

Golden Years

Preventive Health Helps Seniors Stay Healthy

Doctors: Early detection is key in successfully treating many diseases

By Deborah Jeanne Sergeant

If you live by the adage "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," you could be endangering your health. Preventive medicine can help seniors stay healthier as they age.

"People are living longer these days than they did 50 years ago," said Didem Miraloglu, who specializes in internal medicine at Lakeside Health System. "Being proactive about health should really be the goal for everyone young and old. It is especially important in the elderly because the quality of life declines rapidly if they are not proactive."

Many in our parents' generation took it for granted that they would experience mental decline as they aged, but Miraloglu encourages seniors to maintain their functionality by being active physically and mentally. "Exercising improves both overall well-being and sense of self-worth. Mentally keeping fit requires continuing to learn new things and being an active participant in one's life," the physician said.

Many changes in health that could be perceived as "old age" disorders could really be prevented or minimized with proper health care. This starts with an annual physical to make sure your body is functioning as it should and to address any concerns you may have.

Most of the time, the sooner you catch a problem the easier and less expensive it is to lessen its effects.

It's also important to receive vac-

inations for pneumococcal, influenza, hepatitis B, shingles and tetanus/per-tussis. Screening can also help maintain your health, including colonoscopy for detection of colon cancer, bone density scan (especially for women), PAP smear for cervical cancer, and mammogram for detecting breast cancer.

Blood work can ensure the right levels for cholesterol, sugar, thyroid function, vitamin D and B-12.

Follow your doctor's advice for the necessity and frequency of screenings and exams and for taking any extra steps for caring for your health.

"Older adults taking medication should take them in the way they are prescribed," said Thomas V. Caprio, a physician and assistant professor of medicine and clinical nursing for the University of Rochester School of Medicine & Dentistry, department of medicine, division of geriatrics and aging. "If they have side effects, they should not stop abruptly but talk with their physician about it. Some medications need to have the dose lowered gradually before they're discontinued."

Many seniors prefer to use over-the-counter drugs and herbal supplements to treat health problems; however, if these are ineffective, they waste money. If they are effective, they could negatively interact with each other or their prescribed medication.

"These things should be made aware to the primary care physician," Caprio said. "Don't treat yourself.

People can get in trouble when they try to self-diagnose."

Day to day, you can do plenty to maintain your health at home.

"One of the biggest things is a good exercise program to manage weight, help with arthritis, and keep blood pressure low," said Karyn Leible, a physician who serves as senior vice president for medical services at Jewish Senior Life in Rochester.

You don't have to run marathons. Just start walking for a few minutes a day until you're walking for 30 minutes. Or try picking up an active hobby like ballroom dancing.

Steve Ryan a physician with Independent Living for Seniors, an affiliate of Rochester General Health System, doesn't "encourage people to obsess about their diet," he said. "Most people know if they need to lose a few pounds."

Making sure you eat a balanced diet is important, with plenty of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and lean sources of protein and calcium.

"Stay socially engaged," Ryan said. "If you didn't do this while middle aged and working, it's not too late to start. Social connections in some ways have much more of a predictor of your health physically and mentally than diet in some ways."

Join a church, club or class to meet people with similar interests as yours. Making new friends is mentally stimulating and helps you make more con-

nections that can help you out when you need a hand.

Daniel Zatreanu, a physician with Unity Geriatrics Associates, screens his patients for depression as a part of a routine annual exam. Seniors can be prone to depression because of the many negative changes that can occur during this phase of life, including loss of spouse, decreasing control over life decisions and diminishing physical ability.

"Some say they have pain here and there and I cannot find any cause," Zatreanu said. "Then I screen them for depression and find they're depressed. It causes more than emotional pain. Because we are stressed, we can feel physical pain. Depression is not diagnosed and treated as often as it could be."

When he screens patients for depression, he asks questions including:

- Have you dropped many activities?
- Do you feel frequently like crying?
- Do you have trouble concentrating?
- Do you have more problems with memory than other people?
- How do you feel about yourself?
- Do you feel your life is empty?
- Are you bored?
- Are you in good spirits most of the time?
- Do you feel helpless?
- Do you feel like staying at home?
- Do you feel full of energy?
- Do you enjoy getting up in the morning?

Medicare Preventive Services: What's Free, What's Not

By Jim Miller

Medicare covers a wide array of preventive services to help you stay healthy, but it's important to know which services are totally covered, and which ones will generate some out-of-pocket costs.

Free Services

Thanks to the Affordable Care Act, original Medicare now offers many preventive health services completely free to beneficiaries.

Preventive services include various exams, lab tests and screenings that help find health problems in their earliest stages when they're easier to treat. They also include a number of vaccinations and programs for health monitoring, as well as counseling and education to help you take care of your own health.

Here's a quick rundown of the different Medicare preventive services that won't cost you a cent, along with the eligibility requirements you'll need to meet to get them.

• Wellness visits: All Medicare beneficiaries are eligible for two types of

preventive wellness visits — one when you're new to Medicare and one each year after that. But don't confuse these with full physical examinations. These are prevention-focused visits that provide only an overview of your health and medical risk factors and serve as a baseline for future care.

• Colorectal cancer screening: The fecal occult blood test, flexible sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy is available to all beneficiaries aged 50 or older.

• Mammograms: All women with Medicare aged 40 and older can get a free breast cancer screening mammogram every year.

• Pap tests and pelvic exams: These cervical and vaginal cancer screenings are available every two years, or once a year for those at high risk.

• Prostate cancer screenings: Annual PSA blood tests are available to all male beneficiaries aged 50 and older.

• Cardiovascular screenings: Free blood test to check cholesterol, lipid and triglyceride levels are offered every five years to all Medicare recipients.

• Diabetes: Screening available twice a year for those at risk.

• Bone mass measurements: This osteoporosis test is available every two years to those at risk, or more often if medically necessary.

• Abdominal aortic aneurysm screening: To check for bulging blood vessels, this test is available to men aged 65 to 75 who have ever smoked.

• Vaccinations: An annual flu shot, a vaccination against pneumonia and the hepatitis B vaccine are all free to all beneficiaries.

In addition, Medicare also offers free smoking cessation counseling; medical nutrition therapy to help beneficiaries with diabetes or kidney disease; depression screenings; alcohol screening and counseling; obesity screening and counseling; annual cardiovascular risk reduction visits; sexually transmitted infection screening and counseling; and HIV screenings.

Cost-Sharing Services

Medicare also offers several other preventive services that require some

out-of-pocket cost-sharing. With these tests, you'll have to pay 20 percent of the cost of the service (Medicare picks up the other 80 percent), after you've met your \$147 Part B yearly deductible. The services that fall under this category include digital rectal exams for prostate cancer, glaucoma tests and diabetes self-management training services.

For detailed information on all Medicare preventive services see medicare.gov/share-the-health, or call Medicare at 800-633-4227 and ask them to mail you a free copy of "Your Guide to Medicare's Preventive Service" (publication 10110).

Medicare Advantage

If you have a Medicare Advantage plan, you'll be happy to know that all Advantage plans are also now required to cover the same free preventive services as original Medicare.

Jim Miller writes the column Savvy Senior for In Good Health.