

Script – Print – Don't ignore the silent signs of chronic illness

Chronic illness often doesn't announce itself with a dramatic symptom or a trip to the emergency room. Instead, it can develop gradually, quietly affecting the way a person moves through everyday life.

[Syed Zaidi, MD](#), a family medicine provider with OSF HealthCare, sees chronic illness every day in his practice. He says changes in everyday functions can sometimes be early signs that something is happening with your health.

When something is no longer easy to do, such as the way you move, eat, sleep, even the way you urinate or move your bowels, those can be signs that something is changing, Dr. Zaidi says.

In medicine, the term "silent decline" refers to the gradual progression of a long-term health problem. The body can quietly worsen over months or years before noticeable warning signs appear. Examples can include high blood pressure, diabetes and even heart failure.

You don't feel unwell until you feel unwell, and so the silent part occurs where the functional components aren't loud enough yet, Dr. Zaidi says.

Chronic illness usually doesn't happen overnight. For example, it can take years for plaque to build up in your arteries. It can also take years for an enlarged prostate to begin significantly affecting a man's quality of life.

"Subtle cues in terms of, let's say, cognitive decline or memory starts with, you know, a lapse here or a lapse there, but it doesn't impact your quality of life," Dr. Zaidi says. "It goes under the radar. So, under that radar is what I would call silent."

Prevention starts with awareness

Dr. Zaidi says it's important to understand your health history and risk factors so you can prepare for potential chronic health problems.

Ask yourself some key questions: Am I a smoker? Do I drink alcohol? Am I sleeping or moving as well as I should?

Once you start looking honestly at those questions, you can identify areas where you can make changes.

"You don't want to reverse 30 years in 30 days, right?" Dr. Zaidi says. "So, you want to be able to be proactive as well. And I think when we talk about chronic disease, we also have to spend a lot of time talking about prevention as well."

Chronic illness can worsen over time. That progression might happen in three months or over 10 years. It depends on the individual and the illness itself.

According to Dr. Zaidi, one important factor is functionality — how well you're able to move through your daily life.

He gives the example of arthritis in the knees. Years of working as a laborer or participating in sports can take a toll on the knees.

"They may hurt, but the next thing you know, three months later, you're not cycling as much," he says. "Three months later, you're probably not as active or efficient at work on those cement floors as much. Next thing you know, down the road, five years later, you're sitting on a couch."

Small changes can make a difference

Talk to any health care provider, and they'll likely give you plenty of ways to take better care of yourself. One of the most important places to start is with sleep. Dr. Zaidi recommends aiming for about eight hours of good-quality sleep when possible.

Other important steps include staying well hydrated, limiting ultra-processed foods and cutting back on sugary drinks.

Movement is another key component. That doesn't necessarily mean starting an intense exercise program. Begin with something manageable, such as a brisk 15-minute walk or simple chair exercises and go from there.

But it all starts with finding a health care provider you feel comfortable with who can help guide your health journey.

"You need a primary care provider, someone who's going to help you, coach you," says Dr. Zaidi. "And not just come to you for reactive care or provide reactive care but is going to help partner with you in that proactive approach to ensure that you're screened properly for things that are appropriate for age and risk factors."

We all know someone who has neglected their health for years. For those people, Dr. Zaidi has a simple message: It's never too late to make positive changes.

"There's a cost to everything," he says. "The greatest cost we have is time, and time often becomes the reason why we didn't do the things we were supposed to do. Then you realize you don't have the time to do what you should now be doing to reverse what you should have been doing."