

Men's health alert

BY JOEL WARNER, Jun 1, 2009 12:00 PM

Four symptoms no guy should ignore

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The shooting pain woke me in the middle of the night. It felt like someone had wedged a screwdriver between my spine and shoulder blade. Changing position, stretching, pain relievers ... nothing helped. The pain came out of nowhere. I racked my brain: As far as I could recall, I hadn't injured myself. "You need to call the doctor," my wife said. "Maybe," I replied.

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Why did I even hesitate? Well, as it turns out, I'm a typical guy. A 2007 American Academy of Family Physicians survey of 1,100 men found that while most men eventually seek medical attention when they're ailing, a whopping 92 percent wait days to see if they'll feel better. What's worse, nearly a third wait "as long as possible" before getting help. "Men aren't expected to listen to their bodies," explains Salvatore Giorgianni, PharmD, development director at Nashville-based Belmont University and advisor to the Men's Health Network national educational organization. "Little clues that something is wrong are very frequently ignored."

When I did eventually see my doctor, I was relieved to learn that the pain was a bad muscle spasm. The debilitating discomfort that could have lingered for a month was relieved after a few days of chiropractic treatments and massage therapy. But there are scores of other easy-to-ignore symptoms that can spell real trouble, particularly as men get older, says Jean Bonhomme, MD, MPH, founder of the National Black

Men's Health Network. And the later you catch a problem, often the less you can do about it.

In short, if something doesn't seem right — whether you've developed a strange shortness of breath, recurring headaches, inexplicably swollen lymph nodes, or just unusual pain — it's always best to check in with your physician. Here are some of the more common symptoms you may be tempted to ignore — but shouldn't.

SYMPTOM: Skin irregularities

Next Page: Skin irregularities

Why: Lots of men work or play in the sun, so they're prime targets for skin cancer, the most common of all cancers. The ultraviolet rays in sunlight can trigger DNA damage that results in the uncontrolled growth associated with cancers. Many skin cancers are easily treatable if caught early but one type, malignant melanoma, kills roughly 8,000 Americans a year. Even folks diligent with sunscreen for years aren't necessarily safe, says Bonhomme. After all, skin cancer can develop and then lie dormant for 20 or 30 years. If you recognize any of the "ABCDs" above, make an appointment with a dermatologist right away.

How to prevent it: Here's good news: Your spaghetti dinner may help protect against sun damage — as long as it includes sauce made with ample tomato paste. Researchers at the University of Manchester recently discovered that people who ate 5 tablespoons of standard tomato paste a day had 33 percent more skin protection than those in a control group. Lycopene, a powerful antioxidant in tomatoes that is concentrated in tomato paste, may neutralize the harmful effects of UV light. Being a lycopene devotee, however, doesn't mean that you can skip the sunscreen: Regular, daily application is key, especially during the peak sunlight hours between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. and on cloudy days when the ultraviolet rays can still reach you.

SYMPTOM: A big belly

Be on the lookout for: Weight gain around the middle (rather than on hips or legs), particularly if you develop a waist-to-hip ratio greater than 0.9. (To determine your ratio, measure your waist below your ribs and your hips at their greatest circumference; divide the first number by the second number.) A good rule of thumb

is your pants size: A 40-inch waist or larger is reason to be concerned, says Bonhomme.

Why: All body fat isn't created equal. Although excess weight is never a good sign, carrying extra weight around the abdomen (what's sometimes called male-pattern obesity) is worse than in other areas. "Those who have an imbalanced proportion between their waist and hips seem to be at higher risk of metabolic syndrome," says Geovanni Espinosa, ND, Lac, director of the Integrative Urological Center at New York University Medical Center. "That puts them at increased risk of type 2 diabetes, heart problems, and even prostate cancer." The primary risk factors for metabolic syndrome are abdominal obesity and insulin resistance, the body's inability to use insulin it releases in response to food.

How to prevent it: Reevaluate your diet, for starters. A United States Agricultural Research Service study found that people who consumed 2.5 or more servings of whole grains a day were half as likely to have metabolic syndrome than those who ate less than one serving a day. On the other hand, a nine-year National Institutes of Health study recently found that people who regularly ate refined grains, red meat, fried foods, and processed meats like hot dogs and hamburgers elevated their metabolic syndrome risk. Surprisingly, despite having few or zero calories, diet soda is also a risk factor. So opt for whole-grain meals featuring brown rice, oatmeal, and 100 percent whole-grain breads whenever possible.

It's also smart to get moving, because low physical activity also increases risk for metabolic syndrome. Aerobic activities that strengthen abdominal muscles and burn lots of calories, such as jogging, bicycling, swimming, and using rowing machines, can help drop those pounds around the waist.

