

Managing Chronic Disease



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Health Bytes:

“Do I have to take medications for the rest of my life for my blood pressure/ diabetes/ cholesterol?”

This is a question that I get a lot as a primary health practitioner also known as GP. This is also the question that opens up the communication channel that my patient and I share, which enable them to understand and better manage their condition.

First, let's understand a bit more about these conditions. They fall under this group of condition called “Chronic Diseases”. They are not passed from person to person, are of long duration and generally slow progression. The four main types of chronic diseases are:

1. cardiovascular diseases such as heart attack, stroke, high blood pressure, cholesterol
2. diabetes mellitus
3. cancers
4. chronic respiratory diseases like chronic obstructed pulmonary disease and asthma

They generally cannot be prevented by vaccines or cured by medications. Having said that, chronic disease can be prevented from happening and managing it such that they do not worsen and affect our health further. Over the years, I have learnt that 4 very simple words can help patients manage their condition better. They are: “Why? What? How? Who?”

1. Why?

Why do you want to better manage your condition? Why is it important for you?

Find a good reason to empower yourself on this life long journey of taking care of yourself. It can be as simple and truthful as “I want to be healthy and fit to play with my grandkids as they grow up.” Or “I am afraid of losing my self care ability if I have a stroke”. If you have more than one reason, that’s perfect! More to keep you going.

Have a good reason to motivate yourself.

2. What?

What causes high blood pressure? What are the complications of poorly controlled diabetes? What will help to lower my cholesterol? What is the level of my blood sugar?

“What” refers to equipping yourself with knowledge of your condition. Knowledge is the key to understand what is happening to your own body, to learn how to take care of it. In this day and age, technology has greatly improved the ease of us gaining knowledge, make use of it! Find out various things about your condition. Clarify with your family doctor if there are information that you are not clear about.

Know the parameters of your disease, e.g. your blood pressure reading, measure your reading regularly so that you can share these readings with your family doctor. Keep records of your blood tests, so that you know if your sugar and cholesterol levels are getting better or worse. Be in control of your own health.

3. How

How do I lower my blood pressure? How do I manage my diet? How much exercise am I supposed to do?

Coupled with “What”, “How” leads us to action steps to take care of ourselves. Other than popping pills, there are other important ways to manage chronic diseases. Diet and Exercise are two crucial aspects. A high salt intake can increase blood pressure, hence by choosing food with lower salt or avoiding food with high salt content like processed meat, we can lower our blood pressure. Regular exercise 3-5 times a week and daily walks can help our body use up the extra sugar. Or simply take the chance to know more friends by joining the Zumba or Taichi class at the Community Centre while burning the extra sugar and fats.

In addition, also look into “How will this condition affect me?” This will help you gain understanding of “why” is this important for you.

4. Who

Who are the people that can support you in the journey of health? Who are those that can join you in this? Who are the people whom you can learn from?

Identify these people in your life. This may include your spouse who will root for you, give you timely reminders and perhaps prepare your healthier meals. May be your friends who exercise regularly with you. Or your grandchild who will research how to better manage your condition with you. There are also healthcare professionals like doctors, nurses, dieticians whom you can approach to learn more about your condition.

This sums up the four simple words you can ask yourself and anyone for better disease management. May these be the first step of you mastering your own health.

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