



Amarillo VA Health
Care System
Volume 8, Issue 1

Health Trends

What Am I Going to Catch Next?

By Sheree Keil, R.N.

Mad cow disease, monkey pox, SARS, West Nile, influenza – and the list goes on. It seems as though the media is announcing a new disease or epidemic to us on a daily basis. Should I worry? Is there something I can do to protect my loved ones and myself? Worrying is not necessary if you arm yourself with the proper tools and basic knowledge of preventing infectious disease transmission.

Handwashing is one of the simplest, easiest, and most effective ways to prevent getting or passing on many germs. Amazingly, it is also one of the most overlooked. Health care experts recommend scrubbing your hands vigorously for at least 15 seconds with soap and water; about as long as it takes to recite the English alphabet. This will wash away cold viruses and staph and strep bacteria, as well as many other disease-causing microbes. This also will help prevent accidentally passing those germs on to others.

It is especially important to wash your hands:

- Before, during, and after you prepare food
- Before you eat, and after you use the bathroom
- After handling animals or animal waste
- When your hands are dirty, and
- More frequently when someone in your home is sick

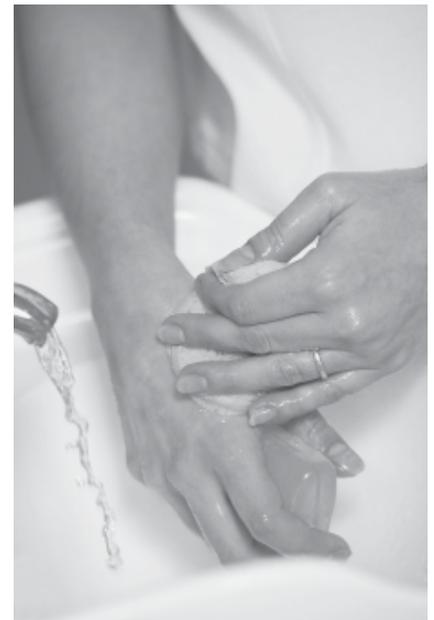
If you are unable to wash your hands, personal-sized waterless hand sanitizers containing alcohol have entered the market and have been found to be as effective as soap and water at preventing the spread of infection.

Another method to prevent infections is vaccination. Vaccines are not only for young children. Adolescents and

adults should get vaccinated regularly for tetanus and diphtheria. Each fall, you should get the flu vaccine, especially if you are over 50. Taking the flu vaccine can prevent or lessen the severity of the illness. In addition, if you are over the age of 65 (or have conditions like diabetes, chronic lung, or heart disease), you should be vaccinated for pneumococcal pneumonia. If you are planning to travel to a foreign country, there are additional vaccines you should obtain prior to leaving.

Another method to prevent the spread of respiratory infections is to cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. If you don't have a tissue, it's better to cough into your elbow or upper sleeve, not your hands. This can prevent spread of the illness to your loved ones. If you have a loved one in the hospital, nursing home, or other institutional setting, wait to visit them until after your cold or flu symptoms have subsided. Respiratory illness can be more severe in the elderly and can be very difficult to control in an institutional setting.

The media does sensationalize infectious diseases, but you do not have to fear them if you arm yourself with the basic knowledge of how to prevent the spread of these illnesses. If you have any questions regarding the spread of infectious diseases, feel free to ask your primary care provider.



Beware of Secret Diet Killers

Psssssst! Have you heard? Secret Diet Killers are waiting to sabotage your weight loss efforts. Here are just a few of them:

1. MAKING FAVORITE FOODS FORBIDDEN

Weight loss does not mean deprivation. If you love pizza, eat it once a month instead of once a week. Eat two pieces instead of four. Denying yourself pleasure will lead to failure.

2. OVEREATING DIET FOOD

Switching to low-fat or low-calorie foods is smart, but remember to eat sensibly. Consuming an entire bag of reduced fat cookies will not help you achieve your goal.

3. FORGETTING LITTLE BITES

If you're tracking food intake, don't forget little nibbles and "tastes" of cookie batter, spaghetti sauce, and homemade salad dressing. Every bite contains fat or calories, so every bite counts!

