

Seven Medical Myths That Can Kill You

Personal Pulse | What you don't know about your health *can* hurt you.

W BY DR. NANCY SNYDERMAN, *TODAY Health/MSNBC.com*

hen it comes to your health, you can't believe everything you hear. And if you get the wrong information, it can have dangerous consequences.

Medical myths have been passed down through the ages, told to us by parents, grandparents and other family members. Also, with more medical information available at the click of a button on the Web, we have become a nation of "cyberchondriacs" diagnosing ourselves with false information and half-truths.

Which vaccinations and boosters do adults need?

- Diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis (DTP)
- Influenza
- Human papillomavirus (HPV)
- Pneumococcal
- Measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR)
- Meningococcal
- Hepatitis A
- Shingles
- Hepatitis B
- Chicken pox

Medical myths can prevent us from focusing clearly on the real issues and our options. They can even be deadly. TODAY chief medical editor Nancy Snyderman says that "two of our greatest enemies in the battle against life-threatening disease are ignorance and the personal beliefs we bring into the doctor's office."

In her new book, "Medical Myths That Can Kill You — And the 101 Truths That Will Save, Extend, and Improve Your Life," Snyderman helps readers separate fact from fiction when it comes to their medical concerns.

Here are the seven medical myths that can kill you:

Annual checkups are obsolete

Having ourselves checked on a regular basis is a vital step and if we all did it, diseases could be prevented or detected at an early stage, when treatment is most effective. Why? The annual checkup gives us a chance to establish and build a relationship with a doctor — a connection that can prove vital if you are ever ill. The annual checkup also gives your doctor a sense of where your health stands from year to year. This yearly conversation can also be used as a form of self-monitoring regarding your habits and lifestyle and is one of

the most important talks you can have. Note: Each annual checkup should be tailored to your own personal needs, your health and your family history.

Vaccinations are just for kids

Vaccines are the greatest medical breakthroughs of the past century. It's easy to disregard them because they no longer seem modern or jazzy ... with all the modern advances we have at our disposal, it is easy to forget what life was like before the dawn of vaccinations. And they're not just for kids. Immunity from vaccines may not last a lifetime — we may outlive the initial protection of the vaccine — which is why you need "booster" shots, particularly after 30. And as we get older, our immune systems are not as strong, which is why diseases like influenza can be so life threatening to people in their 80s. There are also new vaccines that have come out, such as the HPV vaccine, that females should talk to their doctors about.

And just last week the CDC recommended that all people 60 or over should get immunized against shingles, even if they've had the disease before.

Doctors don't play favorites

Every day thousands of people in this country face difficulties in accessing quality health care or preventive services. And often it's the neediest of people — the elderly, women and members of minority groups — who cannot get help and are disenfranchised from the health care system. So is a new class of the medically denied: The working poor — those who are in the workplace but make too much money to qualify for federal assistance, yet not enough to cover their own insurance premiums. These people fall through the cracks of the health care system every day.

We know this is true because disease rates and survival rates among minorities and whites convey something less than a level playing field: ➤

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African American men are 30% more likely to die of heart disease than non-Hispanic whites;
Hispanics suffer in greater percentages than whites from overweight and obesity;
Prostate cancer strikes twice as many blacks than whites;
Black women are 36 percent more likely to die from breast cancer than whites, even though white women are more likely to get cancer after the age of 40.

So if we are to take care of ourselves, we need to know how to access the best health care, how to talk to our doctors, and how to demand respect and appropriate treatment from a system that is not always kind to everyone in it. Finally, the best revenge is to just live better and take matters into your own hands. A study from Harvard University found that you can add about seven years extra to your life by eliminating certain preventable risk factors, and doing so could be more important than access to medical care in terms of our longevity.

We're losing the war on cancer

Cancer may be the medical arena most rife with myths, and one of the most pervasive in this area is that we are losing the war on cancer. The very phrase "war on cancer" is a misnomer, because cancer is not one disease, but hundreds, with just as many causes and complexities, and each has its own battle. Some have real cures and others are agonizingly frustrating to detect and treat, but we know more now about preventing cancer than we ever did before. What's more, treatment of cancer has shifted from not just trying to cure it but also to controlling it.

