

October 2005

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National Breast Cancer Awareness Mammography

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> Most likely, you or someone you know has been affected by breast cancer. Getting a mammogram as soon as it's appropriate for you is an important step in reducing your risk from this disease.

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Answers and explanations to this month's Health IQ questions on breast cancer care.

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# Are You a Prepared Patient

What is one of the biggest epidemics in the United States? It's not an illness, bug, or germ. It's health illiteracy—our inability, as patients, to fully understand our health information. This epidemic affects more than 90 million people every day.



atients worldwide are having a hard time understanding much of what their doctors and pharmacists tell them. This includes how to correctly take medication and how to meet the daily needs of chronic conditions, such as diabetes and heart disease. "Health illiteracy" can also mean not understanding forms for getting reimbursed the right amount from your medical insurance or descriptions of hospital procedures. This kind of illiteracy is not just a problem for the poor, the uneducated, or the elderly—it's a problem for almost everyone. Being prepared to talk to your doctor by collecting information before your visit can help.

#### But What Does Health Literacy Mean?

Being "health literate" means that you understand what's happening in your body and what your choices are in your health care, including treatments and how they might help you. Too often, we are afraid to ask questions or press our health care providers for details. No one wants to be considered a problem patient.

But as medical information becomes more complex and more detailed, more questions need to be asked. Patients need to make the most of their time with doctors. This includes asking lots of questions if you are a little confused or totally lost. If you don't clearly understand what your doctor is telling you, it can seriously affect your health care. For example, not really knowing how or when to take a medication or return for a screening or office visit could seriously endanger your health and even shorten your life.

#### **Health Literacy in the Spotlight**

It's only recently that health illiteracy has been seen as a serious obstacle in health care, even though experts think it costs our health system tens of billions of dollars every year! When it comes to medications and self-care—the things you need to do to get healthy and keep healthy after you leave the doctor's office—never leave the doctor's office without double checking to make sure you know what you are supposed to do.

#### Low Health Literacy Causes Problems

Not understanding your health needs can lead to:

- Taking the wrong amount of medicine or taking it too often or not often enough.
- Misusing important health care items, like asthma inhalers or glucose testing kits for diabetes.
- Overlooking the importance of follow-up doctor visits.
- Misunderstanding the need for referrals to medical specialists.
- More frequent doctor visits, even hospital stays.
- Increased risk for serious diseases and complications, such as heart disease, diabetes, and some forms of cancer.



#### How to Improve Communication With Your Health Care Team

Communicating about your health is a two-way street. True health literacy is not just about how well your doctor explains things to you; it's also about how well you explain things to your doctor. Oftentimes, people don't realize how much vital information they have to offer medical professionals. Your family health history, what medications you are taking or have taken recently, and timing of previous medical screenings can make a big difference in how your doctor directs your care. A little preparation, such as creating a Personal Health Book (see checklist to the right) or visiting www.patienteducationcenter.org to learn about tests and conditions, can make a big difference in your understanding.

#### Importance of Keeping Your Health History

The odds are slim that one doctor will treat you for your entire life. Nowadays, people move around a lot. Unfortunately, not everyone keeps track of medical records or past doctors as well as they should, which can affect health literacy for you and for your current doctor. A great way to solve that problem is to create a *Personal Health Book*— a system to keep track of your medical history.

Families should have one health book for each member of the family. You should section your health book and keep all your information organized, then bring it along to each doctor's appointment.

#### Organize Your Health With a Personal Health Book



#### Section 1: Family Health History

- All health problems "in the family", including parents and siblings.
- See www.generationalhealth.com to learn how to build a family tree based on health.



#### Section 2: Personal Health History

- Past illnesses.
- Chronic illnesses, such as diabetes or migraine.
- Seasonal complaints, such as allergies.
- Hospitalizations and/or surgeries.



#### Section 3: Medications

- All medications you are currently taking:
  - prescriptions
  - over-the-counter drugs
  - vitamins
  - supplements
- Whether you are allergic to any medicines, such as penicillin.



#### Section 4: Medical Records

- Test results, such as blood screenings, vaccination records, and HIV tests.
- X-rays and similar medical films, such as mammograms and ultrasound.



