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# House Call

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IDGP Community  
Committee

The Illawarra Division of General Practice (IDGP) is an organisation which supports and represents General Practitioners. It was developed to provide opportunities for GPs to work with their local colleagues, consumers and other health or community services. It aims to achieve wider health improvements in the community.

## Inside this issue:

Editorial	1
Bowel Cancer	2
Carers Support Unit	2
Looking After Yourself - Diabetes	3
Breast Cancer & Screening	3
Health Information on the Internet	4

Newsletter of the Community Consultative Committee of the IDGP

## Editorial

The best person to look after your health is, of course, you. You can eat well, keep up your exercise, keep stimulated and generally look after yourself better than anyone else. Obviously, you cannot really prescribe your own medication nor can you perform surgery or even decide whether surgery is necessary. Nevertheless, you can treat minor conditions with common-sense approaches and you can certainly try to avoid more serious health problems.

This issue of House Call concentrates on how to be healthy by helping yourself. "Prevention is always better than a cure", so encouraging yourself to follow a healthy lifestyle makes good sense. For example, the medical evidence linking heart disease and smoking is clear, so try to avoid smoking. Another cliché, "Use it or lose it" is also true, so people suffering from arthritis would benefit greatly from regular exercise. There are

so many examples of actions that can help prevent the onset of health problems and never before have we had so much information available about how to keep ourselves healthy. Why on earth are we too busy to look after ourselves?



*By House Call Editor and Consumer Representative Helen Gapps*

Prevention is also achieved by recognising the warning signs early and taking appropriate action then, not later. In the following newsletter articles you will recognise some of the warning signs which are associated with particular health conditions.

Another good way to stay healthy is to recognise the risk factors. Prolonged hasty grabbing of fast food can cause obesity and even some forms of malnutrition; smoking is associated with lung cancer and heart disease and the list goes on and on. What GPs and health workers advocate then is to know what the risk factors for poor health are and to try to avoid them. Recognise the warning signs and take action early and, most of all, try to prevent health problems rather than spend time, money and energy on curing afterwards.

Sensible readers know all of the above. Now we have to encourage everyone else in the community, particularly young people, to follow healthy lifestyles. Finally, a small word of warning from the community committee members: be discerning about health information on the Internet. Some of it may contradict good practice and some of it may be wrong.

Bowel Cancer is the most common cancer in Australia after skin cancer. Each year more than 11,000 people are diagnosed with bowel cancer and around 4,500 people die from it.

The good news is that, if detected early, bowel cancer is the most curable cancer. There is a 90% chance of a cure if it is found and treated early. There are also some things you can do to reduce your chances of getting bowel cancer.

## Prevention

- *A diet high in vegetables, fruit and fibre can reduce risk of bowel cancer.* Eating plenty of bread, pasta, rice and other cereals – especially wholegrain foods – can also help protect you against bowel cancer. Wholegrain foods contain dietary fibre, resistant starch and natural protective substances such as antioxidants, in much higher quantities than more refined versions of the same food.
- It is recommended that you lower your intake of fat, salt and preserved foods and if you drink alcohol only do so in moderation.
- *Be physically active.* Studies have shown that regular physical activity lowers the risk of bowel cancer. If you are inactive, any increase is beneficial.

## See your GP if you have any of the following:

- The most important sign to look for is blood in the bowel motion or the toilet bowl. If you are over 50 check the toilet bowl and toilet paper after each bowel motion.
- If you have any changes in your toilet habits lasting more than 2 weeks.
- If one or more of your close relatives have had bowel cancer.
- You have had bowel polyps (small growths) or bowel cancer.
- You have had inflammatory bowel disease such as ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease for more than eight years.
- You are a member of a family with Familial Adenomatous Polyposis (FAP) or another family bowel cancer syndrome.

## Finding bowel cancer early

Some people are shy about discussing bowel cancer, but it is important not to let your embarrassment keep you from having life-saving checks. Finding bowel cancer early is the most important factor in beating this disease.

## Screening

It is recommended that those over 50 have a simple test each year to detect any signs of bowel cancer. The test can save lives. It is called a faecal occult blood test (FOBT) and can detect tiny amounts of blood in your faeces. You can get an FOBT kit from GPs and some chemists. A positive test doesn't necessarily mean you have bowel cancer. Most people who have blood in their faeces have it for some other reason, such as piles. It will only be cancer in a few cases. To find out for sure you will need more tests, such as a colonoscopy where a doctor looks in your bowel through a tube, and takes a sample for testing.