The fight against it has been on the national agenda since 1997, when President Richard Nixon officially declared war on this dreaded disease. Since then, medicine has made great strides, and consequently your risk of being diagnosed with cancer and the risk of dying of cancer have decreased significantly. Fewer than half the people diagnosed with cancer today will die of the disease. Some are completely cured, and many more people survive for years with a good quality of life.

Cancers such as Hodgkin's lymphoma and acute lymphocytic leukemia in children have largely been defeated and for the most part are now considered curable. Since the 1970s, researchers have amassed a wealth of information about the innermost secrets of malignant cells and how they evolve — which means better methods of targeting treatment are being developed.

How we live can have a great affect on our risk for many cancers. Lung, colon, skin, breast, prostate, esophagus and others can often be linked to our behaviors. According to

the American Cancer Society, 550,000 Americans die of cancer and one-third of these deaths can be linked to poor diet, lack of physical activity, being overweight or other risky behaviors.

Myth: Only old people get heart disease and stroke

High cholesterol, diabetes, high blood pressure, stress, lack of exercise and obesity can all lead to heart disease and stroke at any age.

The American Heart Association now recommends that young adults have a heart check beginning at the age of 20, and every two years afterward. Why? For somebody who's heading for a heart attack in their 40s, 50s, 60s or 70s, there's arteriosclerosis building up in your teenage and young adult years.

We are now seeing in children and adolescence the seeds of later heart disease. So if doctors start checking for basic things like waist measurement, blood pressure, cholesterol levels and body mass index (which is your weight versus your height), then preventive measures can be taken early on. Just because you are young doesn't mean you are at low risk.

Natural means 'safe'

A lot of us feel this way. There is some sort of comfort when we see a product that says "natural." And many people struggle with accepting established medical advice versus using some "natural" remedy for their health problem. But even though something is labeled natural, it does not necessarily mean that it's safe. Tobacco, for example, is natural, but we know that it is a killer. So is arsenic.

Consumers often think that, as with pharmaceutical drugs, government agencies test natural products to make sure that they are safe and effective. But this is not the case. In 1994, in response to forceful lobbying on the part of supplement makers, Congress passed the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act. Now, vitamins, minerals, herbs and other natural substances on shelves do not need review or approval from the Food and Drug Administration. As part of this act, supplement manufacturers were told they had to substantiate the safety of their ingredients. But this has not been enforced until recently. The agency phased in the rule requiring supplement makers to test the purity and composition of their products, and companies have until 2010 to comply.

Herbs can be as powerful as mainstream medicine. About 25% of all prescription drugs are derived from trees, shrubs >



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or herbs. For example, aspirin comes from willow trees and the birth control pill originated from the Mexican yam.

So how do you evaluate supplements to make sure they are good for your health? Ideally, any natural supplement you take should work together with medication that has been prescribed by your doctor. You need to do your homework before taking any supplement, and make sure to tell your doctor everything you're taking — natural substances included.

You can just 'snap out' of mental illness

We all hit bumps in the road throughout life, and we all handle these hard times differently. But many of us think people should be able to snap out of depression or anxiety because we don't recognize it as a treatable illness. But in the case of mental health, such attitudes can stand in the way of recognizing when things get off track and when it might be time for measures that help restore joy, energy and purpose to life.

Here is an encouraging, empowering fact to take to heart: Mental disorders like depression and anxiety are illnesses, and you are no more responsible for them than you would be if you had diabetes — and if you did have diabetes, you would not hesitate to treat it. Mental health problems are not caused by the person suffering from them, either. Certainly, you need to take responsibility for the thoughts, feelings and behaviors associated with the problem, but you are not to blame for them. There is a difference between taking responsibility and accepting blame — and it's important to not confuse the two.

There is no single cause for mental illness, but factors can include family history, stress, chronic illness, or brain chemical imbalances. Getting professional help will help you with your illness and make you stronger.

One in five American adults will experience a diagnosable mental illness in their lifetime. In fact, mental disorders are the leading cause of disability in the United States for people ages 15 to 44. According to a study published in the journal *Lancet*, depression can do more physical damage to someone's health than several long-term diseases.



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