



Growing Trend in Self Care

There's a shift on the health care landscape. Perhaps you've noticed. Increasingly, governments and society expect us to take more responsibility for our own health. What's more, a large and growing number of us are doing just that, leading some observers to call this trend the self-care movement.

What is self-care?

Self-care means just what it says: taking care of yourself. This involves making healthy choices such as getting regular exercise, eating a balanced diet, refraining from smoking and managing stress. It includes using medications responsibly, whether you select them yourself, over-the-counter, or receive them through a prescription from a nurse or physician.

Self-care means practising accident-prevention, actively monitoring your health for signs of approaching illness and knowing when it's appropriate to seek professional care. For those living with long-term conditions like diabetes, cancer and the human immunodeficiency virus, it means learning to manage symptoms and treatments, as well as minimize complications. Self-care means staying informed, asking questions and making decisions that you feel are in your best interest.

Why is self-care gaining momentum?

This pro-active approach to health is in keeping with today's emphasis on wellness and illness prevention. In decades gone by the health care system focused more on the treatment of disease than on the promotion of health. Patients were often expected to be dependent and passive. But as society's understanding of factors that determine health has grown, so has its awareness that each of us can play a leading role in maximizing our own health and quality of life. This awareness is fuelled by:

- a range of media that link us to vast amounts of health information;
- government policies and public education campaigns that discourage risky practices like impaired driving and encourage healthy choices like seatbelt and helmet use;
- a growing array of non-prescription medicines, self-test kits and alternative therapies; and
- knowledgeable nurses, physicians and pharmacists, who provide us with insight, information and advice.

Is self-care for you?

While many people are keen to embrace self-care, not everyone feels comfortable or able to take control of their own health. No matter what your perspective, there's no right or wrong path – just the potential for growth.

With the proper information and support, each one of us can gradually learn to take more responsibility for our health. Think of it as a matter of degree: if you brush your teeth regularly or have been trying to quit smoking, you're already practising some level of self-care.

It's also important to remember that self-care doesn't mean being totally on your own. True self-care should be a collaboration between your health care professionals and you. Patient support groups, non-governmental organisations and help lines are other important resources.

Benefits of self care

Research is beginning to show that self-care can give you a heightened sense of well-being, increased satisfaction and improved quality of life. At a time when health care systems are



stretched to the limit, self-care also contributes to better use of resources. According to the Department of Health in the United Kingdom, for example, 40% of a general practitioner's time is spent dealing with patients with minor self-treatable illness. When given appropriate support, however, people can take care of these ailments themselves,ⁱ freeing the physician for other responsibilities.

Points to keep in mind

Whether you're dealing with minor ailments, a long-term illness, or making choices aimed at living a longer, healthier life, self-care is an important aspect of holistic care and responsibility. In seizing that responsibility, here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Look for high-quality health information from a range of credible sources. Check out the Patient Talk! fact sheet *Health Information for Patients and Consumers* (www.patienttalk.info/FSptinfo.htm) for tips on assessing information for accuracy, clarity and relevancy.
- Keep the lines of communication open between you and your health care

professionals. Ask questions and discuss options openly. Think of your relationships as partnerships.

- Read and follow directions carefully, whether taking prescription or non-prescription medications. Don't exceed recommended doses.
- If you're living with a long-term condition, request a face-to-face review of your medications with your health care professional. This can help reduce adverse reactions by identifying potential interactions and side effects and taking action beforehand to resolve them.ⁱⁱ The guide *Focus on Your Medicines*,ⁱⁱⁱ available online at www.medicines-partnership.org/our-publications, is designed to help consumers get the maximum benefit from a review by preparing questions in advance.

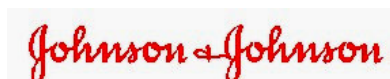
Finally, when in doubt ask. You don't have to have all the answers yourself.

References:

ⁱ Department of Health UK (2005). Self Care – A Real Choice, January 2005, p.6. Accessed February 2005 at: www.dh.gov.uk/assetRoot/04/10/17/02/04101702.pdf

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p.5.

ⁱⁱⁱ Medicines Partnership UK (2005). Focus on Your Medicines. Patient-tested extensively, the guide can be viewed online in portable document format. See www.medicines-partnership.org/our-publications and follow the links under Medication Review listings.



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