

My Story: The Power of Prevention

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Last spring, I was taking in one of my favorite weekend pastimes—a game of golf—enjoying the sunshine and feeling the warmth on my arms and face when I got the shock of my life. You see, this wasn't just any day of golf; it was a tournament sponsored by my employer, Southeast Health Group. Every few holes, SHG had staff camped out to offer health screenings. When I got to the 5th hole, they innocently put a blood pressure cuff on my arm and then delivered the bad news. My blood pressure was dangerously high.

As a person who works hard to stay healthy, I was stunned at the news. I stay thin, exercise regularly, eat my veggies and consciously manage my stress levels. How could this be true? I learned it's because high blood pressure is called the “silent

killer.” Lots of people just like me are walking around unaware of their situation because they don't get regular check-ups or take time for preventative care. Suddenly, the headaches I'd been having and the nervousness, sweating and difficulty I had sleeping made sense. I needed to get to the doctor and take control of the situation.

I was wondering what else could be happening that I wasn't aware of and did some research. It turns out, there is a whole list of preventable diseases and simple actions you can take to get and stay healthy. According to the **Centers for Disease Control**, “chronic diseases are among the most common and costly of all health problems, and they are also among the most preventable. Chronic disease prevention, to be most effective, must occur in multiple sectors and across individuals' entire life spans. Prevention encompasses health promotion activities that encourage healthy living and limit the initial onset of chronic diseases. Prevention also embraces early detection efforts, such as screening at-risk populations,

as well as strategies for appropriate management of existing diseases and related complications. The following examples show what targeted investments in prevention can achieve:

The health benefits of **quitting smoking** are numerous, and many are experienced rapidly. Within 2 weeks to 3 months after quitting, heart attack risk begins to drop and lung function begins to improve. One year after quitting, excess risk for heart disease is reduced by half, and 10 years after quitting, the lung cancer death rate

is about half that of a current smoker. Fifteen years after quitting, an ex-smoker's risk for heart disease is about the same as that of a lifelong nonsmoker.



Lifestyle changes in diet and exercise, including a 5%–7% maintained weight loss and at least 150 minutes per week in physical activity, can prevent or delay the onset of type 2 diabetes for Americans at high risk for the disease. Participants in a major clinical trial group exercised at moderate intensity, usually by walking an average of 30 minutes a day, 5 days a week, and lowered their intake of fat and calories. Their efforts resulted in a sustained weight loss of about 10 to 15 pounds, reducing their risk of getting diabetes by 58%.

An adult with **healthy blood pressure and healthy blood cholesterol levels** has a greatly reduced risk for cardiovascular disease. A 12- to 13-point reduction in systolic blood pressure can reduce cardiovascular disease deaths by 25%, and a 10% decrease in total cholesterol levels reduces the risk for coronary heart disease by 30%.

Instilling **healthy behaviors and practices during youth**, particularly

in school settings, is far more cost-effective than waiting until unhealthy behaviors are entrenched. A study of the “Toward No Tobacco” program, which was designed to prevent cigarette use among middle and high school students, found that for every dollar invested in school tobacco prevention programs, almost \$20 in future medical care costs would be saved.

Regular screening for colorectal cancer can reduce the number of people who die from this disease.

When colorectal cancer is found early and treated, the 5-year relative survival rate is 90%.

For women aged 40 years or older, **mammograms** every 12–33 months significantly reduce mortality from breast cancer. For women who have been sexually active and have a cervix, screening with a Pap test reduces incidence of, and mortality from, cervical cancer. Females aged 11–26 years can help prevent cervical, vaginal, and vulvar cancers by getting the HPV vaccine.

Improved glycemic control benefits people with either type 1 or type 2 diabetes. In general, every percentage point drop in A1c blood test results (e.g., from 8.0% to 7.0%) can reduce the risk of microvascular complications (eye, kidney, and nerve diseases) by 40%. Among people with diabetes, annual eye and foot exams can reduce vision loss and lower-extremity amputations. Detecting and treating diabetic eye disease with laser therapy can reduce the development of severe vision loss by an estimated 50% to 60%. Comprehensive foot care programs can reduce amputation rates by 45% to 85%.

Early diagnosis and appropriate management of arthritis, including self-management activities, can help people with arthritis decrease pain, improve function, and stay productive.

For more information about the costs and impacts of chronic diseases, you can access the full report at <http://www.cdc.gov/chronicdisease/pdf/2009-power-of-prevention.pdf>.