Kootenay Boundary
Patient Advisory
Committee & Community

Empowering the Citizen Patient

Actionable Tips, Information & Resources to Support Your Health & Health Care

Article #9

Healthy People, Healthy Communities

Learning About Your Health Conditions

View All Articles Online at kbpacc.ca!

As we journey through life, maintaining good health becomes increasingly challenging, especially as we reach our middle years. In this ninth installment of the 'Empowering the Citizen Patient' series, Dr. Mindy Smith uses the examples of hypertension and diabetes to explore how understanding your health conditions can empower you to take control of your well-being, manage your symptoms effectively, and live a full and vibrant life.

Even though we try to stay healthy, many of us will get a chronic health condition like high blood pressure in our 40s and 50s. By age 65, over 90% of us have at least one chronic illness. Things like a poor diet, not enough exercise, too much alcohol, smoking, stress, and genetic factors increase our risk. But the good news is that learning about our health conditions and taking action can make a big difference. We can still live full, vibrant lives!

Learn About Your Health Conditions

Learning about your health condition(s) is an important first step! Talk with health care providers, if you can, including local pharmacists and check out this website to learn more about how you can support your own health: https://www.selfmanagementbc.ca/.

It's also important to keep an easily accessible list of your medications, what they do for you, and possible side effects. Read about your condition on reliable sites like Canada Public Health Services, HealthLink BC, and specific disease association sites like Heart and Stroke Canada. Interior Health also offers information and links to local and virtual education programs and supports, including how to manage medications. Remember that all internet sources are not reputable. Your local library is another valuable resource.

Have a Plan

Having a plan for managing your health condition(s) is crucial. This can include step-by-step changes to improve your diet, health habits, and activities. Your plan should also include:

- Which symptoms to watch for to know when to seek help (e.g., chest pain with exercise)
- Measures you can take if you are having trouble (e.g., blood pressure going up)
- Where to call if you need advice (e.g., HealthLink BC by dialing 8-1-1)

Action plans are available online for conditions like asthma, chronic pain, and for those with mental health concerns. Guidance for action and crisis planning can be found at sites like this one at healthy place.com.

Things That Help

Things considered helpful for most chronic health conditions include eating healthy food, getting daily exercise, and adequate sleep. You could consider meeting with a dietitian for support, available through some clinics or through calling 8-1-1.

(Image Copyright © 2008, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health)

Managing Specific Conditions

Things considered helpful for most chronic health conditions include eating healthy food, getting daily exercise, and adequate sleep. You could consider meeting with a dietitian for support, available through some clinics or through calling 8-1-1.

Hypertension (High Blood Pressure)

Hypertension is persistent blood pressure (BP) of more than 140/90 mmHg. Check your BP at your practitioner's office or with a home BP monitor; many pharmacies have BP machines that you can use anytime. BP normally goes up and down but should not stay high. We know that high BP strains your heart and can lead to heart attacks or strokes. Here are a few tips to lower your BP:

- Limit salt in your diet
- Exercise daily (e.g., walking); heavy exertion/sweat is not needed to be effective
- Reduce stress through mindfulness, meditation, or counseling
- Follow a heart-healthy diet like DASH
- If overweight, reduce weight by 5-10 pounds

If you are on medication, take it as prescribed or consult your healthcare provider or pharmacist for adjustments that you may need for too high or too low BP. Check your BP regularly and keep track of it. Seek help for very high BP (180/120 mmHg or higher) with symptoms like chest pain, shortness of breath, numbness or weakness, vision changes, difficulty speaking, or severe headache.

Diabetes

Diabetes is a condition in which the pancreas does not make enough insulin or sometimes the body becomes resistant to insulin leading to high blood sugar. High blood sugar can make you feel tired or confused, and can damage your eyes, kidneys, and heart. Symptoms to watch for are excessive thirst, urinating more often, blurry vision, unexpected weight loss, skin sores that heal slowly, or feeling tired and weak.

A few tips to help manage diabetes:

- Eat regular, plant-based meals; if overweight, even a 5 pound loss helps. Proper foods are not easy to get for some of us and these links may help when eating on a budget (Food Insecurity and Diabetes and Diabetic Friendly Hamper Food)
- Exercise most days
- Take your medications if prescribed
- Check your feet for sores and have your eyes checked yearly

Controlling BP to less than 130/80 mmHg and lowering cholesterol are very important for staying healthy. For those with type II diabetes, your clinician should check your blood sugar (A1C test <7-8) every 3-6 months and you should track it so you know when you need better control. You can check your own BS by finger stick if you feel unwell. Seek help for any non-healing skin sores and urgent help for high (above) or low blood sugar symptoms (e.g., dizzy, anxious, sweating, weak, confused).

This article covers two relatively common health conditions. Visit our Kootenay Boundary Patient Advisory Committee and Community (https://kbpacc.ca/) for a table of conditions including the cause of the condition, what you can do to care for yourself and what you might need if the condition worsens.

By taking proactive steps and staying informed, we can better manage our health conditions and lead healthier lives.

Get “Empowering the Citizen Patient” Direct to Your Inbox!