

## Taking Charge of Your Own Health

By Armi Sevilla Rowe

Once all the gifts have been unwrapped and the last bite of yummy holiday treats has been eaten, we'll step on our scales, take a good look at ourselves in the mirror and greet the next season, the get-our-rumps-back-on-a-health-and-fitness-regimen time of year. Even the most dedicated well-being enthusiast might have fallen off track these past few weeks with all the extra fuss created by holiday preparation and social obligations.

Everyone knows the basics of how to avoid catching a nasty bug. Wash your hands frequently. Pop the vitamin C. Avoid crowded indoor places where re-circulated air passes the latest strains of viruses back and forth.

If you are fastidious and lucky enough, perhaps you will dodge the illnesses that render you in so much pain and discomfort that you are useless for a few days. And even if you end up getting sick, you can ride it out with lots of fluids and sleep, allowing your body to naturally fight off those evil trespassers and emerge a new human being.

But what if you're one of those people with a vague sense of "blah" despite having consulted your doctors? You've administered the decongestants, cough medicine and pain relief medication. They say

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there's nothing seriously wrong with you. Go get some rest and find ways to relieve stress, they say. But you still have a nagging feeling of malcontent.

Sometimes, it's a question of recognizing that you may have an underlying chronic condition such as allergies or acute sinusitis. But unless your physician has referred you to a specialist, you might not look any further into it, so you continually suffer the annoying symptoms. "It's one of the struggles within medicine today; when to refer (patients) to the specialist," said Dr. G. William Palmer, an allergy and asthma specialist at Shoreline Allergy & Asthma Associates LLP in Waterford. When should you consult an allergist even if your physician has not suggested it? "Almost anyone with a food allergy should be followed by an allergy specialist," said Palmer. And in general, "whenever your physician can't answer your questions to your satisfaction or if you have any complicated form of disease, seek a specialist," added Palmer.

While it is good to always advocate your own medical well-being, some people take it to the extreme by what Palmer refers to as "undertaking very expensive interventions" such as installing cleaning and air purification systems when it may have no role in the improvement of their symptoms. According to Palmer, only 50 percent of people with chronic nasal symptoms are truly allergic. Only once your allergies have been confirmed will it pay off to cover those pillows and mattresses with allergy-proof covers or replace that mattress every eight to 10 years.

The job of the allergy specialist is to help people sort through

their symptoms. Palmer says there are no hard and fast rules about how to discern between upper respiratory symptoms brought on by other conditions versus allergies. Allergies are "a complex interrelation between your genes and your internal immune derangement," he says, and diagnosis requires an examination of a detailed medical history and close monitoring of symptoms over a period of time. The more aware you become of the triggers, time of day and frequency of your symptoms, the faster doctors and specialists will be able to determine what is wrong and how to help treat you.

There are a growing number of people who are taking their own health to a whole new level. They not only want to rid themselves of pain and discomfort; they are interested in a pro-active approach to preventing disease from even starting.

"There is a shift occurring in the community. People are looking at how they are living their lives and are taking better care of themselves," said Christine Rizzo, M.S., a licensed acupuncturist and certified herbalist who practices at Acupuncture, Shiatsu and Oriental Medicine of New England (ASOMNE) in East Lyme. "People are more interested in holistic wellness, not just having their body functioning properly but also feeling strong and having energy," added Rizzo. She explained that this involves cultivating a lifestyle in which you have body, spirit and mind harmony.

A large portion of ASOMNE's clients come to the center when they "have tried everything and nothing else works" according to Rizzo. A majority of the center's patients have pain issues, but some have been prescribed rest, pills, physical therapy, anti-inflammatory

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ry or steroid treatments and finally, surgery. Many turn to the center either right before undergoing surgery or immediately after, ready to commit to change for the better. Still others have emotional or anxiety issues which affect their stress levels and are in search of a deeper understanding of the source of their problems.

"They don't feel alive, and they don't want to be medicated," said Rizzo regarding patients who may have been prescribed medication that have accompanying side effects on the mind and body.

Shihan David R. LoPriore, L.Ac., S.T., Director of ASOMNE, started his practice 15 years ago. It became clear to him after 12 years that it was time to expand the practice into a building big enough to hire another practitioner and accommodate all the people who kept his phone ringing off the hook.

"In just nine short months, Christine's practice has grown from just a couple of patients per week to over 30 patients every week. Not all patients come on a weekly basis so the actual number of patients is much greater," said LoPriore. He added that his appointment book is always full, treating an average of 35-40 patients per week.

LoPriore believes that people are used to waiting until they are sick to seek help and end up just chasing symptoms instead of addressing the deepest aspect of their symptoms. "We can mop up the mess only after we fix the broken pipe," said LoPriore.

He says that primary care should be about prevention rather than reactionary care. "There's that old saying 'an apple a day keeps the doctor away' but have the doctor know about the apples," added LoPriore, who thinks most doctors don't get trained enough on nu-

trition. At least people are attaining food wisdom elsewhere. "Many people are eating more organically, knowing that genetically modified foods can't be right," said Rizzo. "There's a whole movement. People are taking a world view, working out, eating healthier and looking outside of structures in which they were raised," added Rizzo. More people are turning to alternative therapies to supplement their traditional healthcare and more health insurance companies are covering these claims. By aligning the energies of the body, mind and spirit through the practice of acupuncture and taking herbs, the holistic wellness profession believes people will tap into the wisdom of Eastern medicine which relies on the body's natural way to heal itself and prevent disease.

So once the ball drops at midnight, millions will have recited their new year's resolutions either in their own minds or to their inner support circles. And most likely, eating right, exercising regularly and quitting unhealthy habits will top the list.

How long will they go before they fall off the wagon?

"A significant portion of people don't make it beyond March," said Rick Hersom, Operations Manager at Work Out World in Waterford. Hersom says that the first 30-60 days of an exercise regimen are the most important part of the gym membership in order to establish a good habit so people can reach their goals. At minimum, he thinks people should exercise three times a week in order to have working out become more ingrained to their life.

Heather Buscetto, mother of three children in New London, attributes hitting her exercise goal of three times per week, despite

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her busy schedule with the kids, to joining a gym with her husband, Michael Buscetto III.

"It was something we could do together while the kids were in school and both benefit from," said Buscetto.

She believes having someone to support you and check in with periodically reinforces the habit.

"When I was younger, I was always in shape. Once I had the kids it got harder to do," added Buscetto.

The couple is fortunate enough to have flexible schedules so they can trade off and cover for each other at home whenever one of the kids is sick or when the kids are home from school.

Exercise has even become a family affair. "I got my sister, my brother-in-law and my mother-in-law to do it. I'll call my sister sometimes and say 'are you going to the gym today?'" said Buscetto.

Many people do the right thing by joining a gym but somehow are not able to reap the full benefits of their membership due to lack of support. Hersom recommends the following to ensure success:

Have a workout partner; people are more apt to do it on a consistent basis with someone checking up on them

Participate in group exercise activities; it's similar to a friend looking out for you

Meet with a personal trainer; start on the right foot with a program designed for you

If you miss a week or two, it is OK; start again. Don't be discouraged or embarrassed; just get back in the game.