SYMPTOM: Irregular urination

Be on the lookout for: Any kind of unusual bathroom activity, including weak, frequent, or minimal urination. If you're hitting the bathroom several times a night, for example, it's time to find out what's going on.

Why: A variety of ailments can lead to wonky urination, says Carl Hangee-Bauer, ND, Lac, founder of San Francisco Natural Medicine in California. Weak or frequent urination can be a sign of urinary tract infection, kidney illness, diabetes, or an enlarged prostate, a gland near the bladder found only in men. More common with age, a swollen prostate can lead to increasingly painful and difficult urination and

may require medication or surgery. These same symptoms can also indicate prostate cancer, the most common cancer in men, with approximately 186,000 new cases diagnosed each year. Guys need to realize that prostate cancer is often a silent killer, cautions Bonhomme, usually with few or no symptoms in its early stages. That's why it's important for all men to get annual prostate cancer screens starting at age 50, he says; those with a family history or who are African American should start at 40 or earlier.

How to prevent it: Keep that flow going as naturally as possible, says Espinosa, by drinking eight to ten glasses of water a day to help the body flush out possible infection-causing agents. To counter a swelling prostate, Hangee-Bauer recommends 160 mg of standardized extract of saw palmetto, combined with pygeum and pumpkin-seed oil. These extracts help shrink the prostate by inhibiting conversion of testosterone into dihydrotestosterone, which triggers growth in prostate cells. He also suggests 2 tablespoons of ground flaxseed a day; a 2008 study found that this omega-3 fatty acid-rich food helped slow the growth of prostate tumors.

SYMPTOM: Low sex drive

Be on the lookout for: Decreased libido or erectile dysfunction. "Low libido is not a simple thing," says Hangee-Bauer. "It can be a condition in and of itself, but it can also be a symptom of something else."

Why: Guys may assume bedroom activity decreases naturally with age, but a low sex drive may indicate something more serious is amiss. A common culprit is low testosterone, which can lead to heart problems and bone loss, says Espinosa. Erectile dysfunction may also be a warning sign of impending heart disease or stroke. "The arteries that go to the male genitals are smaller than the arteries that go to the brain," explains Bonhomme. If blood can't flow to the penis to cause erections, blood flow may be dangerously weak in other parts of the body, too.

How to prevent it: Weight-bearing exercise and healthy stress management support balanced testosterone levels, says Espinosa. "There seems to be a connection between highly stressed men and lower testosterone levels," he warns. And try to get a full eight hours of sleep, too. Researchers have found that men who suffer from obstructive sleep apnea — breathing problems that interrupt normal sleeping patterns — produce lower levels of testosterone.

If you're over 50 and suffer from low libido, Hangee-Bauer suggests 160 mg a day of ginkgo biloba. Not only does the herb relax artery walls to improve circulation to the penis, says Hangee-Bauer, but it can also help blood flow to the brain and have a mild antidepressant effect.

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Essential daily supplements for men

* A GOOD MULTIVITAMIN

Carl Hangee-Bauer, ND, Lac, founder of San Francisco Natural Medicine, recommends a three-times-a-day, high-potency combination. After all, he points out, "We have to remember that recommended dietary allowances [the recommended amounts of nutrients people should have in their diets] are just the amounts that prevent us from having different diseases" and not necessarily optimum amounts for overall well-being. "If you have a good multivitamin, you are covering things you may be missing in your diet," he adds. "I see it as health insurance."

* FISH OIL

Hangee-Bauer recommends fish oil for its omega-3 fatty acids, which have strong anti-inflammatory effects and may help prevent cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, and some cancers.

Dose: 1,000 mg daily.

Note: May interact with blood-thinning meds.

* GREEN TEA

Researchers have found that green tea's key antioxidant ingredient, epigallocatechin gallate (EGCG), binds to tumor cells and slows their growth. So make sure you're getting enough EGCG, either in brewed or extract form, Hangee-Bauer suggests. Dose: 70-100 mg EGCG daily (1-2 cups of green tea).

Note: Those with caffeine sensitivities should consider decaffeinated versions, making sure to choose a brand that's decaffeinated using the natural "effervescence"

method, a process involving water and carbon dioxide that retains most of the EGCG content.

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For its cancer-prevention properties. “The vast majority of patients I see get less than optimal levels in their daily diet and through sunlight exposure,” says Hangee-Bauer. Dose: 1,000 IU daily.

SYMPTOM: Skin irregularities

Be on the lookout for: Skin irregularities such as moles with odd shapes, rough or blurry borders, different colors, or a diameter larger than a pencil eraser. These follow what Bonhomme calls the “ABCDs” of skin cancer: asymmetry, border irregularities, color, and diameter. Be extra diligent in checking for abnormalities on parts of the body with lots of direct sun exposure, like your nose, ears, back, shoulders, and the top of your head, where hair may be thinning.

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