

- Health

## For booking a doctor's visit, gender plays a role

**Men often view checkups as pampering, while women are more proactive**

**By Dr. Steven Lamm**

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*Getting a man to go to the doctor is often like trying to get him to stop for directions—he just won't do it. They're often stubborn, and they don't think they need a check-up unless there's something visibly wrong. But putting off a doctor's appointment can be detrimental to a man's health.*

*Best Life magazine contributing editor Dr. Steven Lamm, author of "The Hardness Factor," examines the gender differences between men and women and explains when to push a man to finally visit a doctor:*

I have been in medical practice for more than 30 years. When a patient comes to my office, I immediately observe several traits, which then helps me come to a diagnosis. These include overall appearance, age, and any particular mannerisms the person may have. The most important trait, however, is gender.

Men and women are different from each other in a variety of ways. Although a much larger number of medical conditions are seen regularly in both sexes, many predominate or are often more severe in one. Some are even sex-specific, such as color blindness and hemophilia in men. For the most part, though, gender differences are due to physiology or hormones, and sometimes to specific genes.

After three decades of treating both sexes, I have concluded that many men simply don't think to put doctor visits on their "to do" lists. They look upon going to a physician as some undesirable form of pampering, no matter how sick they are. In general, men are not all that good at taking care of their health, probably because they have not grown up with periodic medical exams.

Women, on the other hand, are comfortable with routine exams for gynecological checkups and pregnancy. Moreover, since women also tend to be the family

caregiver, making health care decisions for children and taking them to the doctor has typically been a mother's role.

The typical man will go for years without ever seeing a doctor. Men are not trained to think about early detection of disease. If men do not have any symptoms, they tend to think they are fine, so understandably it is hard to convince them to go in for basic screening tests for cholesterol, colon and prostate cancer, glaucoma, and diabetes. In addition, when symptoms of an ailment do occur, men will oftentimes ignore or underestimate them. They do their best to tough it out, often allowing a minor problem to escalate into something more risky before they finally consent to see a doctor.

Unfortunately, this traditional masculine pattern can be hazardous not only to their health but to the health of their partner. Here's how:

**Untreated erection problems:** It's often a sign of underlying heart disease, hypertension, or diabetes can make sex difficult, if not impossible, and can quickly drive a wedge in long-standing relationships, straining it to the breaking point.

**Sleep apnea:** With its nocturnal snoring and lapses in breathing, is not only harmful to the man, but will disrupt a woman's sleep, leaving her sleep-deprived and unable to function during the day.

**Untreated or poorly managed depression:** This can rip a relationship apart with its incapacitating profile of absence of joy and inability to function at work.

**Excessive drinking, drug abuse, and untreated hypertension:** These are ailments that can all trigger enough stress in the partner to cause a decline in her own health.

### **Common male-female differences**

#### **Women**

**Wellness:** Women have excellent "help-seeking behaviors": They visit doctors two to four times more than men do. Women also undergo more laboratory tests and examinations, receive more prescription drugs. Many calls to men's health hotlines are from women seeking information for their partners.

**Depression:** Major depression, dysthymia, and seasonal affective disorder are more common with women.

**Blood pressure:** Higher rates of hypertension, which places women at higher risk of stroke.

**Cancer:** Breast cancer is the most common form of cancer in women in the United States. This year, more than 175,000 new cases of female breast cancer will be diagnosed, and more than 40,000 women will die from the disease. Breast cancer is the second leading cause of cancer death for all women, and the leading cause of cancer death in all women between the ages of 40 and 55. Men also develop breast cancer and its symptoms are often much worse.

**Bones:** Osteoporosis, a thinning of the bones, which makes them fragile and brittle so that they fracture easily, is about eight times more common in women than men.

**Knees:** Knee problems are the most common type of sports injuries, and women experience more severe ruptures of the anterior cruciate ligament than men.

**Diabetes:** Diabetic women have higher risk of complications from coronary artery disease, the leading cause of death for those with diabetes; their circulation problems are more severe and can lead to amputation.

**Reproductive health:** Pregnancy increases the risk of diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, gallbladder disease, and postpartum depression.

**Chronic ailments:** Women have higher levels of eating disorders, incontinence, rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, and thyroid disorders.

**Alcohol consumption:** Women absorb more alcohol due to differences in their stomach lining and differences in the proportion of body fat to muscle tissue. Heavy drinkers are more likely to develop cirrhosis of the liver.

**Infection:** HIV negative women are more likely to be infected by their HIV-positive partners. The reverse is less likely.

**Medication:** Women react differently from men to the same drug dosages, probably due to body fat, liver metabolism, or hormones. This newly recognized health threat could lead to serious electrical abnormalities in the heart.

## **Men**

**Cancer:** One in three men develop some type of cancer. After skin cancer, cancer of the prostate is the most common cancer in American men (186,000 diagnosed annually) and is the second leading cause of cancer death (30,000 ) in men after lung cancer.

**Heart:** More men than women develop heart conditions, but after menopause, cardiac incidents in women increase significantly. Overall, 27 percent of men die within a year after a heart attack compared to 44 percent of women.

**Depression:** Rates are lower, compared to women, especially among married men

**Brain:** Men start out with bigger brains (though not always evident) but lose brain cells faster than women, leveling out, particularly in the frontal lobe, to be the same size as women by middle age.

**Pain:** Men synthesize seven times more of the neurotransmitter serotonin in their brains than women, making them less at risk for developing chronic pain syndromes.

**Suicide:** 80 percent are committed by men.

**Sexual dysfunction:** In men, related to erectile dysfunction or premature ejaculation. Women's issues are more complex, usually related to partner dissatisfaction and libido.

**Headaches:** Men develop half as many headaches as women.

**Gout:** More than 90 percent of gout sufferers are men over the age of 40, with the rest mostly post-menopausal women over age 65.

**Safety habits:** Men are less likely to wear seat belts, more likely to drive drunk (obviously, their larger brains aren't working).

**Snoring:** 85 percent of snorers are men. Sleep apnea, a serious health condition linked with snoring, is three times more prevalent in men than women.

### **Medical concerns men should not ignore**

Men live five years less than women (74.7 vs. 79.9) and are three times less likely to have visited a doctor in the previous year. Men need to report health problems and unusual symptoms immediately to their physician. Play it safe and see your doctor if you have any of the following symptoms:

- Erection problems
- Any change in your normal sleep pattern
- Unusual mood swings, including anxiety, racing thoughts, and depression
- Change in bowel habits
- Blood in the stool
- A persistent cough or hoarseness

- Difficulty swallowing
- Indigestion and the need to constantly use antacids
- Dizziness
- Shortness of breath
- Weight loss of 10 or more pounds for no reason
- Constant thirst
- Change in the appearance of a mole
- Unusual and persistent fatigue
- Headache accompanied by vomiting
- A lump in a testicle
- Pain in the jaw, arms, or back
- Coughing up blood
- Any lump under the skin

**The bottom line:** Forget the notion, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." It doesn't apply in medicine. Early health, which means taking preventive steps at the earliest possible time, is today's buzzword. Men need to step up to the plate and take responsibility for their health. Many people are depending on you, so let yourself become a patient, at least once a year. You'll sleep better—and so will your spouse.

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