#### Section 4: Medical Records cont'd

- Records of regular testing for chronic illnesses, such as blood cholesterol, blood pressure, heart rate, and glucose.
- History of office visits or regular test appointments.



#### Section 5: Health Diary/Calendar

- Daily readings (such as glucose levels if you have diabetes).
- Symptoms or health issues and when they occurred.
- Calendar of office visits and test dates, recent hospitalizations and screenings.
- Menstruation chart (for women).



#### Section 6: Insurance Information

Copies of your insurance information (or Medicare/Medicaid, social security, social services, etc.), including ID card(s), prescription plan, and important phone numbers.



#### Section 7: Miscellaneous

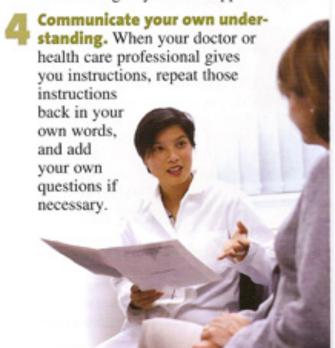
Articles and news columns talking about advances in health care to discuss with your doctor.



Brochures and advertisements on new supplements or herbal options to discuss with your doctor.

#### How to Improve Your Health Literacy

- Ask questions. Even the most basic ones—"what does my diagnosis mean?" and "why do I need that kind of medicine?"—can go a long way in helping you understand your health needs and how to meet them.
- Keep notes. Make notes of your symptoms and concerns before you see your doctor, then make notes of your progress and concerns while you are being treated.
- Ask for help. If you are concerned about your ability to understand or remember everything your doctor tells you, bring a trusted family member or friend along to your next appointment.



# When Teens Lose Hope,

Parents Don't Have To

I know teenagers can be moody, but lately my teen's reactions have been affecting school, home, and even friends.

Could it be depression?

A: A certain amount of moodiness is part of the hormonal changes of adolescence, but teenage depression is different. It is a serious medical condition that should be diagnosed and treated by a medical professional. As many as 10% of American teens suffer from depression. The high stress of school, body changes, and the future can make things worse. See the brochure on depression online at <a href="https://www.patienteducationcenter.org">www.patienteducationcenter.org</a> to learn more about signs and symptoms of depression.

#### **Recognizing Depression**

If you believe your child has 3 or more of the following signs and symptoms of depression, it's time to talk to a health care professional:

- Missing school or a drop in grades or performance.
- Lack of interest in hobbies or activities.
- Loss of friendships and social activities.
- Problems with authority or aggression.
- Forgetfulness, absent-mindedness, or indecisiveness.
- Drug and/or alcohol use or abuse.

- Low self-esteem.
- Persistent sadness or hopelessness.
- Inappropriate anger and rage.
- Frequent physical problems, such as headache and stomachache.
- Change in sleep habits, including sleeping a lot or not sleeping at all.
- Preoccupation with death and suicide.

The bottom two are particularly important. The long-term effects of drug and alcohol addiction can be severe, even life-threatening. Teen suicide is also a frightening reality—it is the third leading cause of death for Americans ages 15 to 24. If you suspect either of those symptoms in your teen, seek professional help or intervention right away.

#### **Getting Help for Depression**

If your teen is diagnosed with depression, your doctor will probably suggest your child talks with a mental health professional. Often referred to as "talk therapy," this kind of help is a great asset to people suffering from depression. Talk therapy can help people learn about their illness and learn how to explain their illness to others. The last part is very important, particularly for teens. While depression is a serious medical condition, many people still think it's just a "phase" or something a person should be able to snap out of or just stop. Being a teenager is rough enough without people misunderstanding an illness. Talk therapy can help teenagers communicate with their peers and their family about depression and reduce how other people's opinions of depression affect the influential teen years.

## Mammography:

#### An Annual Exam That Might Save Your Life

ost likely, you or someone you know has been affected by breast cancer. It is one of the most common cancers in women, affecting more than 211,000 American women each year. The good news is that there are more breast cancer survivors today than ever before, partly due to screening tools-like mammograms-that detect breast cancer early. When it comes to cancer, early detection is the key to survival. Ask your doctor today about when to schedule a mammogram, especially if you're older than 40.

