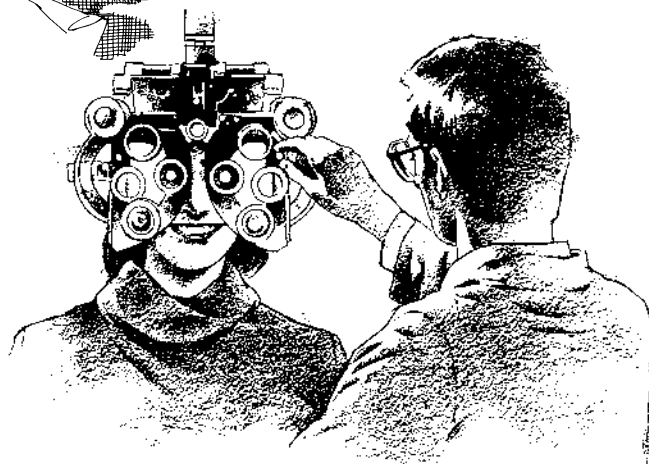
If you are not in managed care, you still need a medical home. You can find that with a primary care provider in your community.

What Checkups Do You Need? A Checkup Checklist

Here’s a list of routine checkups you and your family may need.

- Get good pre-natal care when you are pregnant.
- Make sure your children are appropriately immunized.
- Make sure you are appropriately immunized.
- Have your blood pressure checked annually.
- Have your vision and your hearing checked annually.

- Do breast self-exams monthly and have a clinical breast exam every year.
- If you’re over 40, get an annual mammogram.
- Do a testicular self-exam.
- Talk with your health-care provider about screening for cancer of the colon and rectum.
- Have annual dental check-ups.
- Have your cholesterol checked every 5 years, and more often if your level is high.



Take Care of Minor Illnesses Yourself

Is Self-Treatment Really Something to Consider?

As many as 70 percent of all visits to doctors for new problems may be unnecessary. These visits are often for minor health problems such as uncomplicated colds, minor cuts, or minor sprains. So, **yes** you should consider self-treatment.

Examples of problems we can treat or manage at home include acne, many allergies, athlete's foot, back pain, bruises and minor burns, lice, colds, colic, diaper rash and heat rash, flu, most headaches, most vomiting and diarrhea, sore throats, teething, temporary discouragement or loneliness.

Remember, however, that controlling or curing many illnesses depends on **early** detection and working with a health-care provider to get the best advice. If you are using self-treatment, use your common sense in deciding when you need a health care professional, **but be sure you don't delay important medical treatment.** Any condition that is alarming, dramatic, has persistent symptoms, involves an infection, malignancy, or the malfunction of vital organs requires care from a health professional. Certain types of headaches and severe vomiting can require professional care—sometimes emergency care. Prolonged or severe discouragement could be connected to depression that needs professional attention.

Ways to Improve Self-Treatment

Improve your self-care by practicing the following behaviors.

Gather Information

Self-treatment requires gathering information. This information can be found in books and pamphlets, audio tapes or videotapes. Contact your health-care provider, your health department, hospital, or pharmacist.

Purchase a self-care manual, or borrow one from the library. A few ideas to get you started include:

Healthwise Handbook: A Self-Care Manual for You

Take Care of Yourself: The Complete Guide to Medical Self-Care

Home Remedies Health Handbook.

Develop Self-Care Skills

Self-treatment requires you to have confidence in your own skills.

- Know how to take a temperature, count pulse rates, count respiration rates, and take blood pressure.
- Learn to do simple ear exams. Find out what to look for when examining the throat, tonsils, and glands.
- Learn first aid skills, such as CPR, the Heimlich Maneuver, or applying butterfly bandages to cuts that need skin edges pulled together.
- Learn how to do breast and testicular self-exams.

Observe Yourself and Your Family

Self-treatment requires knowing your body and moods and knowing your family's bodies and moods. Then you will notice if things change.

When you suspect somebody is getting sick, start viewing yourself or a family member as your patient. Use the head-to-toe exam to look for specific prob-

lems. First, look for an overall impression—mood, activity level, and behavior. Then one by one, check skin, head and scalp, eyes, nose, ears, throat and mouth, neck, chest, back abdomen, genitals and anus, arms, legs, hands and feet. Women will do a breast self-exam.

Have the Supplies You Need

And, finally, self-treatment requires supplies within easy reach. Make sure you have the following supplies.

- Useful Tools And Supplies: adhesive strips ("Band-aids"), sterile gauze (pads and in rolls), adhesive tape, elastic bandage ("Ace" bandage), cotton balls, safety pins, dental floss, thermometer (rectal thermometer for children under six), tweezers, medicine spoon, penlight, eyedropper, scissors, cold packs, heating pad, humidifier or vaporizer, and nail clippers. With instruction you can learn how to use a blood pressure cuff and stethoscope, and an otoscope (for looking into the ear).

- Useful Medications: acetaminophen ("Tylenol"); aspirin (**never** give aspirin to children and teens under age 20 unless recommended by a doctor); antidiarrheal medicine; a basic cough medicine; antihistamines; ointments to relieve rashes; creams to relieve itching; and antibiotic ointments to apply to cuts and scrapes; syrup of ipecac for poisons that you want someone to vomit. Remember some poisons you do not want the victim to vomit. Have the poison control center number by your telephone and call the center or 911 **before** administering syrup of ipecac.

Work Closely With Your Doctor

Your health-care provider knows a lot more about ailments and diseases than she does about you or your family members. You need to be an active patient and an active advocate for your family members.

The average time the doctor and patient spend together is 15 minutes or less. Use that time to your advantage!

What Should You Expect Your Doctor or Health-Care Provider to Do?

