

Health & Well-being



RoodlaneMedical

Dr Gill's Blog

What really caught my eye this month was the news links to the six steps to reduce dementia programme in Wales. The recent push follows a survey that shows 48% of people in Wales believe nothing can be done to reduce the risk. Not true!

This brings together many of the health and wellbeing threads we talk about regularly and it affects us both in the care of aging relatives and in our own decisions about how we will be in the future and how much care we will need.

An alternative version of the list with really good detailed advice is available at <http://www.helpguide.org/articles/alzheimers-dementia/alzheimers-and-dementia-prevention>.

I would suggest 8 points so here are the Roodlane Medical tips to a long and healthy mental life:

1. Regular exercise
2. Healthy diet and weight
3. Avoid smoking and reduce alcohol
4. Mental stimulation
5. Quality sleep
6. Stress management
7. An active social life
8. Commit to regular health reviews to detect and treat chronic diseases early

Be physically active: get plenty of aerobic activity to get your heart rate up but also



Eat lean meat and fish and have some vegetarian days each week. Keep processed and cured meats to a minimum.

I have talked quite a bit about alcohol and all the risks associated with it – this is yet another reason to get consumption right down. I want as many of my neurons with me right to the end of my life as possible and I don't intend to give any of them up to alcohol. Brain scans of heavy drinkers show a shrunken brain. Stop for a month to recalibrate then make sure you have 3 dry days a week. Once you do you will start to realise just how insidious alcohol can be in your life.

consider adding weight training/resistance which can reduce the risk of Alzheimer's by an incredible 50%. This particularly applies to the over 65s so don't let your elderly friends and relatives tell you it is too late. Exercise also helps mood and mental health and improves concentration. Good in the short term and protective in the long term. The goal is a minimum of 150 minutes per week, not very much at all when you think it can include brisk walking even for short periods.



Obesity is a significant risk factor for diabetes, heart disease, cancer - the list goes on. It is also a risk factor for dementia. Make long term dietary changes for life, increase fruit and vegetables, become aware of hidden sugar and keep intake right down. Recent reports on sugar in coffee chain drinks were horrifying. I am with Jamie Oliver on this one, we need to deal with this urgently.

Learn a language, do puzzles, put your brain through its paces. Doing this stimulates new neural connections.

Sleep is essential – 7-9 hours a night and as restful and undisturbed as possible. Chronic sleep deprivation will lead to short term and long term mental deterioration. Take a look at the sleep foundation website which is full of excellent information and advice at <https://sleepfoundation.org/>

Stress management is a big subject but ultimately learning to relax and let go through good life habits and meditation lie at the heart of self-management.

Human beings are social creatures. We need interaction and support from family friends and colleagues to be mentally healthy. How much and in what form depends on individual personality and taste but the stimulation of social interaction is really important to our long term good mental function.

Finally check your health. Do it regularly. Modern life comes with a burden of long term illnesses and whilst all these good steps will help reduce the risk it is essential to have problems diagnosed early and treated carefully to help maintain healthy brain function. Have a regular medical and act on the advice.

Looking after your Lifestyle

Spotlight on Acupuncture

The 7-13th March is Acupuncture Awareness week and so we're taking the opportunity to review if acupuncture is effective as a treatment.

Some individuals say it can cure many things including muscle aches and pains, long term chronic pain and help women to become pregnant, but others say it is just a sham treatment – a placebo.

Acupuncture is classed as a Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and can also be known as dry needling if delivered by a health professional such as a physiotherapist or osteopath.

Acupuncture involves the insertion of very thin needles through the patient's skin at specific points on the body - the needles are inserted to various depths.



How does it work?

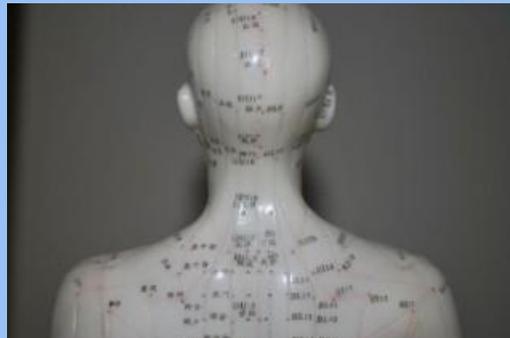
TCM explains that it works by restoring the *yin* and *yang* of our life force known as qi or chi. *Qi* is said to flow through meridians (pathways) in the human body. Through 350 acupuncture points in the body, these meridians and energy flows may be accessed. Illness is said to be the consequence of an imbalance of the forces. If needles are inserted into these points with appropriate combinations it is said that the energy flow can be brought back into proper balance and certain illness and conditions cured.

In Western societies acupuncture is explained using the concepts of neuroscience.

Acupuncture points are seen as places where nerves, muscles and connective tissue can be stimulated.

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Acupuncture practitioners say that the stimulation increases blood flow while at the same time triggering the activity of our own body's natural painkillers.



So what does it work for?

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidelines recommend acupuncture as a first line treatment for persistent, non-specific lower back pain, chronic tension-type headaches and migraine. Those who've tried it say it is less invasive than they expected and can even be relaxing.

However a recent report suggests that acupuncture for hot flushes is no better than sham treatment:

Acupuncture was found to be no better at reducing menopausal hot flushes than sham acupuncture, in which needles do not penetrate the skin, in a randomised controlled trial published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

Australian researchers randomly allocated 327 women with moderately severe menopausal hot flushes to 10 treatments of standardised Chinese medicine needle acupuncture or to non-invasive, "sham" acupuncture.

