

Symptoms 1

Recently the The American College of Chest Physicians issued a warning to parents to use caution when using cough syrup for their children. Studies show that these remedies are not only not effective, but also have some harmful side effects. In fact, plain water has been shown to be just as effective as the average cough remedy.

Cough remedies have been around for decades. In fact my mother used to give me a cough medicine that is still available today. One of the questions that I have is, if these remedies are ineffective, why did it take 40 years for them to find this out? Why did it take the American College of Chest Physicians three years to publicly make a statement when the study was actually published in 2004? How many billions of dollars have been spent on these drugs by well-meaning parents who trusted the companies that peddle these products and the FDA that regulates them? How many children have been injured and even died from cough remedies that we now know are no more effective than a glass of water?

The studies that have led to this recent understanding are not complicated. They could have been conducted decades ago. It is important for health care consumers to realize that just because a product is approved by the FDA, is advertized on TV, and is available over the counter, doesn't mean that the product is safe or effective.

This brings me to a vital topic that I will discuss over the next few weeks regarding the nature of symptoms and our obsession in this country with eliminating them. If you truly want to live a healthier life, the information I will share with you will be critical to your future health. Stay tuned.

Symptoms 2

Typically, our first awareness of a health problem is when we feel a symptom. Most people believe that as long as they are symptom free, then they are in good health. Unfortunately this represents a misunderstanding of what symptoms are and why they are felt.

Symptoms are the only method that your body has to get your attention. Most of the time when you experience a symptom, your body is trying to teach you something or it is encouraging you to take action. You feel pain when touching a hot stove to alert you that touching hot objects is not good for you and to encourage you to remove your hand. Pain when walking on a sprained ankle encourages you to give the ankle some time to heal before putting your full weight on it.

Because of the discomfort associated with most symptoms, many of us feel that reducing the symptom is a good idea. For thousands of years, that was for the most part, a wise action. If a leg was broken, resting the leg felt better than standing on it and rest helped the leg to heal. Fingers felt better when splinters are removed and removing the splinter helped the wound to heal. Nausea and vomiting after eating spoiled or poisonous food, taught us what was safe to eat and what was not. The tired and achy feeling associated with the flu taught us to rest and keep warm.

Today however, there are many drugs available that can reduce our symptoms. The problem is that few if any actually help the body heal. They make us feel healthier, when in fact we are no healthier after taking the drug than we were before. In most if not all cases, we are actually less healthy after taking the drug, yet we are fooled into thinking the opposite is true.

Next week I will share with you some of our more commonly treated symptoms and why it is probably a good idea not to treat them at all.

Symptoms 3

As I discussed last week, treating symptoms is not the same as improving health. In fact, in many cases, treating the symptom can actually slow or prevent healing.

Pain is felt when tissue is damaged and the damaged tissue releases chemicals into the spaces between the cells. These chemicals stimulate nearby nerves that then alert the brain that damage has occurred. In response, the brain initiates a series of reactions that are necessary for healing. This is called the inflammatory process.

The inflammatory process also stimulates pain nerves. As a result the damaged area hurts. Although pain is obviously uncomfortable, it has a purpose. It alerts us of a problem so that we will take appropriate action such as to remove a rock from our shoe or keep our weight off a sprained ankle or avoid the activity that caused the pain.

The most common response to pain in this country, however, is to use anti-inflammatory drugs. These are the types of medications most common prescribed for pain and they are the most commonly used pain relieving over-the-counter medications.

Anti-inflammatory medications such as Vioxx and Celebrex, were in the news a lot a few years ago due to the serious cardiovascular side effects that they caused. Even over-the-counter anti-inflammatory medications damage the stomach and intestines as well as the kidneys. Thousands of people die every year as a result of these popular medications.

There is another side effect that is rarely discussed. Anti-inflammatory medications work by interrupting the chemical reaction that generates pain. At the same time they interrupt the chemical reaction responsible for healing. As a result, it can slow the healing process and even lead to incomplete healing. Incomplete healing results in weaker tissue, which makes it easier to re-injure the area. This leads to more pain for which we take even more pain medicine and the cycle continues.

For many injuries, it may be best to let the healing process progress naturally. This would include paying attention to your pain to try to learn the cause, so that you can avoid or alter the way you perform the activity that caused the pain. It may also be wise to limit the use of pain medications.

For chronic or recurring pain, it may be necessary to look for anything that is interfering with normal healing. It may also be necessary to stimulate appropriate inflammation to kick-start the healing process. This is one of the methods used by chiropractors to help patients recover from chronic pain conditions.

Symptoms 4

As I have been discussing in the last few articles, treating symptoms without addressing the cause can lead to more problems than it solves. In fact, symptoms are usually part of the healing process. Last week I discussed how pain is a component of the inflammatory healing process. Fever is another symptom that is part of the healing process.

We are exposed to germs every second of every day. Some germs are good for the body. Some are not. When unhealthy germs invade the body, the body goes to work eliminating the germs. Different types of germs require different modes of attack. Fever is one method the body uses to eliminate some germs. For example, the body generates a fever in response to the flu virus, but not in response to the cold virus.

Most people think the virus causes the fever. In fact, the body creates the fever as part of its defense against the virus.

Fevers don't feel good, so most Americans take medications to lower them. When the temperature goes down, so do the unpleasant symptoms. Unfortunately, so does the ability of the body to kill the germs.

Research demonstrates that as the temperature rises, the strength of our immune system also rises. This appears to be true up to 103 degrees. Research has not yet shown that the same effect occurs above 103 degrees.

Fever reducing medications do not aid the body in eliminating germs, and since the fever is part of the body's defense mechanism, artificially lowering it can impair the ability of the body to recover from the illness. People who take fever reducing medications are, on average, sick longer than people who allow the illness to run its course.

There are concerns that high temperatures will damage the body, but this concern has not been supported by scientific research, especially if the body is kept hydrated. Temperatures up to 106 have not been shown to be harmful except in infants under six weeks of age. Of course, it is always wise to attempt to determine the cause of an elevated temperature, especially if it is present for more than a few days, but in most cases, simply treating the fever can hurt rather than help.

Symptoms 5

Continuing my discussion of symptoms, I would like to discuss how so many people misinterpret common cold and flu symptoms. Last week I discussed how fevers are one of the defense mechanisms our bodies use to fight some infections. As a result, people who treat fevers are often sick longer than people who don't.

Coughing and sneezing are common cold-related symptoms and both of these symptoms are unpleasant. Many people also attempt to control these symptoms using over the counter and prescription medications.

Both of these symptoms are also tools the body uses to protect itself. Sneezing is a method the body uses to expel foreign substances from the nasal passages. Likewise, coughing is a mechanism for expelling mucus and other substances from the lungs.

When these symptoms are suppressed, they allow potentially harmful germs and other substances to remain in the body. In addition, many of the drugs used to suppress these symptoms have been shown to be no more effective than a glass of water and some have also been shown to have significant harmful side effects. For example, some of the most commonly used asthma medications have been shown to cause more serious asthma attacks than they prevent.

While coughing and sneezing are tools the body uses to clear harmful substances from our airways, vomiting and diarrhea are often used by the body to eliminate harmful substances from the digestive tract. Treating these symptoms can potentially prolong illness. Even worse, the side-effects of the medication can cause further harm. A commonly used medication for diarrhea in infants caused numerous deaths and was finally removed from the market.

In rare cases, it is appropriate to treat these symptoms, but typically they do the body more good than harm.