You should expect your doctor or health-care provider to

- Be an active listener when you are speaking.
- Talk in ordinary language.
- Answer all your questions or arrange for someone else in the clinic or office to answer your questions.
 - Treat you in a respectful and compassionate manner.
 - Appreciate your cultural heritage.
 - Let family and friends accompany you, if that is what you want.
 - Understand the practical problems you may have such as child care, work schedules, transportation, and limited financial resources (especially if you lack health insurance), and negotiate with you to find the treatment that fits best with your own individual situation.
 - Help you make informed decisions about your care.

What Can You Do to Build a Partnership With Your Health-Care Provider?

You can build a partnership with your health-care provider when you

- Feel confident in yourself. You know best how you are feeling.
- Keep organized medical records. Keep records from previous doctors or hospital visits. Be familiar with your medical history so you can accurately fill out the forms you're given when you see new health care providers.
- Prepare before you get to the doctor's office or clinic:
 - ☞ Know what feels bad and be able to describe how it feels. Practice saying it out loud, or write it down.
 - ☞ Know what is really worrying you. For example, is it that the pain is too much, or are you really afraid that the pain might mean you have a terrible disease, or are you afraid that the doctor will want you to take medicine that you can't afford?
 - ☞ Write down any questions you have.
 - ☞ Make a list of all the medications you are taking. Remember to include over-the-counter medications. If you are using several medications, take them with you.
- Interact confidently with your doctor during your visit.
 - ☞ Ask questions.
 - ☞ Be honest with your doctor.
 - ☞ Tell him or her if you're having any side effects from any medicine you're taking.
 - ☞ Tell the doctor if you don't understand. The doctor won't know you are confused if

you don't say so. Doctors can talk quickly and use medical terms that are confusing to most patients. They can be too brief when they tell you how to take medicine they are prescribing.

- ☞ Tell him or her honestly about the personal lifestyle issues that may impact your health. If you don't exercise, say so. If you eat fatty foods, say so. If you have multiple sexual partners, say so. If you think you get too impatient with your children, ask your doctor for advice or a referral.
- ☞ Share with the doctor any other treatment you're undergoing. What other doctors are you working with? Do you have any other illnesses, or did you recently have an illness? Are you using alternative treatments like home remedies or acupuncture?
- ☞ Sometimes you might have to negotiate with your doctor. If the doctor makes recommendations that will not work for you, say so. You may need to share ideas back and forth several times before you agree on the best treatment or strategy.
- ☞ If you or someone you care for has a chronic disease, ask for a referral to a support group that deals with that illness.
- ☞ Remain calm. Even if the visit seems rushed, gently but firmly remind the doctor of your questions and concerns. Remember, your aim is to be partners.

When You Should Seek Emergency Care?

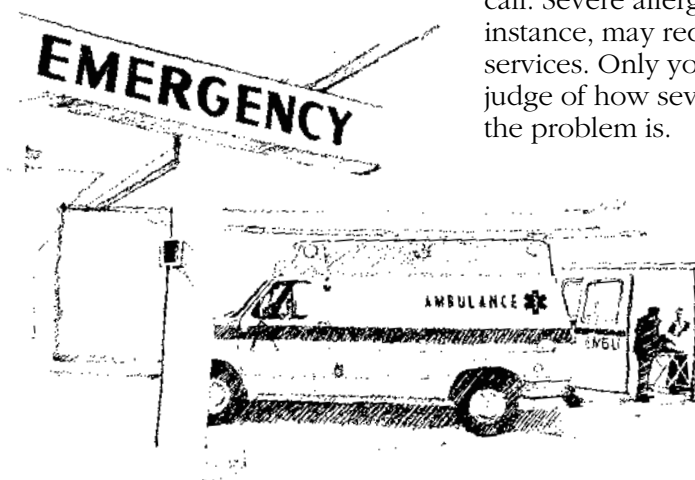
If the conditions appear severe or life threatening, call 911 or go to the emergency room. You should use emergency services when the following conditions occur:

- Heavy bleeding or bleeding that won't stop after 15 minutes of pressure.
- Unconsciousness.
- A stupor or a dazed condition (someone can't think or speak in a clear manner).
- Cold sweats with chest pain, abdominal pain, or lightheadedness.
- Difficulty breathing.
- A seizure (fit) for the first time or if a seizure lasts longer than 5 minutes.
- A possible spinal (back) or neck injury.

- Head injury followed by confusion, deep sleepiness, or vomiting or if the person cannot move arms or legs on one side of the body.
 - Choking.
 - Chemical or acid burns.
 - Serious burns from a fire or smoke inhalation.
 - Possible heart attack.

- A sudden "thunderclap" headache; a headache that is sudden and much more severe than ever before; a headache that is accompanied by stiff neck, drowsiness, confusion, paralysis, numbness, slurred speech, or visual disturbances; a headache that occurs soon after a fall or blow to the head.

Other conditions may require an emergency room visit or a 911 call. Severe allergic reactions, for instance, may require emergency services. Only you can be the judge of how severe or urgent the problem is.



Conclusion

Wise self-care means we take charge at every step by

- Adopting healthy lifestyles and working in our communities to achieve environments that support healthy lifestyles,
- Getting routine check-ups,
- Self-treating minor illnesses, and
- Working with health-care providers whenever we need professional treatment.

If you want to know more about any of the information in this publication, call your county Extension agent. They can help you get further information on many of these topics, develop workshops where you can learn new skills, and help organize community planning groups or health councils that can work together to build healthier neighborhoods and communities.

Remember self-care is not a substitute for professional health care. This publication is only meant as a guide and is not intended to replace professional medical care.

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