

Why don't men seek care? **By Christopher Burke, PhD**

Men have a higher mortality rate than women in every age bracket, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Some of that is due to men's behavior (more men than women ride motorcycles) and lifestyle choices (more men than women use alcohol and drugs). However, the CDC reports, men's higher mortality rate also is due to illness. More men in their 40s, 50s, and 60s die from serious diseases than do women in the same age brackets, and this is true across all major disease categories, including heart disease and cancer. Only from age 70 to 79 do gender mortality rates equalize, mainly because there aren't as many men still alive by that age. Given that men have more health problems than women, you'd expect men to seek health care more often than women right?

Hesitance

In fact, the exact opposite is true. That's part of the reason men's mortality is much higher than women's. Take cancer, for example. The World Health Organization's Agency for Research on Cancer published a study in 2000 showing that more men die from cancer than women do. This was due in large part to men's hesitancy to seek medical care, and resulted in their cancers becoming so advanced by the time they were detected that they could no longer be treated. Men are 25 percent less likely to have seen a primary care doctor in the last year than are women. Although men do have certain genetic factors that contribute to disease, their reluctance to see a doctor makes their genetic predisposition worse. If men took part in recommended medical screens such as colonoscopy, a significant number of untimely male deaths could be prevented.

Causes

The reason for men's reluctance to seek medical care is an ongoing question for researchers, health providers, and people who care about the males in their lives, but research has provided some insight to date.

1. *Men often see health care as a woman's concern.* Men observe that women start using health care on a regular basis much earlier in their lifespan due to the greater physiological changes they experience through monthly hormonal cycles and pregnancy. In contrast, during men's earlier years, health concerns are generally short term and externally caused, such as infection or injury. Consequently, when men approach their 40s and health care becomes less like an option and more like a requirement, the misperception of health care as something needed by only females interferes with the likelihood of men getting the care they need.

2. *Men tend to have a "wait and see" attitude.* A review of men's health-seeking behavior found that a majority of men endorsed statements such as, "Minor illness can be fought off if you don't give in," "I often ignore symptoms, hoping they will go away," and, "I have to be really ill before I go and see the doctor"

(Journal of Advanced Nursing 2005). Researchers also found that if men have pain or symptoms, their first reaction is not to see a doctor.

3. *Socialization* was another factor. Western men are taught that weakness and a lack of resilience are moral failures, and that the risk of appearing to be a hypochondriac is to be avoided at all costs. In addition, there is a tacit social prohibition for men against looking foolish and vulnerable, and they are encouraged not to express the painful emotions and vulnerability that health problems evoke. Consequently, while sitting in a flimsy gown, getting poked and prodded, and sharing embarrassing details about medical problems is unpleasant for anyone, it is especially upsetting for men.

Don't be John Wayne

The strong and silent John Wayne outlook may be effective in battle, but can be an impediment to men seeking the health care they need. Here are some ideas to keep in mind when encouraging men to seek health care.

Men benefit from encouragement. Research has shown that encouragement increases the likelihood that someone will see a doctor. Bringing up the issue can keep the, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" attitude from becoming ingrained.

Speak from your own perspective. It is advisable to talk about the male's health as it affects you. "I would be happier and less anxious if you would get a check up" is often more effective than, "You need to see a doctor."

For any behavior to change, two things are needed: desire and ability. Both are necessary, and in that order. Be aware of these two concepts when talking with a man about health care. If he is not sure he wants to get a colonoscopy, it is counterproductive to start talking with him about scheduling one. Instead, focus on how getting a recommended health screening will benefit him or his loved ones. The man's desire to change his behavior typically will ensue. Alternatively, if the man with whom you're speaking has the desire to seek health care but hasn't followed through to actually obtain it, focus the discussion differently. Reassure him that his concerns or feelings of embarrassment are normal, discuss what the colonoscopy or other medical care he needs entails, and talk about how to arrange your schedules to make it possible for him to get the care he needs.

Traditional masculinity can work to your advantage. The same socialization that keeps men away from health care can be harnessed to encourage men to seek it. The American Journal of Men's Health reported in 2009 that African American men who scored highly for having traditional masculine values had better health, and higher levels of health care participation, than cohorts who had less traditional masculine values. This finding has been replicated in numerous studies of Caucasian men. Try broaching the subject by equating the same desire a man has to take care of his tools or his car with taking care of his body.

Wayne died of stomach cancer. Do you happen to know if it was advanced by the time Wayne sought treatment?

Doesn't this tactic run the risk of making some people annoyed and/or making them dig in their heels?

Men love a mission. Some men will do things for their loved ones that they would never do for themselves. Mention that getting routine medical screens has a higher purpose, such as making sure a man will be around for loved ones. In the same vein, many men fear becoming a burden to loved ones, and getting timely medical attention can prevent that.

As groundless as a man's concerns may seem to you, take them at face value. In general, downplaying or scoffing at fears men have about going to a doctor is not effective. Chances are that, in time, a man will see his former concerns as groundless and be able to laugh at them. However, when a man is still ambivalent about seeing the doctor, it is more effective to encourage the reasons for wanting to change than trying to diminish the reasons he has for not changing.

Follow up on previous conversations. Respectfully following up a week or two after an initial discussion shows concern. Plus, a recurring conversation is harder to dismiss than a one-time conversation.

"Attaboys" and humor can help. Praise for any action a man takes toward obtaining health care is always advisable, and humor has a way of putting awkward medical situations in perspective.

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