

The Health Checkup: Taking Responsibility for Your Health Care

By Linda Harms

"Intellectuals solve problems; geniuses prevent them."
—Albert Einstein

I am so delighted to have Linda Harms as a member of the LJAP team! When I asked her to find time in her very busy case management schedule to write an article for this column, she did shoot me a good-natured "look," but in short order she called on her medical background and produced what I believe is a very thoughtful and practical piece about the importance of scheduling and getting the most from regular health checkups.

This topic may seem too obvious, but truth be told, when we are doing LJAP evaluations on attorneys and we ask questions pertaining to health history, too often they are sheepish as they intone, defeated: "I have no time for doctor's appointments."

How do we address the problem of limited time in this circumstance? Often, we point out that each of us gets 24 hours in a day (again, obvious, I know) but that attorneys tend to prioritize the needs and demands of clients and work life, leaving self-care by the wayside. This selflessness can be seen as a virtue, and is sometimes exalted within the professional culture, but ultimately, neglect of physical, spiritual, and emotional health can be very costly to individuals, families, organizations, and communities. Reprioritization of self-care can become imperative to healthy functioning for busy people.

As we enter the holiday season and approach the New Year, the LJAP team wishes to encourage you to enjoy your families and friends, eat and drink sensibly, and call on your inner genius by resolving to take care of "number one" by engaging in preventative health care.

—Martha D. Burkett,
Program Administrator, LJAP

Sometimes it seems as if our lives are filled with appointments. While some appointments are not important and can be changed or cancelled, one appointment is so important that your health and general well-being may depend on it: the health checkup, or physical examination. The health checkup appointment with your health care provider is your opportunity to tell your story, express your concerns, ask questions, and learn about the best ways to care for your body. This is the time to be proactive regarding your health care. The health checkup is the time to assess, evaluate, and treat conditions that may already exist and also a time to screen for possible health problems and learn about preventive health care. Preventive health care now may improve the quality of your life and add years to it.

Heart disease continues to be the number one cause of death for males and females in the United States, and cancer remains the number two cause of death despite medical advances made in the identification and treatment of these diseases. Many of these deaths could be prevented if only the diseases were identified and treated during their early stages.¹ During the health checkup appointment, your risk factors for these diseases and others, such as diabetes, are assessed. A health history, physical examination, and screening tests will provide your health care provider with information that can confirm whether you are in good health, identify potential health concerns, or diagnose health problems that exist.

A visit to a health care provider can be anxiety-provoking for some. After all, it is unfamiliar territory for most people. To get the most out of your health checkup, it helps to be prepared and organized. The

following are suggestions for making the most of your appointment:

- Before the health checkup appointment, make a list of all the questions you want to ask the health care provider.
- Schedule the appointment for the first thing in the morning or right after lunch to avoid a long wait.
- Inform the office staff that you want to schedule a health checkup and will need longer than 10 or 15 minutes that may be allotted for appointments.
- Find out if your health insurance requires preauthorization for services and remember to bring your insurance card with you to the appointment.
- Arrive early to complete any forms that are required.
- Be prepared to share your family medical history, which should include significant health problems of family members, such as high blood pressure, cancer, diabetes, etc.
- Provide information regarding your past and current health issues.
- Be prepared to document information regarding any past or recent surgeries or other medical procedures.
- List all allergies, including medication, food, and environmental.
- List all medications you are taking, including supplements, herbal preparations, and over-the-counter drugs. Also include the dosages of the medications, times that you take them, and the length of time you have been taking them. You may want to bring your medications with you to the appointment.

Suggested Resources

Heart Health

Piscatella & Franklin, *Take a Load Off Your Heart* (New York: Workman Publishing Co, Inc, 2003)

American Heart Association, *Patient Information Sheets* <<http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=3004356>>

Cancer

American Cancer Society, *Information and Resources for Cancer* <<http://www.cancer.org/docroot/home/index.asp>>

Sleep Hygiene

National Institutes of Health, *IN BRIEF: Your Guide To Healthy Sleep* (April 2006), available at <<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/sleep/healthysleepfs.pdf>>

Vaccines

Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Vaccines & Immunizations* <<http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/default.htm>>

Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Adolescent and Adult Vaccine Quiz* <<http://www2.cdc.gov/nip/adultImmSched/>>

- List dates of previous vaccinations.
- Share with the health care provider if you have experienced in the past or are currently experiencing depression, anxiety, phobias, suicidal thoughts, or any other symptoms of emotional problems.
- Discuss any nutritional problems or weight concerns.
- Share information about your ability to perform physical exercise and your current level of activity.
- Bring your list of questions along with paper and pencil or pen to write down the answers to your questions and other information the health care provider shares with you.
- Ask the health care provider to explain anything that you do not understand or to write it out for you. Do not hesitate to ask questions; this is the way to increase your knowledge about your health.
- Take someone to the appointment with you if you feel the need for a support person.

At the beginning of the examination, you will usually have your blood pressure,

pulse, and temperature checked and your height and weight measured. You may also have your vision and hearing checked at this time. The health checkup should also include a blood test to check your total cholesterol level, including the “good” cholesterol, HDL, and the “bad” cholesterol, LDL. The health care provider will also order blood tests to screen for health issues that may be related to diabetes, thyroid, renal, liver, or heart problems. A complete blood count and urinalysis will also be done.

You will change into a gown for the actual physical examination, so remember to wear clothing that you can easily remove. The health care provider will perform a complete physical examination to assess for any health problems. The physical examination will include a prostate exam for males and a pelvic examination and PAP test for females. It may also be recommended that you receive vaccinations or booster immunizations for influenza, pneumococcal pneumonia, chicken pox, zoster (shingles), HPV (human papilloma virus), meningitis, Hepatitis A and B, tetanus/diphtheria/pertussis, MMR (measles/mumps/rubella), and possibly polio if you have not been vaccinated and will be traveling to certain countries.²

Your health care provider will want to review your medical history with you and discuss any concerns that you may have about your health. Remember, you and your health care provider are partners in managing your health care, so now is the time to speak up. By asking questions, you will be actively taking responsibility for understanding your health care.

After the physical examination, the health care provider may suggest other screening tests, such as a bone density test to check for osteoporosis or osteopenia, which is thinning of the bones that occurs before osteoporosis. Depending on your age, family history, and findings during the physical examination, the health care provider may recommend that you have a colonoscopy, which is a procedure to screen for polyps, pre-cancerous growths, and colon cancer. A mammogram may be recommended for women to screen for breast abnormalities. The health care provider also may recommend further screening for peripheral artery

disease if you have signs of poor leg circulation, which could indicate circulation problems in other parts of your body. If you are experiencing sleep difficulties, such as loud snoring, frequent awakening, pauses in your breathing while sleeping, and fatigue during the day, it may be recommended that you have a sleep study to screen for a sleep disorder. Other screenings may include x-rays, an electrocardiogram, an ultrasound, or other specialized tests for specific health concerns.

Before concluding your appointment, ask your health care provider when you should schedule a follow-up appointment to discuss the results of the examination, screening tests, procedures, and any recommendations for taking care of your health. Knowledge is definitely power when it comes to taking care of your health and making informed decisions regarding your health care. Now is the time to start taking responsibility for understanding your health care; the benefits are enormous and can be life changing. ■

Linda Harms joined the State Bar as a case monitor and counselor in the Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program in 2007. She is a registered nurse and a fully licensed, nationally certified professional counselor. Ms. Harms received her master's degree in counselor education and graduate certificate in holistic health from Western Michigan University. Ms. Harms also holds a certificate in gerontology, the advanced addictions counselor certification, and the national auricular acupuncture detoxification specialist certification.

FOOTNOTES

1. American Heart Association, *Heart Disease and Stroke Statistics* (2008 Update), available at <http://www.americanheart.org/downloadable/heart/1200078608862HS_Stats%202008.final.pdf> and American Cancer Society, *Cancer Prevention & Early Detection Facts & Figures* (Atlanta: American Cancer Society, 2007), available at <<http://www.cancer.org/downloads/STT/CPED2007PVVSecuredCPED.pdf>>. All websites cited in this article were accessed October 19, 2008.
2. Immunization Action Coalition, *Summary of Recommendations for Adult Immunization* (April 2008), available at <<http://www.immunize.org/catg.d/p2011.pdf>>.