4. AIMING FOR ZERO

Dieters often try to reduce calories as much as possible. While you may need to decrease caloric intake, don't attempt to avoid *all* calories. The human body *requires* a certain amount of fat and sugar. Ask your doctor how many calories you need each day and plan meals accordingly.

5. OBSESSING ABOUT THE SCALES

On a sensible weight loss plan, you may only lose one or two pounds each week. Daily weights fluctuate, so don't climb on the scales each morning to measure your progress. Seeing the dial move up even one pound can be disappointing enough to cause some people to give up.

6. SWEARING OFF SOLIDS

Never, ever go on a so-called liquid diet or consume diet drinks in lieu of solid food. Your body is not able to function properly without a variety of vitamins and minerals, and the best way to get them is through healthy meals.

Be on the lookout for these and other Diet Killers. Your ability to recognize them puts you a step closer to achieving your goals.

Most Lower Back Pain is Avoidable

People who suffer from lower back pain have something in common with their physician: frustration! Why is treating such a common malady so difficult?

Most back pain is caused by weak muscles, excess weight, lack of exercise, or poor posture. Muscle spasms in the back cause pain, and the prolonged pain induces additional spasms. The cycle continues - sometimes for weeks - and occasionally extends into the buttocks, upper legs, and hips. But doctors who can't find any actual nerve damage can only suggest rest or lifestyle changes, and perhaps prescribe pain medication.



Back pain sufferers usually adhere to an initial rest period, but they are often reluctant to do what is necessary to prevent future injuries. Most physicians recommend exercises to strengthen lower back and abdominal muscles, and regular stretching to increase flexibility. Some patients also need to lose weight, while others just need to practice good posture!

What can you do to lessen your chance of a lower back injury?

- Avoid repetitive or sustained bending over.
- Use a carrier for luggage, briefcases, or bags normally carried on the shoulder.
- Avoid awkward or unbalanced postures like sitting with weight shifted to one side, crossing your legs at the knees while sitting, or carrying your wallet in your back pocket.
- Sit up straight.
- Lose weight if you need to.
- Find someone to help with heavy awkward objects, or use a jack or dolly to lift and move items.
- Get plenty of rest on a mattress with adequate support.

Estimates indicate that four out of five adults will experience significant lower back pain sometime during their life. Avoid becoming a statistic, and you'll avoid the frustration of a long, slow recovery from this painful ailment.

MEDICAL TOOLBOX: *X-rays Help Doctors Diagnose & Treat Illness*

Patients used to be concerned about radiation exposure from x-rays. Today's radiological procedures, however, safely take pictures that play an important role in the diagnosis and treatment of your illness. X-rays look like a photographic negative. A special doctor called a radiologist interprets the picture and sends the results to your physician.

- **X-rays** are the most common radiological test, and some people use the term generically to describe other radiological procedures. X-rays commonly diagnose broken bones.
- **Bone densitometry**, a quick and painless test, shows whether a patient has a loss of bone mass, which makes older adults prone to fractures.
- After a dye is administered through an IV, an **intravenous pyelogram** (IVP) reveals kidney stones, an enlarged prostate, or a tumor.

- A **barium enema** is an x-ray of the colon and large intestine. The procedure sounds unpleasant, but it saves lives by revealing cancer, polyps, and diverticulitis (a bulge in the colon).
- An **upper GI (gastrointestinal)** reveals the esophagus, stomach, and small intestine after the patient drinks a special fluid. It allows diagnosis of ulcers, cancer, or intestinal blockage.
- **Pelvic sonograms** use sonar to detect abnormalities in an unborn baby. They can also reveal cysts or tumors in the pelvic area.
- A **mammogram** is a special breast x-ray that helps detect breast cancer early, often before a patient even feels a lump.
- During a **CT scan**, you lie very still while a machine takes pictures, usually of just one area (brain, chest, abdomen, etc.). Often it helps your doctor diagnose central nervous system disorders.

Other types of radiological procedures also help diagnose and treat diseases. Ask your doctor if you have any questions about why radiological procedures are ordered for you or how they are administered.