The risk of breast cancer increases as we age, so the American Cancer Society recommends that all women older than 40 have a mammogram every year. Some women need to go for mammography at an even younger age, depending on certain uncontrollable risk factors. Talk to your doctor about your risk, especially if a close relative-such as your mother or your sister-has had breast cancer.



#### What Is a Mammogram?

A mammogram is a kind of x-ray, but this one doesn't find broken bones. Instead, it looks for changes in breast tissue. Most mammograms are done in special clinics, but some doctors' offices have the equipment as well. It's important to know that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) inspects all places in the US where a mammogram is done, so be sure to look for the FDA certification. Then you can feel confident that your mammogram is safe and of very high quality.

#### **Preparing for Your Mammogram**

Mammography may be uncomfortable, but there are steps you can take to reduce that discomfort and make the process easier overall.

- Schedule your mammogram 1 to 2 weeks after your period to reduce breast tenderness.
- Do not apply deodorant, antiperspirant, powder, or lotion to your armpits or breast area.
- Wear comfortable, loose clothing that is easy to put on and take off.
- Provide your mammogram technician with any prior mammogram results.
- Tell the technician of any particular symptoms, lumps, or unusual changes you have noticed.

#### October 21 is National Mammography Day!

Mammography is an important test—one that could save your life. According to the experts at www.breastcancer.org, mammography lowers the chance of dying from breast cancer by an estimated 35% in women older than 50. It may save just as many women who are older than 40. Talk to your doctor and schedule your mammogram.

## Do You Know What's Best for Your Breast?

The advances in breast cancer therapies-for men and women-are amazing. Today, more people than ever before are surviving this disease. It can be tough to keep up with the latest in breast cancer prevention.

Take this quiz to test your Health IQ on today's options for preventing or living a good life after breast cancer.

- 1) To reduce your risk of developing breast cancer, you should:
  - A. Eat a diet rich in fruits and vegetables.
- C. Never smoke cigarettes or stop if you do.
- B. Exercise every day.
- D. All of the above.

The correct answer is D. A recent study in the Archives of Internal Medicine showed that only about 3% of Americans maintain a "healthy lifestyle," which includes the factors above as well as keeping your weight at a healthy level. These steps can reduce your risk of breast cancer and other conditions.

- 2) If someone else in your family has had breast cancer, your risk is:
  - A. Higher than average.
- C. Lower than average.
- B. The same as everyone else.
- D. No one knows.

The correct answer is A. Talk to your doctor, especially if your mother or sister has had

breast cancer. You may need to have earlier or more frequent mammograms, or you may benefit from some genetic tests that will let you know more about your risk.

- 3) The "gold standard" for preventing breast cancer from returning may now be:
  - A. Tamoxifen.
- C. β-blockers.
- B. Aromatase inhibitors.
- D. Oral contraceptives.

The correct answer is B. If you answered "A," you're not alone. Tamoxifen has been recommended for years for postmenopausal women who have beaten early-stage, hormone receptor -positive breast cancer to help reduce the risk of it coming back. However, recent research shows that aromatase inhibitors may be slightly more effective and have fewer side effects. Ask your doctor about this class of medications, especially if you have been taking tamoxifen for two to five years, according to the American Society of Clinical Oncology.

- 4) The tissue in a previous biopsy was "abnormal." What is my risk of developing breast cancer?
  - A. It's slightly higher.
- C. I should ask
- B. It depends on the abnormality.
- my doctor. D. All of the above.

The correct answer is D. Having abnormal findings in a previous biopsy doesn't mean you're going to get breast cancer later, but it does slightly increase your risk (1.5 to 2 times greater than other women), according to the American Cancer Society. Talk to your doctor about any concerns you may have about future risk, and see our article online for more discussion about the types of abnormal results that increase risk.



Visit us online to read this month's issue and more on each topic, including ...



#### **Are You a Prepared Patient?**

 More details on improving your health literacy.

When Teens Lose Hope, Parents Don't Have To

. Tips for choosing your child's therapist.



NBCAM NATIONAL BREAST CANCER AWARENESS MONTH



Mammography: An Annual
Exam That Might Save Your Life

Types of mammograms, and how they work.

## Do You Know What's Best for Your Breast?

 Anatomy of the breast and different types of breast cancer.



... and much more!

Available online at www.patienteducationcenter.org

or

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PEC-PCC-110