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Medicare Part D – Open Enrollment Starts October 15th

Our Medicare insured patients are required by law to have an approved drug plan called Medicare Part D. This program is part of CMS (Center for Medicare Services) but is actually outsourced and administered by private insurers.

Each year the insurers have the opportunity to change which medications they wish to cover. For example, they may cover Xeljanz XR for rheumatoid arthritis in 2019 but not in 2020 because it's too expensive. You don't want to be surprised by price changes when you show up at your pharmacy to pick up a refill for a product that has been costing \$24 a month and is suddenly costing \$2400 a month. Yikes!

Your current Part D plan administrator is supposed to mail an explanation of changes in formulary for 2021 by the end of September. However, the best way to review this topic is to access www.medicare.gov on your computer. Choose the option to find drug plans. Enter your personal information and your living location. Eventually you will be asked to enter your medications by name and dosage.

The government program works well and will identify the most comprehensive and cost-effective plan for 2021. The open enrollment period runs from October 15th through December 7th, 2020.

The one drawback to the Medicare.gov website is that it will try to steer you into a private insurer run Medicare HMO as part of the Medicare Advantage program. **My advice is avoid that since it binds you to their contracted panels of doctors and facilities.** If you are having trouble with this just call us for help. Also, the state of Florida provides free counseling at www.floridashine.org or 1-800-963-5337.

Blood Pressure Control Takes Center Stage

The news has been flooded with information about viral respiratory tract infections, COVID-19, influenza, masks, vaccines and the disruption of our lives. At the same time, traditional controllable health risks relentlessly continue to take their deadly toll. Much has been written in the past few weeks about high blood pressure.

The *Journal of the American Medical Association* carried a peer reviewed article from the University of Alabama, Birmingham, authored by Paul Murthan PhD, noting that between 2013 and 2018 there had been a decrease of 11% in adult blood pressure control in the USA in adults who were followed in the National Health and Nutrition Study. The major reason was failure of patients to see their doctor.

In a publication of *JAMA Cardiology* recently, researchers looked at adults with no risk factors for cardiovascular disease and calculated that for each 10mm mercury rise in blood pressure there was a major risk increase in developing atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease. The authors emphasized the need for tight blood pressure control for prevention.

Physicians run into obstacles when trying to tightly control blood pressure. We always prefer lifestyle improvements. Weight reduction lowers blood pressure. Salt restriction of sodium chloride lowers blood pressure. Smoking cessation lowers blood pressure as does regular modest activity or exercise. If lifestyle changes don't solve the problem, we must consider medications.

The Family Physicians Inquiry Network examined supplements for blood pressure control. In a 2017 Cochran's review of 1,800 patients given cocoa, they found a 1.8 mm mercury reduction in systolic and diastolic blood pressure. For those patients carrying a hypertension diagnosis, the reduction in BP averaged 4 mm mercury. Blood pressure reduction also occurred with omega3 fatty acids, garlic, L arginine, beetroot juice, flax seed oil and olive oil extract.

When we add medications to achieve blood pressure guidelines, we run into medication adverse effects as we increase the dosages and number of medications. For years, a subset of patients with orthostatic hypotension (OH) challenged us. Due to likely faulty regulation of their reflexes and autonomic nervous system when they stand up, and blood rushes away from their brain, normal regulatory actions don't occur. Their pressure plummets, they get lightheaded and faint or fall to the ground sustaining traumatic injuries. Their blood pressure lying down and sometimes seated is high because we are afraid to lower it too much.

A research publication in the September 10th *Annals of Internal Medicine* by S. Juraschek, MD, PhD et al showed that intensive blood pressure control with medications lowered the risk of an orthostatic hypotension event. Data shows that by aggressively lowering their blood pressure, we are not exacerbating their orthostatic hypotension.

Honey Reduces Upper Respiratory Symptoms

The British Medical Journal published a thorough review of the medical literature reviewing the beneficial effects of honey in reducing the intensity and severity of coughs in viral upper respiratory tract infections. The study was performed at Oxford University by Abuelgasm, Albury, Lee and associates. They reviewed fourteen published studies on the subject and then ran that data through their own stringent tests to assure the hypothesis was accurate. We are heading into the fall-winter cold and flu season with cold weather forcing individuals to remain indoors. We can add to this the ongoing Covid-19 respiratory pandemic as a source of coughing. For years now doctors, scientists and public health officials have tried to convince their colleagues and the public that antibiotics do not lessen the course or duration of a viral upper respiratory tract infection. There are dozens of over the counter non-prescription cough preparations sold in pharmacies and groceries. We read regularly about these products causing severe illness, deaths and adverse effects in children and the elderly. Honey solves these issues.

