

Medical Self-Care: What is it?

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"Have you ever ended a conversation with the phrase 'Take Care'?"

It seems that "Take Care" is replacing "Good Bye" as the friendly ending of phone conversations and visits. There is also an important health message in these two words.

One of the changes occurring in the health care system is the expectation that individuals will take more responsibility for their own health. Practicing medical self care is one way of taking more control. Medical self-care is defined as those things that individuals do to deal with minor illness and injuries at home. This includes preventing, detecting, and treating illness and disease.

Data suggests that self care is already a fact of life. Over 80% of health problems are treated at home. For example every time someone takes an over-the-counter drug for a headache they are practicing self care.

Studies also suggest that an even larger number of health care problems could be treated at home. As many as 70% of all visits to doctors for new problems have been termed unnecessary. For example, 11% of such visits are for uncomplicated colds. Many other visits are for minor cuts that do not require stitches, for tetanus shots even though the person is current on their immunizations, and for minor ankle sprains.

Medical self-care does not involve learning large amounts of information. It is not about practicing alternative medicine or using weird home remedies. Self-care is not a substitute for professional care. One of the important self-care decisions individuals always have to make is, "Do I see my health care provider or do I apply home

treatment?" Your goal is to protect your health and that of your family so you want to practice sound self care skills like the following.

- Use a medically sound self-care reference such as Take Care of Yourself by Donald M., Vicker M.D. and James F. Fries, M.D. or Healthwise for Life by Molly Mettler MSW and Donald W. Kemper, MPH.
- Learn how to take some basic vital signs like temperature, pulse, and respiration and how to do some simple health observations. These skills can help you make better use of your self-care reference as well as communicate more effectively with your health care provider.
- Find a convenient and safe place for your home health care center which includes basic first aid supplies, medications and your self-care reference book.
- Use over-the-counter and prescription drugs in such a way as to avoid over medication.
- Learn to communicate effectively with your health care providers and to use these providers as resources in protecting and maintaining your health.

Learning how to do these tasks more effectively is no guarantee that family member's will stay healthy. However, learning how to handle common illnesses and injuries at home, knowing when and how to work with health care providers, and encouraging healthy lifestyle behaviors may ease your mind, save you time, help reduce unnecessary doctor visits and may reduce your family's health care costs.