

The Importance of Preventive Care



MS had really taken a toll on my new patient. Or so I thought...

She came to see me one afternoon in my family medicine clinic. Her son pushed her into my exam room, and I moved my stool to make way for her wheelchair. One of her arms was rigid, useless. Her speech was slurred, and she reported terrible back pain. As an MS patient myself, I was disturbed to see her, knowing that my fate could be similar.

“How long have you had MS?” I asked.

“Oh, 20 years, at least,” she said, pausing to clear her throat. “But I was doing OK until the stroke last year.”

Stroke? What?

It was a stroke that caused all these problems?

As I unraveled her story, I learned I was wrong about her MS. Before the stroke, she had been an active hiker and traveler. I don't think she had seen a doctor much either, except perhaps to treat her MS. And I don't think anyone had ever checked her cholesterol.

I was startled to see how high her cholesterol was, when I got her test results back a few days later. I immediately started her on medication. Now I had found a reason for her stroke... and a critical reminder to me, as an MS patient: Don't overlook preventive care!

Preventive care encompasses everything from screening for cancer, diabetes, and high cholesterol to getting immunizations, dietary guidance, and smoking cessation. It doesn't get

the same attention, headlines, or research dollars as breakthrough medications for advanced cancer or complex new surgical techniques, but it is important.

Especially for those of us with MS, preventive care is often overshadowed by more urgent matters. MRIs may be more critical than mammograms; seeing the neurologist may take precedence over seeing the family physician. I know when I was required recently to go in for a check-up with my primary care doctor, I complained, "I already see so many doctors! I don't want to go to another medical appointment!"

But preventive care should be a top priority for everyone with MS, adding quality and longevity to our lives. With preventive care, we can detect and remove colon polyps before they become cancer. We can identify osteoporosis (thinning of the bones) and treat it before a fracture occurs. We can and do prevent millions of infectious diseases every year through vaccinations. And perhaps my patient, had she been screened and treated for high cholesterol years before, could have prevented her stroke.

Those of us with MS may also be inclined to blame MS for every ailment, as I started to do when I assumed my patient's disability was due to MS. We shouldn't. For example, fatigue, though so common with MS, can also be due to a myriad of other conditions like anemia, underactive thyroid, depression or sleep apnea. Checking in regularly with a primary care doctor is an important way to ensure other symptoms and concerns are addressed.

If I'm stuck with MS, I'm going to make sure I do everything I can to prevent another chronic disease. That means getting up every morning to exercise, making sure I eat at least five servings of fruits and vegetables every day, and sleeping at least seven hours every night. That means seeing my primary care doctor for screening tests and reviewing new symptoms - that may or may not be due to MS.

Despite my best efforts to stay healthy, I still got MS at age 36. Illness can be random and mysterious, but I haven't let it stop me from seeking new challenges, prioritizing preventive care, and doing whatever I can to stay as healthy as possible.

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