In an online review accompanying the article experts suggest mixing 1.5tablespoons of honey with 6-8 ounces of oolong tea. Let it cool down so it isn't too hot and it is a great cough suppressant and source

of hydration for children one to five years old. The darker the tea the more nutrient rich antioxidants the patient gets from the tea leaves along with caffeine. They suggest later in the day switching to a chamomile tea to avoid all that caffeine. Younger children will benefit from 2-3 servings per day providing hydration plus cough suppression. Adults and older kids can use two tablespoons of honey and consume a larger volume of warm fluids.

New Cancer-Detecting Blood Tests Move Closer to Availability

New technology is being developed which hopes to provide early detection of cancer in asymptomatic individuals. Several firms have been using a technique known as DNA methylation to detect cancer from a simple blood draw.

Recently, online medical review site Healio, discussed a product called a Panseer test by Sinlera Genomics. They accessed a large multi-year health study from China known as the Taizhou Longitudinal Study which looked at 123,115 patients aged 25 to 90 years old who provided 1.6 million specimens from 2007 until 2017. Using their new test, they were able to detect stomach cancer, esophageal cancer, colorectal, hepatic and lung cancer in 91 % of asymptomatic patients at checkups who went on to exhibit these cancers using standard detection methods 1-4 years later. They used stored blood and plasma from these annual checkups to conduct the study.

There were 605 asymptomatic individuals of whom 191 went on to develop stomach, liver, colon , esophageal or lung cancer. They also used blood from 233 known cancer patients and 200 known cancerous samples.

The hope is that with early detection we can save lives and reduce costs. For purposes of the scope of impact this testing could have, these five cancer types account for over 250,000 annual deaths in the USA and 2.1 million in China.

Flu Vaccination Program Begins October 1st

It's that time of year for you to call the office and make an appointment for your flu vaccination. We will be administering the vaccine this year beginning October 1st.

If it is a late, aggressive flu season we will be offering a second shot in January for seniors 65- years of age or older. This is based on data that flu vaccine immunity begins to wane in the elderly after 90 days.

This year our seniors 65 years of age and older will receive the inactivated high dose quadrivalent vaccine which provides protection against Influenza B strains for the first time. Patients 16-64 years old will receive the standard quadrivalent inactivated flu vaccine. All protocols and precautions initiated for prevention of transmission of COVID-19 will remain in place. Masks are required and you will be prescreened by phone.

Although pharmacies may seem more convenient for your flu vaccination, they will not provide the degree of safety we will by following CDC protocols. If you have any questions, please call the practice.

Pregnant Women Can Safely Take the Flu Shot

Vaccinations have been blamed for causing autism in children and used as an excuse to permit school age children to opt out of receiving vaccinations and immunizations but still attend school. The result has been a reemergence of measles and other preventable childhood illnesses around the world.

Anti-vaccination advocates have extended their arguments to claim pregnant women receiving the flu shot are increasing their off springs' chance of developing a disease on the autism spectrum. To study this question Jonas F. Ludvigsson, MD, PhD of the Karolinka Institute in Stockholm, Sweden explored this question. They followed large numbers of pregnant women in Sweden during the 2009-2010 influenza season and then followed their newborns for almost seven more years. Over 39,000 pregnant moms were vaccinated with the standard inactivated flu vaccine that season. Only 1% of their children, 394, had developed illnesses on the autism spectrum by 2016. Conversely, over 29,000 moms did not receive the flu shot that season and 394, or 1.1%, of their offspring developed diseases on the autism spectrum. There was NO statistical difference in the groups. Their research paper was published in the Annals of Internal Medicine Journal.

As we head into influenza immunization season; the voices of scientists, public health experts and physicians will be encouraging everyone to take a flu shot. The voices of those who believe these vaccinations will cause harm will also be loud.

Look at the data and scientific evidence and please take your flu shot this season. It certainly is not a perfect preventive treatment but it reduces symptoms and severity in those unfortunate enough to catch it. Call your doctor and make an appointment to receive your flu shot.

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