During March each year Rotary runs a bowel-screening program when they sell kits, usually at a cheaper than normal price.

## What if I have a family history of bowel cancer?

If your mother, father, brother or sister has had bowel cancer, you could be at higher risk, even if you're under 50. Talk to your doctor about it. It may be best for you to have a colonoscopy every couple of years, to look very carefully for early bowel cancers. If this is the case for you, FOBT can't take the place of regular colonoscopies.

For more information talk to your GP or call the Cancer Helpline on 13 11 20.

**Noreen Byrne**  
Regional Programs Coordinator  
Cancer Council NSW

## Carers Support Unit

**“Drop in centre” for people who care for someone with a mental illness.**

**Open:** Fridays 10am – 12.30pm

**Where:** upstairs in the Bulli Resource Centre.

You are welcome to come in and have a cuppa and chat, or take advantage of the resources that are available.

**“Well Ways”** is a course for all interested families, friends and carers of people with a mental illness. The course will commence in March, consisting of weekly sessions lasting 2.5 hours and will run for eight consecutive weeks during the day. It is styled around informal workshops involving group discussions, videos and practical demonstrations. The program provides a broad and sensitive perspective to the many issues facing families as they manage the impact of mental illness on their lives.

For more information, please contact Toni Garretty on 4285 0155 or 0422 406 616.

# Looking After Yourself – Preventing Type 2 Diabetes

In Australia, a startling 1 in 4 adults aged 25 and over has type 2 diabetes or 'pre-diabetes'. With much of the focus on diabetes we thought we would focus on the so called 'pre-diabetes' and what can be done to prevent or control it.

'Pre-diabetes' is a term used to describe two conditions - Impaired Glucose Tolerance (IGT) and Impaired Fasting Glucose (IFG). Although these conditions are not "full blown" diabetes they need to be taken seriously because they can lead to type 2 diabetes and a greater risk of heart disease.

It is possible to have these conditions and not have any symptoms. Illawarra resident Beverly Taylor is someone who knows first hand just how sneaky IGT and IFG can be. She visited her GP because she was feeling a little unwell and was shocked to learn she had Impaired Glucose Tolerance. She now advises all her friends around her own age to ask their GP to test their blood sugar levels because she says, "it's no use saying it won't happen to you". Beverly believes that her generation today has to face the reality of this problem. "Gone are the days when you could ignore your health," she said.

People with pre-diabetes can do plenty to stop IGT and IFG from developing into type 2 diabetes. Research clearly shows that regular exercise and a healthy diet are more effective than medication. Beverly advises that as well as watching what you eat, it is vital to take regular exercise. "If you don't look after your body you will lose it," she says. She also says that people should follow the advice given by the GP or diabetes educator. "If you don't do what they say you are wasting their time and yours," said Beverly.

## What can you do?

### See your GP for a simple blood test if you are:

- Aged over 45 and very overweight or have high blood pressure or have a close relative with type 2 diabetes.
- Aged over 55, women who have had gestational diabetes, "pre diabetes", cardiovascular disease, women with polycystic ovary syndrome who are obese.
- In a high risk group: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders aged over 35, Pacific Islanders, Chinese and people from the Indian subcontinent.

### Keep to a healthy weight for your height:

- Eat a varied diet which is low in fat (especially saturated fat, which is mostly from animal products), with plenty of fruit, vegetables, wholegrains and legumes
- Exercise regularly. Thirty minutes of brisk walking on all or most days of the week or several 10 minute bursts through the day is all you need. It helps you to control your weight and process insulin properly.
- A low GI (Glycemic Index) diet assists weight loss and blood sugar control.
- See your GP for a checkup and to obtain advice about weight loss and/or referral to a dietitian.

If you have type 2 diabetes already, even if you are feeling well, it is vital that you follow a program of health checks, physical activity and sensible eating to maintain your wellbeing and reduce your chances of developing complications. Diabetes has potential complications such as heart attack, high blood pressure, kidney disease and sight loss. See your GP for further information.

## Breast Cancer & Screening

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in women in NSW and the most common cause of female cancer death. We do not know what causes breast cancer so we are unable to prevent the illness from developing. This means that it is very important to find breast cancer in the earliest stages when it is very tiny and easy to treat. Currently mammograms (breast X-rays) are the most effective tool we have for doing this.

