

Script – Print – Don't wait until it hurts

We all know some men who'd rather fight off sharks than deal with issues that affect their health. They don't like talking about it, they put symptoms on the back burner, and they don't see a health care provider unless it's at the urging of a persistent wife who might schedule the appointment.

June is National Men's Health Month. It's a time to encourage men to take their health seriously, make necessary lifestyle changes and get established with a primary care provider, if they don't have one.

According to Ben Guth, an advanced practice nurse with OSF HealthCare, the reasons for putting off medical care vary. For some men, they're too busy working to find the time to book, for example, an eye exam or dentist appointment. Some are willing to wait out a nagging pain or a lingering headache. And for others it's simply a case of "if it ain't broke, don't fix it."

"Men will often tell me, 'I don't have any problems. Everything feels fine. I don't need to see you,'" Guth says. "Unfortunately, all issues won't really present as a symptom until they're in the more moderate to severe stages." For example, most people with high blood pressure or diabetes won't know they have it until they get checked at the provider's office.

In 2018, Cleveland Clinic surveyed a small sample of men ages 18 to 70 and found that only three in five men get an annual physical, and just over 40% go to the doctor only when they fear they have a serious medical condition.

Guth says the statistics aren't surprising. "No one wants to be told that they have high blood pressure, that they have diabetes," he says. "But I would counter that by saying it's better to go early to get screened, to have your doctor as your health consultant, to check in once a year to make sure that everything's OK. So that when you do go, you have a better idea of how it's going to turn out."

Scheduling an annual physical exam

Guth strongly recommends all adult men, even those in their late teens, 20s and 30s, to have an annual physical.

"We all have our financial consultants. We all have a car that needs regular oil changes. We all have taxes that need to be filed," Guth says. "We all have a body that needs to be taken care of. So come in once a year to have a good once over. And what's nice about those visits is you'll get some blood work done. We'll be able to do a lot of different screenings, and you'll get that checkup."

Men should have annual screenings for diabetes, hypertension and cholesterol, as well as certain cancers. Prostate cancer screening is done with a simple blood test.

"The recommendation for any healthy man is to start at age 50," Guth says about prostate cancer screening. "Typically, we will screen sooner if there are certain risk factors, or you're in a population that has a higher chance of developing prostate cancer. In my practice, I usually start the conversation with men in between 40 and 45 for prostate cancer."

Colon cancer screening begins at age 45 and is repeated every five or 10 years, depending on findings and family history. Also, regular self-exams are important when it comes to issues such as testicular cancer, which is more than 90% curable if caught early enough.

Coping with stress

Another issue affecting men that isn't always talked about is stress. Whether it is job or family related, or it stems from health or financial issues, everyone has reason to worry from time to time. Guth recommends several options for dealing with stress, which, if not handled properly, can cause major health problems such as heart disease, depression and sleep disorders. Guth suggests talking to a therapist or counselor if daily stress becomes too much to handle.

Guth suggests first finding ways to relieve stress in a healthy way such as exercising, reading and spending time with loved ones. Men can also consider talking to a therapist or counselor if daily stress becomes too much to handle.

As a husband and father who works 10 hours or more a day, Guth understands some of the obstacles that his male patients face in staying on top of their health needs. However, it's imperative to make time for the basics – listening to our bodies, not smoking and limiting alcohol consumption.

"I think all men should have a primary care provider. It's important to see them annually, to have those checkups, so that you have the peace of mind to know that everything is good," Guth says. "I can go about my day-to-day life, doing what I need to do, whether that's working, taking care of family, taking the kids to sporting events. You want to have that peace of mind to know that I'm going to be there for them for a long time."