Parkinson's Disease Strikes All Age Groups

Parkinson's Disease (PD) affects approximately one million people in the United States. It is a neurological disorder (sometimes called a movement disorder) that progressively worsens. Certain brain cells quit producing dopamine, a chemical that carries messages about movement and balance. The resulting symptoms can be hard to detect at first because they are so subtle, but over time they increase and are hard to miss. Not all patients have all symptoms but common ones include:

- **Tremor in one or both hands, arms, legs, or face.**
- **Slowness of movement or stiff body parts (arms, legs).**
- **Difficulty initiating or maintaining movements.**
- **Balance instability or poor posture.**
- **Lack of facial expression.**

Ongoing research has led to highly effective treatments. Drugs that mimic dopamine bring amazing results, and surgical procedures work wonders at helping some people control symptoms.

Other treatments seem to help, too. Physical therapy builds strength and keeps muscles flexible, while speech exercises make it easier to talk. Counseling helps PD patients work through emotional swings common with the disorder, and many people say support groups help them maintain a positive attitude.

Parkinson's can strike at any age, and for those learning to live with PD, several organizations offer help through brochures, videos, and referral services:

Parkinson's Disease Foundation, Inc.
1-800-457-6676

The National Parkinson Foundation
1-800-433-7022

The American Parkinson Disease Association, Inc.
1-800-223-2732



MyHealthVet: A New and Exciting Web-Based Program

By Spencer Ralston, MPA
Associate Director, SAVAHCS - Tucson

On Veterans Day of 2003, the VA proudly announced the launch of a new online website known as “MyHealthVet” where veterans, family, and VA clinicians can come together to optimize health care. This website offers perhaps the most advanced system for patient education and interaction available anywhere in this country.

By entering the worldwide web address www.myhealthvet.va.gov the veteran, his or her family members, and VA staff can register and access important and interesting health news and information. In Phase 1 of MyHealthVet, a vast health education library maintained by HealthGate offers MHV registrants the ability to search for information on virtually anything related to health, medical conditions, and drugs. A link to “Healthy Living Calculators” helps registrants assess their health status. A link to “Rx Checker” lets patients who are taking multiple medications be sure those medications are not adversely interacting with each other. Links to the “Women’s Health Guide” and the “Men’s Health Guide” offer comprehensive quick-reference guides to health conditions and medical procedures.

Phase 2 (scheduled to be online this summer) will be a tremendous addition to the MHV program. With this enhancement, VA-enrolled patients will have the ability to order their prescription refills online. They will also be able to view their co-payment balance and next scheduled appointment. Additionally, VA patients will be able to enter certain health information (such as weight), and even keep

a personal calendar. Eventually patients will be able to add such information as their blood pressure and blood glucose levels. All of this self-entered data will help the veteran and (if desired) his or her family and provider monitor progress in maintaining or improving health status.

Finally, in Phase 3 (which is expected to be rolled out during the winter of 2005), veteran patients will have the ability to view parts of their medical record, and share this information with those they designate – for example their spouse, children, community providers, etc. Also being developed is a way to allow two-way communication online between patients and providers.

Here are some interesting statistics: As of February

2004, over 15,000 people have registered for an MHV account. The

website averages 4,300 visits a day – with 70 percent of those coming from America Online (AOL) subscribers. The top five visiting states are California, Virginia, Texas, Georgia and Illinois. And, while close to 99 percent of all visitors were from the United States, there were visitors from such countries as Germany, the Netherlands, Canada, the United Kingdom, South Korea, Nigeria, Japan, Australia, China, and Spain.

For our patients, MyHealthVet offers a way to become a knowledgeable partner with physicians and nurses in terms of care and treatment. MyHealthVet is of great benefit to veterans, their families, and VA employees, and is just one more way that the Department of Veterans Affairs is providing high quality care to America’s heroes and heroines.

www.myhealthvet.va.gov

Spring 2004
Linda Harris, Chief, Community and Patient Relations
Public Affairs Officer
806-356-3737
Tobacco Use Cessation classes are offered in Amarillo and Lubbock. You can refer yourself or ask your provider for a referral. In Amarillo dial 806-355-9703 to contact April McCrary at ext. 4100; Cynthia Jackson at ext. 4601; Janie Adams at ext. 4400; Shirley Lora at ext. 7680; or Vance Pearson at ext. 7960. In Lubbock, dial 806-796-7900 to contact Becky Haskitt at ext. 7945 or Janice Putnam at ext. 7929.
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