

James L. Holly, M.D.

SILENT KILLERS by Muhammad Aziz, M.D. Your Life Your Health April 11, 2002

You are driving on the highway, and suddenly hear trouble in your car. You park your car on the shoulder and get out. The wind is blowing across the highway; cars and trucks are zipping by making a great deal of noise. Realizing the potential danger, you are careful to protect your life by being cautious and attentive to the passing cars and trucks.

You might be thinking, this sounds familiar. We tend to take precautions when we are alarmed, afraid or in danger. However, when it comes to our health, we often throw caution to the wind. Many Americans are not careful about their health. There are certain diseases which are very common but everyone ignores them until they hit you hard and life is changed dramatically for the worse. Professionals in the medical field call these the Silent Killers.

These are the physical problems which develop silently and only become obvious when a serious, life threatening and sometimes irreversible health problem manifests itself. These silent killers can affect our families, friends and loved ones. When they occur, we may take precautions for a few days. Some of us even make an appointment to see our physician, but fail to return for complete follow-up if we feel a little better.

Some major silent killers are cholesterol problems, high blood pressure, and diabetes. Associated complications are heart disease and strokes with vascular disease.

High cholesterol is the most important factor in heart disease and blood vessel disease, but a lot of patients do not take it seriously. They never follow their diets or take their medications consistently.

It is very important to understand that a single blood test, with a good cholesterol result, does not mean you are healthy forever. You should check your cholesterol on an annual basis, even if it is normal. Every person has a different target level of LDL (bad cholesterol). You can discuss this with your physician or log on to the American Heart Association web site for more details on determining your target LDL.

Once you are on cholesterol medication, you need to check your blood periodically. Fortunately, drugs available today for cholesterol are fairly safe. You have to take your medicine regularly and for life, in order to keep your target LDL level maintained. Cholesterol causes clogging of the coronary arteries to the heart, carotid arteries in your neck that go to your brain, and the other arteries to your kidneys and extremities. Your aim should be to protect these vital organs by keeping all arteries clean. This can be accomplished through exercise, diet, or medication if necessary.

High blood pressure silently and slowly puts pressure on your heart, brain and kidneys, and damages them over time. You may not feel the adverse effects initially, as the process is slow. However, one day you may suddenly get chest pain and the doctor tells you that you are having a heart attack, or you have had a stroke. Then it is too late.

Keep your blood pressure checked. Blood pressure monitors are readily available and easy to use. Record your blood pressures regularly, first thing in the morning. Your doctor's office staff should also check your blood pressure on every visit. If you are on blood pressure medications, remember to take these daily for life.

Diabetes mellitus itself is not a killer, but its complications are. If you keep your diabetes under control all the time, not only when you have to visit your doctor, your life expectancy does not change. It is a tedious job to keep sugar controlled. A fasting blood sugar less than 100mg/dl, is the key to success. Physicians can easily determine whether a patient is truly keeping their blood sugar controlled by testing a Hemoglobin A1C. This needs to be checked every 3-6 months and gives the history of sugar control over the past three months.

Patients with diabetes tend to have cholesterol problems, circulation problems, nerve problems, eye and kidney problems. Diabetics also need to see an eye doctor on a yearly basis, if they have no current vision problems, but more frequently if a problem exists.

Another important issue to avoid those "silent killers" are cancer screenings. You should have your colon checked every 5 years, and more often if you have a family history of colon cancer. Remember, colon cancer caught early is 95 % curable, but caught late it is 95% fatal. For prostate cancer, men should check their PSA on a yearly basis after age 50, and earlier if a they have a family history of cancer. Women should have mammograms yearly after age 40, earlier if a family history of maternal breast cancer is present. Women should also have a Pap smear every 1-2 years, once they are sexually active. Nothing is as important with breast cancer, colon cancer, prostate cancer or cervical cancer as early detection. Nothing will detect these early as well as an annual preventive health care visit to your health care provider.

Get your blood pressure checked, cholesterol controlled, blood sugar in target range and protect your vital organs from the devastating effect of diabetes.

These are your responsibility. You can't expect anyone else to take care of your health, if you are not willing to take an active and indeed a proactive role in managing your own health care. You need to have a healthcare provider who will demand that you stop smoking, that you get your flu and pneumonia immunizations and that you get regular preventive health care screening.

You need to make healthy choices every day in your life. You need to eat less, exercise more and change the kinds of foods that you eat. Remember, almost all "fast" foods are bad for you. Foods with high sugar and fat content are bad for you.

There are not enough medications in the world to make up for you neglecting your responsibility of making healthy choices in your habits and in your obtaining of preventive and screening healthcare. You should have at least one visit to your healthcare provider per year which is not associated with an acute health problem or an illness. If you have diabetes, you need three or four a year routinely, regularly, consistently, without regard to your state of health. If you have controlled blood pressure problems, you should see your healthcare provider at least two times a year.

If your healthcare provider is not willing or able to discuss your personal risk factors for these "silent killers," find a healthcare provider who will. If you do not have a healthcare provider who routinely checks your blood pressure, weight, height, cholesterol, triglycerides, HDL, LDL, urine, and blood sugar, then find a healthcare provider who will.

Ask questions!!! You should know as much about your health as your doctor or nurse practitioner. While the basic science behind your health issues may be beyond your level of interest, the practical applications and the practical implications of that science should not be beyond your level of interest and they certainly are not beyond your ability to understand.

Remember, it is your life and it is your health.