BreastScreen NSW provides free mammograms for women aged 40 years and over. The risk of developing breast cancer increases with age and women in the 50 – 69 year age groups are actively encouraged to join the BreastScreen program.

The program is free and women do not need a doctor's referral to have a mammogram with BreastScreen. All the radiographers are female and especially trained in mammography. Women receive their results within ten working days and are sent a reminder when they are due for their mammogram in two years time. Follow-up of women with screen-detected abnormalities takes place in weekly clinics.

BreastScreen NSW have recently moved to a convenient location in Wollongong. Many women have already attended the new unit at 299 Crown St and feedback about the new

premises has been overwhelmingly positive.

Other BreastScreen units in the Illawarra are located at Shellharbour Square and in the Standish Medical Centre in Berry St, Nowra. Women who would like to join the program can do so by phoning 13 20 50 to make an appointment at a time convenient to them.

## What else can I do?

A screening mammogram detects most, but not all, breast cancers. Therefore:

- Have a screening mammogram with BreastScreen NSW every two years if you are aged 50 - 69.
- Have a clinical breast examination by your doctor or women's health nurse once every year.
- See your doctor immediately if you notice any unusual changes in your breasts, such as lumps, pain or nipple discharge, even if your screening mammogram has been normal.

**Kerrie Deville**

**Health Promotion Officer**

**BreastScreen NSW, Southern Sydney & Illawarra**

**Ph: 4225 9700**

# Health Information on the Internet

For consumers in this day and age there seems to be an ever increasing amount of information we can access through the Internet. The Internet can be a great resource for information on health topics and issues, but how do we know what we are reading is accurate and reliable?

The Consumers' Health Forum of Australia (CHF), published an article in their newsletter *The Australian Health Consumer* No. 2, 2002, about "Assessing health information on the Internet" written by Helen Hopkins and Sarah Fogg. Below are some extracts from this article that provide some tips on how to assess the credibility of the information we are reading on the Internet:

## **What consumers value about Internet health information:**

- It provides timely and convenient access at the time the consumer wants the information or has the time to consider it;
- The depth and breadth of information, so that a person can find the information they want, from plain English summaries through to detailed information on specific subjects;
- Information about health options, including medical and non-medical information and where to find help or contact other consumers;
- Consumers also liked the way they could learn from other consumers' experiences with the same condition or undergoing the same treatment.

## **Concerns about Internet health information:**

- The quality of information and which health information sites are trustworthy;
- Misleading or inaccurate information which may lead to negative health outcomes. Such information may be incomplete or unbalanced – e.g. sites that leave out information that is important to consumers and sites that tend to favour one type of treatment over others;
- The sheer amount of information being overwhelming. Information overload, particularly for beginners.

## **Ways to assess the credibility of the information:**

The most frequently mentioned features of a good Internet site for health information were:

- Ease of access and navigation, clear presentation
- Use of appropriate language
- Completeness of the information
- Ways to assess the credibility of the information provided.

A good website provides information about itself and who is behind it, and the actual author's professional background and/or qualifications. It includes appropriate details about the source of the information contained. It also shows clearly when it was written and updated and includes current, up-to-date information.

Preferably, the site is connected with, or information is provided by, an organisation or individual with an existing good reputation in the real world, such as government regulators, professional colleges, universities and research institutes or known not-for-profit organisations.

There is some difference of opinion about the provision of references as a way to assess the credibility of the information, as consumers may not know how much weight to attach to references and indeed, might be misled by an apparently

impressive list of references. Other ways of crosschecking or verifying the information include, looking for links to other sites for the complete reference, or links to and from other known credible sites, or endorsement by a known authority.

Guidance about the amount and type of evidence available for particular statements and treatment options, including whether there is negative or limited evidence, or research has not been done, is also important.

Some useful websites that have health information are:

## **HealthInsite** [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

- a website set up by the Department of Health and Ageing that provides links to up-to-date information on particular health topics. To be linked to this website, the organisation and their webpages have to be assessed as meeting certain standards of quality.

## **Informed Health Online** [www.informedhealthonline.org](http://www.informedhealthonline.org)

- a website produced by the Health Research and Education Foundation that provides up-to-date evidence based health information. Information on this website complies with guidelines about reliability and credibility of health information.

***It is important to always remember that information you find on the Internet should never substitute medical advice. If you have any concerns or questions about your health, please see your doctor.***

## **Illawarra Division of General Practice Community Consultative Committee**

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