The sham treatment used a blunt needle that telescopes into itself, giving the visual and physical impression of insertion into the skin. After eight weeks, patients in both groups

reported an approximate 40% decrease in hot flushes that was sustained for six months. However, acupuncture does offer effective relief from hot flashes in women who are being treated with the anti-estrogen tamoxifen following surgery for breast cancer, another study found.

There are sadly very few good quality trials that prove the efficacy of acupuncture in aiding infertility. However, many women who used it as a complementary treatment found it helpful and anecdotal reports suggest that it can help relax and calm anxious patients – which may help their success in becoming pregnant.

However, promising results have emerged demonstrating the efficacy of acupuncture for adult post-operative and chemotherapy induced nausea and vomiting and in post-operative dental pain. There are other situations such as addiction, stroke rehabilitation, headache, menstrual cramps, tennis elbow, fibromyalgia, myofascial pain, osteoarthritis, low back pain, carpal tunnel syndrome, and asthma where acupuncture may be useful as an adjunct treatment or an acceptable alternative or be included in a comprehensive management programme.

According to WHO (World Health Organisation) acupuncture is effective for treating 28 conditions, while evidence indicates it may have an effective therapeutic value for many more

'As with any therapeutic intervention, including acupuncture, there are "non-specific effects that account for a substantial proportion of its effectiveness, and these should not be ignored'

Doctors Corner



Dear Doctor,

A colleague has been diagnosed with shingles. I thought that only elderly people got this! What exactly is shingles, how do you catch it and can it be treated?

He has been told that it is safe for him to come to work- is this true?

Dear Patient,

Shingles is caused by a reactivation of the virus which causes chickenpox (varicella-zoster virus). It is not possible to develop shingles without having previously been infected by this virus. However sometimes a dose of chicken pox can be very mild 'subclinical' and so individuals may not always have been aware of the original chicken pox infection.

After infection with the chicken pox virus some virus particles remain hidden and inactive in the nerve roots causing no symptoms. However on occasion, often many years later, the virus can begin to multiply again. When it does so it travels along the nerve to the skin area supplied by that nerve root and causes the typical rash of shingles. Sometimes a bout of shingles follows a period of stress or illness but often there is no obvious explanation as to why it has occurred at a given time.

Although shingles is most common over the age of 50; contrary to popular belief, it can occur at any age. About 1 in 5 people will have an episode of shingles at some time in their life. It is possible to have it more than once but this is quite rare.

Symptoms

The virus usually affects a single nerve root, and as each nerve root supplies an area of skin on one side of the body only, symptoms are one sided. The most commonly affected nerves are those supplying the skin on the chest or abdomen. Sometimes however a nerve supplying part of the face can be involved.

The main symptoms are pain and a rash although there can be some other non-specific features like feeling feverish or generally tired and unwell. The pain commonly precedes the rash usually by about 2-3 days. At this stage in the absence of any visible signs it is a difficult diagnosis to make.

When the rash develops it remains (like the pain) limited to the skin supplied by the nerve—normally a one sided band. The rash starts as red blotches but a classic feature is that blisters form. New blisters may appear for up to a week. They spontaneously dry up and form scabs eventually fading – much like chicken pox itself.

An episode of shingles usually lasts 2-4 weeks.

Shingles has a reputation for being a debilitating illness but this is more of an issue in older people and those with a poor immune system. The most common complication of shingles is that the pain can persist after the rash has gone (post-herpetic neuralgia). This problem is uncommon in people under 50 but up to 1 in 4 people with shingles, over the age of 60, have pain that lasts more than a month and in some cases it can persist for much longer.

Is shingles contagious?

You can catch chickenpox from someone with shingles but not shingles itself. However most adults have already had chickenpox (sometimes without being aware that they have). Once someone has had chicken pox they generally develop immunity and will not get it again.

The virus from shingles is only passed on by direct contact with the blister fluid. The rash is contagious until all the blisters have scabbed and are dry. But if the blisters are covered by clothing or a dressing, transmission will not occur and that is why individuals with shingles can return to work if they are not feeling too unwell. However they should not share towels, go swimming, or play contact sports such as rugby before the blisters are fully scabbed to limit the chance of others coming into contact with blister fluid.

Pregnant women who have not had chickenpox should avoid people with shingles as the chicken pox virus can be bad for developing babies. If a pregnant woman without known past immunity has been in direct contact she should seek medical advice.

Prevention

There is a vaccine against the varicella-zoster virus which has been used routinely in the USA since 1996 to protect children against chickenpox. It is not given routinely in the UK.

The vaccine against the varicella-zoster virus has been shown to be effective in reducing the risk of older people developing shingles. In the UK, there is now a shingles vaccination programme for people aged 70 and 79. The programme began in September 2013.

Treatment

Most cases of shingles will self-resolve but antiviral medicines stop the virus from multiplying and may limit the severity of symptoms. An antiviral medicine is most useful when started

within 72 hours of the rash appearing or at least before the blisters have scabbed.

If you or someone you know develops a painful one sided rash with blisters seek medical advice at an early stage. For young fit people antiviral treatment is not always necessary but as it is most effective the earlier it is given it is important not to wait to make the decision.



Do you have a health related question?

Why not try emailing us in confidence and you could see your question answered by a qualified Doctor in our next newsletter!

Email: DoctorsQuestions@roodlane.co.uk

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