

Overcoming Chronic Disease the New Old-fashioned Way



Health Matters

By Kerry Sauser

These days we all seem to have a friend or family member who suffers from a chronic disease. Diabetes, heart disease, cancer, mental illness, digestive problems and auto-immune disorders such as rheumatoid arthritis all are classified as chronic diseases. And they are on the rise at an alarming rate.

According to Webster's Dictionary, a chronic disease is "marked by long duration or frequent recurrence: not acute." For example, years of arthritis pain and swelling in your wrist is chronic, but a broken wrist is not—that is an acute health situation.

So just what is going on? Why are chronic diseases on the rise? As with most complex problems, there is more than one factor. Our environment today is filled with substances that adversely affect our health. The air we breathe contains car exhaust, pesticides, and herbicides. The food we eat contains preservatives, artificial colorings, radiation and genetically modified ingredients. The water we drink may contain bacteria, fecal matter from runoff or chlorine. Our lifestyles are filled with stress, which in turn causes abnormal hormonal shifts. Every one of these factors can cause imbalances in the body, and such internal imbalances are the root cause of disease.

Besides the growing causes of chronic disease, the system of medicine practiced by most physicians is

not normally geared toward treatment of chronic illnesses. While typical medical approaches handle acute care very effectively, restoring balance to the body systems is not usually the focus. Acute care diagnoses and treats trauma or illness with specific prescribed remedies (such as drugs or surgery) to alleviate the immediate problem or symptom. This approach works to minimize the damage of a heart attack, for instance, but it often does not focus on uncovering and treating the underlying factors that contributed to the heart attack, such as a weakened heart and circulatory system. An approach that works better with chronic illness focuses on restoring balance to the body—the functional medicine approach.

Consider functional medicine in terms of a car. Perhaps the tread on your left front tire wears out much faster than the tread on the other tires. If you deal with the symptoms only (like the typical medical approach), you will replace the bad tire, but after a while, that tire will wear out again. With a functional approach, your mechanic would replace the tire, but he would also run complete diagnostics on the car to see what is causing the problem. He might find the tire is wearing out because of poor alignment or an improperly balanced wheel, and he would fix that underlying cause so that the tire will no longer be ruined. Functional medicine is like that...its philosophy is to address and treat the underlying cause of illness, not just the symptoms.

Functional Medicine is the new "old-fashioned way." This approach was once common in the United States, but the discovery of new medications and surgical techniques, as well as political and social changes, led to its disuse. In many ways, it is a common sense

approach that utilizes the best in science, medicine and experience. The functional medicine "toolbox" contains many ways to locate the source of illnesses, including traditional blood tests and diagnostics. However, a functional practitioner may also use blood tests to determine how well a person is processing nutrients, a saliva test to check hormone levels, a hair analysis to check for toxicity or thermal imaging to detect hidden sources of pain.

It is suggested that most chronic illnesses come from imbalances in one of the following body functions:

- * Regulation of hormones
- * Removal of toxins
- * Immune system response
- * Inflammatory responses
- * Digestion and absorption of nutrients
- * Structural integrity
- * Physiological and spiritual equilibrium
- * Energy Production

The functional practitioner uses a second "healing toolbox" to deal with these body imbalances, and the tools are selected according to a person's unique health needs. The idea is to use remedies that have few, if any, detrimental effects on the body. The functional practitioner may use traditional medications, but they may also suggest dietary changes, nutritional or herbal supplements, exercise, stress reduction techniques and body balancing treatments such as acupuncture or massage therapy. The ultimate goal is to help the patient be free of the need for medication.

You might guess that functional medicine is patient centered care. Most of us have some understanding of our own bodies and we know how we feel. A practitioner who uses the functional medicine approach

works extensively with their patient to evaluate their history, current physical condition, and lifestyle, as well as internal (mind, body and spirit) and external (physical and social surroundings) factors. For functional medicine to work best, a patient must be a partner in achieving their personal health goals. In cases of chronic disease, the functional approach is like peeling the layers off an onion. A person will see some results in a short time, but the benefits will increase over time as the layers of illness-causing factors are removed and balance is restored to the body.

Most importantly, although functional medicine can treat illness very effectively, it is all about keeping well. ...and maintaining good balance in your body. That is great news, because with a little understanding of how functional medicine works, each of us can take the small steps necessary to keep ourselves well and avoid chronic illness altogether.

Until next month...Heal well, Be well....naturally!

K.S.

P.S. You can learn more about functional medicine from the Institute for Functional Medicine at www.functionalmedicine.org.

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