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Steps to Good Health - Men and Women ages 21-64

By: James L. Holly, MD

The “fountain of youth” is available to anyone. Just send \$39.95 – of course, that’s monthly times three – and we’ll send you_____. The solution is a book, a pill, a regime, a diet, or some other miracle which is guaranteed, or your money back for thirty days. The truth is that aging is an inevitable part of life – and, an inevitable part of aging is vulnerability to illness and ultimately death.

What should we then do? What steps should we take, or more precisely, what steps can we take, in order to maximize our potential for good health for as long as possible? Before giving a list of current recommendations by age and sex, here are several general, overarching steps anyone and everyone can take to improve their health:

1. If you smoke, stop! If you choose to smoke, don’t go any further than this point, because nothing you do beyond this point can overcome the consequences of excessive smoking. Now, there’s an idea, “excessive smoking.” How much is excessive? Recent research demonstrates that 10 cigarettes a day are as destructive to your health as three packs of cigarettes a day. The same is true for five.

Remember, the story about the police officer who stopped the driver who had slowed down but not stopped at a stop sign? The driver said, “What do you want? I slowed down!” The officer took the man out of the car and began striking him with his night stick. The officer then said, “Do you want me to slow down, or stop?” With smoking, the only health initiative which is beneficial is to stop now, stop completely and never start again.

2. If you drink alcohol, limit yourself to one or two ounces, or one or two beers a day. The issue here from a health standpoint is moderation. Frequently, I have patients ask me if they drink and take a particular medicine. I tell them, “Answering as a Baptist, I tell you, no; as a doctor, I tell you, be careful.” While there have been some reported health benefits of small amounts of wine, the real and potential health hazards to alcohol consumption far outweigh any such benefits.

3. If you are over weight, lose weight. Here is where most people get into trouble. The television advertises hard and straight abdominal muscles. That is depicted as the ideal. The reality is that if you are overweight, a modest reduction in weight of 10 to 20 pounds will improve your health considerably. If you are severely overweight find a healthcare provider who will compassionately but confrontationally help you lose weight and maintain that weight loss. Above all, you don't want a healthcare provider who is going to be a co-conspirator with you, excusing and approving your continued abuse of your health with over eating of the wrong foods.
4. Get regular, moderate exercise. God design the human body to function best when it is mobile. A sedentary life style is as unhealthy as one filled with tobacco, excessive alcohol and rich foods high in saturated fats. Start an exercise program you can and will maintain. 30 minutes a day, 4 to 5 days a week, will make a huge difference in your energy level, your self esteem, your muscle tone, your bone health and in your cardiopulmonary function. And, unless you have forgotten, without "good" cardiopulmonary function, you can't have good health.
5. Get preventive health care. Develop a relationship with a clinic which offers you preventive health care. Even serious disease such as diabetes can be lived with successfully and healthily if you get the proper care. Many cancers can be cured if caught early enough. That's not always possible but it is only possible if you ask the right questions, at the right time, and if you keep asking those questions at proper intervals all of your life.

In education, as in healthcare, the questions the teacher asks tells us what we need to know. However, in education, you take a test to prove that you know the answers; in healthcare, you take tests to get the answers. In healthcare, the right questions tell us which tests to take. If we don't ask the right questions, i.e., if we don't do the right tests, we can't get the right answers. The lists below will give you some of those questions and the tests which are required in order to get the answers you need.

6. Pay attention to your mental and spiritual health. The physical is inextricably interrelated with the spiritual in humans. Good mental health and proper attention to your spiritual health will reap dividends in your physical health. And, when you do face illness, even serious and/or terminal illnesses, your mental and spiritual health will aid you in your journey.
7. Pay attention to relationships. How many people enjoy eating a meal alone? Not many. Eating is a social event, which is why we often overeat as we visit with others and don't pay attention to what and how much we are eating. Yet, one of the healthiest things you can do for yourself and others is to be a friend. If you have a family, cherish the members of that family and work on good relationships with them. If you don't have a family, develop a support group of friends and

relationships which give value and structure to your life and to the lives of others. If you do work on relationships, you not only will live longer, you will have more joy and peace while you are living.

Here are my recommendations for men between the ages of 21 and 64.

Treatment of elevated blood pressure – if your diastolic blood pressure (the bottom number in your reading) is over 90, you should be on medication to bring it down. Remember, medication, properly chosen and properly monitored will not hurt you, but untreated hypertension will.

Pneumonia Vaccination – if you have no compromise of your immune system, you should have the pneumococcal pneumonia vaccination at 55 years of age.

Elevated Cholesterol – If your cholesterol is elevated above 180, or if your cholesterol HDL ratio is above 4, or if your LDL is above 120, you would benefit from treatment of your cholesterol with medication. We know that getting your LDL below 70 virtually eliminates your risk for hardening of the arteries with plaques. We think that decreasing your cholesterol may prevent, delay or decrease dementia.

Colon and rectal cancer – After age 50, if you don't have a family history of colon cancer, you should have a stool test for blood. If you are at high risk because of a family history of colon cancer, you should begin having colon screens with colonoscopic examination 10 years younger than your family member was when diagnosed, i.e., if your father had colon cancer at 60, you should begin having colon screening at 50.

Dental hygiene and prevention of cavities – Make sure your community water is fluorinated and that you use fluoride toothpaste. Brush three times a day and floss your teeth daily.

Hearing Impairment – Avoid loud sounds, either by avoiding places where there is noise or using hearing protection when around noise. This means sportsmen who shoot shotguns and children who attend rock concerts.

Lung Cancer – Stop smoking and avoid places with concentrated, second-hand smoke. The natural occurring substances and fiber in green leafy vegetables and fruit are helpful in decreasing the probability of lung cancer. A chest x-ray every five years for those with low risk and more frequently as your risk go up is important.

Obesity – Have your healthcare provider calculate and monitor your Body Mass Index. If it is over 26, lose weight.

Skin Cancer – Avoid unprotected exposure to sunlight at the hottest times of day, use sun screen and/or wear clothing which covers your skin.

Prostate Cancer – After age 50, all men should have an annual Prostate Specific Antigen test and an annual digital prostate examination by a healthcare provider.

Testicular Cancer – Monthly self examinations and annual physical examinations are important parts of identifying and treating this very serious condition in young males.

Bladder Cancer – Urinalysis annually where the presence of protein, blood and/or cells can be discovered.

Carotid Artery Disease and/or Stroke – Annual examination of the carotid arteries by your healthcare provider with a stethoscope.

Depression – A general health questionnaire can be given quickly and easily by your healthcare provider which can recognize the beginning or presence of depression. Often, this illness is unrecognized in any age groups. Many physical symptoms are pursued when the real problem is depression. Don't overlook the possibility that you may be, as anyone may be, suffering from depression. Don't think that depression is a sign of weakness, wickedness or wimpishness. Anyone can be depressed.

Surveying your life and your health for these problems is relatively easy and not terribly expensive. Not doing so puts you on a very hard road which can be very costly.

Remember, the Fram oil filter ad, where the mechanic says, "Pay me now (by buying an oil filter) or pay me later (by repairing your engine)." Your body is more valuable than an automobile engine, but preventive health care has this same principle. You are going to spend money on your health. The question is whether you will spend the money to maintain and/or retain your health or to try and regain it once it is lost.

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