

Self-management: Taking Charge of Your Health

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What is a chronic illness?

There are 2 main types of illness: acute and chronic. An acute illness doesn't last very long. It goes away either on its own or in response to treatment, such as taking medicine or having surgery. Strep throat is an example of an acute illness.

A chronic illness is ongoing. It affects your health over a long period of time--possibly your entire life. In many cases, there is no way to cure a chronic illness. Diabetes and high blood pressure are examples of chronic illnesses.

What can I do to take care of my health if I have a chronic illness?

It's important to understand that your chronic illness is a serious problem. If you don't believe this, you'll never be motivated to manage your illness effectively. Managing your illness involves making lifestyle choices and using prescribed medical treatments to be as healthy as possible. Unless you take care of your body, your chronic illness can cause more problems in the future.

When you have a chronic health problem, it's easy to feel overwhelmed and helpless, as if the illness has taken over your life. For example, you may need to take daily insulin injections, use an inhaler or monitor your blood pressure. However, you can take steps to control the negative effects of a chronic illness on your health. One method of taking control is called "self-management."

What is self-management of chronic illness?

Self-management of chronic illness means that you take responsibility for doing what it takes to manage your illness effectively. It's important for you to be responsible for your health because the treatment recommendations your doctor makes won't do any good unless you follow them. He or she can't make decisions for you or make you change your behavior. Only you can do these things.

In Self-management, you and your doctor are partners in care. Your doctor can provide valuable advice and information to help you deal with your illness. However, the treatment plan that works best for one person with your condition won't necessarily work best for you. Talk to your doctor about the different treatment options available and help him or her create a plan that's right for you. After all, nobody knows more than you do about your feelings, your actions and how your health problems affect you.

As part of self-management, it's also your responsibility to ask for the help you need to deal with your illness. This support can come from friends and family members, as well as from your doctor or a support group for people with your health problem.

How can self-management help a person who has a chronic illness?

Once you've decided to take an active role in managing your illness, you and your doctor can work together to set goals that will lead to better health. These goals will be part of an overall treatment plan.

Pick a problem. Take an honest look at the unhealthy aspects of your lifestyle. Start with a particular behavior that you'd like to change in order to have better control of your illness. For example, you might decide that you don't eat enough vegetables, get enough exercise or take your medicines as your doctor tells you to.

Get specific. Once you've identified a problem, state a specific goal for dealing with it. The more specific your goal is, the more likely you are to succeed. For example, instead of saying, "I'm going to exercise more," decide what kind of exercise you'll do. Be specific about what days of the week you'll exercise and what times you'll exercise on those days. Your new goal might be: "During my lunch hour on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, I'm going to walk 1 mile in the park."

Plan ahead. After you've stated your goal, think of things that could go wrong and plan how you'll deal with them. For example, if it rains and you can't go to the park, where will you go to walk? If you plan how to handle problems in advance, they won't prevent you from meeting your goals.

Check your confidence level. Ask yourself, "How confident am I that I'll be able to meet this goal?" If the answer is "Not very confident," you may need to start with a more realistic goal. Follow up. As you're working toward your goal, check in regularly with your doctor to let him or her know how you're doing. If you're having trouble following the plan, talk to your doctor to figure out why. Your setbacks can be learning experiences that help you make a new plan for success.

One of the most important things to remember is that you can change your behavior. Even though your illness makes you feel helpless at times, if you work with your doctor to set goals and you take responsibility for following through with them, you can make changes that will lead to better health.

Other Organizations

U.S. Surgeon General's My Family Health Portrait