

## **Educating Seniors: Bring Your Health... Home**

*A Monthly Column by Kimberly Harmon RN, BSN*

### **Hats Off to a Healthy 2007**

Last month, you got a home safety checklist: Ten steps you and your caregiver could implement to make your home—inside and out—a safe place for your long term stay. From installing helpful mobility aids; to moving commonly used items to easily accessible heights, you discovered that a little proactive home health care planning can help ensure a lot of peace of mind.

This month, we'll talk about Complementary and Alternative Medicines (CAM) and you'll meet Harmon Home Health's Medical Director, Robert Hansen MD.

But first, a personal note about why you're reading a column about Complementary and Alternative Medicines. As I write this column, I'm returning home from visiting family in sunny Florida. On the second day of my trip, I came down with the dreaded flu. Some of you may ask, "Didn't you get the flu shot?" The answer is no. Why not? "No time?" "Too busy with the kids?" or my favorite, "It will never happen to me; I'm a nurse and we can't get sick." I like the latter the most and believe this "logical" reasoning forces me to survive on daily doses of vitamins.

But I'm not the only one who believes in vitamins, nutritional supplements, and alternative medicines. In fact, the majority of medicines that we now refer to as 'alternative' have roots in ancient history. Herodius, one of Hippocrates' teachers, used massage in the 5th century B.C. to extend the life of his older patients. He was so successful that Plato scolded him for unduly prolonging the life expectancy of the elderly (Plato was obviously no fan of aging!). Nevertheless, Plato faithfully adopted the practice of being massaged regularly until he died at age 104.

Bringing us to today, according to recent research from the National Institute on Aging, 70 percent of older adults now use some form of CAM. Another survey from the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that 42% of Americans used at least one of sixteen alternative therapies. Based on this survey, investigators estimated that patients paid \$27 billion annually for alternative therapies. This amount is similar to the annual out-of-pocket costs for all physician services in the United States.

Commonly used alternative therapies include the following:

- herbal medicines
- massage therapy
- chiropractic care (most common)
- large doses of vitamins
- self-help groups
- folk remedies
- energy healing (e.g., magnets) and meditation
- homeopathy

Alternative therapies are used to treat many symptoms or illnesses, including back or neck pain, headaches, arthritis, fatigue, anxiety, depression and memory problems.

Robert Hansen MD, Medical Director for Harmon Home Health, has a lot to say about complementary and alternative medicines. While he is positive about many benefits of CAM, he cautions you to always consult your primary care physician before you start an alternative medicine regimen.

“I personally think that alternative medicine is great when used appropriately. I have gone to a chiropractor for more than 20 years for my back, and various other problems, usually orthopedic. I know that they can help with headaches, tension, and other orthopedic and neurological issues. I don't think that this is very prevalent anymore, but I used to hear about chiropractors (and for that matter other alternative practitioners) claim to be able to heal appendicitis and gallbladder infections. All of the complementary and alternative medical treatments available can be very helpful, either alone or in combinations, but you have to remember to use them appropriately.”

So back to my bout with the flu. When I talked about it with Dr. Hansen, he told me to take Cod Liver Oil. I thought back to my childhood, of my poor mother forcing a spoonful of that foul liquid down my unwilling throat, and I reflexively spit out, “no way am I taking cod liver oil.”

Turns out that Dr. Hansen's wife, Debbie, swears by the stuff. He says he's not sure how or why it seems to work, but it does. He supposes the oil must somehow alter or affect the immune system. As for combating a cold or flu, if you don't like cold liver oil (and I can't say I blame you!), Dr. Hansen recommends Echinacea, an OTC herbal remedy.

Obviously, the best way to not be sick from a viral infection is to not get them in the first place, says Hansen. Simple stuff works, like covering your mouth when sneezing, practicing good, almost obsessive, hand washing techniques, and frequent disinfection with Lysol or similar product of common living areas. Keep your hands away from your eyes and mouth when you haven't recently washed them. Get plenty of sleep so your immunity stays high, and exercise as often and vigorously as possible, thus improving your immune function.

To emphasize: It is very important that you tell your health care provider about all medications you are taking, including any OTC remedies and alternative therapies. This is because many OTC products and alternative therapies can interact with or alter the effects of many prescription medications. Some of these interactions or side effects can be serious and even life threatening.

Next month, we'll talk about the role of the Geriatric Care Manager; and you'll meet one or two local social workers specializing in long-term planning. Remember, the essence of home health care is to provide individuals, families and loved ones with services that promote maximum comfort and independence in the home.

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