

IF YOU'RE A GUY, CHANCES ARE AT SOME POINT in your life someone—probably another man—has said to you: 'walk it off' or 'suck up and deal.'

This kind of full-throttle macho attitude may help you get back on the soccer or football field after a few minor scrapes and bruises. But for serious medical problems, especially those common in men as they age, downplaying symptoms will only end up getting you cut from the game sooner—the game of life, that is.

So what is it about men that makes them so reluctant to take care of their own health? It's certainly not a question of understanding the need to deal with problems early.

» WRITTEN BY SHAWN RADCLIFFE

IS MANHOOD KILLING MEN?



“We all take our cars to be repaired, we do oil changes. We know the roof needs to be fixed, the gutters need to be taken care of,” said Dr. John Verheul, a family doctor in a private practice in the Richmond, Virginia, area affiliated with SignatureMD. “We all know the importance of prevention, but when it comes to ourselves, we’re somewhat more reticent.”

In a very real way, the reluctance of men to take their own health seriously is killing them. Some of the most common illnesses affecting men can be caught early with screenings, like blood pressure and cholesterol for heart disease, and checks for colon or skin cancer.

“But doctors can’t do screenings if men aren’t in their offices,” said Dr. Will Courtenay, a psychotherapist, researcher and author of the book “Dying to Be Men” “So men don’t get screened—and don’t get diagnosed.”

While not all men live up to the ‘real men don’t need a doctor’ adage, there’s a very macho grain of truth lurking beneath it. Courtenay’s own research clearly tells the score:

- ▶ Twice as many men as women have no regular source of health care
- ▶ More than twice as many men as women have not visited a doctor in two to five years
- ▶ Among adults aged 18 to 64 years, women make over one-and-a-half times more doctor visits than men

And not only do men visit the doctor less frequently than women, but they also put it off even when concerned about their health.

According to Courtenay, 1 in 4 men surveyed nationally admitted to waiting as long as possible to see a doctor if he was sick or in pain.

WHY DO MEN AVOID THE DOCTOR?

Understanding the male psyche has never been easy. The same is true when it comes to figuring out why men avoid the doctor—and how to encourage them to treat their bodies with the same respect they give their car or truck.

“There are so many factors that undermine men getting to the doctor,” said Courtenay, but “being a ‘real man’ is probably the biggest barrier between a man and his doctor.”

This macho attitude comes to the forefront when a man brags about not going to the doctor in years. Or when he ignores physical symptoms and goes to work just like any other day.

“There’s no doubt that the macho syndrome is a big issue,” said Verheul. “Maybe that goes all the way down into our DNA as guys.”

As Verheul describes it, men can be very primitive in the way they approach their health. Like animals defending their territory, men are sometimes afraid to show any sign of weakness. So for men, admitting that they need help is the same as admitting defeat.

There’s also a strong cultural myth in our society that men are the “stronger sex.” This has led to a sense of invincibility among men, even when it comes to common physical issues like diabetes or heart disease.

Over time, the belief that ‘men don’t go to the doctor’ has simply ended up reinforcing this kind of behavior in men.

“The problem with this belief,” said Courtenay, “is that many men take it as gospel as to what they’re supposed to do—and it discourages men from seeking help.”

But while men are often concerned about following what society says they should or shouldn’t do, they still care about being healthy—even if they don’t always show it.

“Most men are concerned about their health, but they think that most other men aren’t,” said Courtenay. “That leaves men feeling like they shouldn’t be concerned about their own health.”

And as men age—and their body starts to show signs of wear and tear—some of these attitudes may also shift.

“Younger guys will wait until there’s something wrong, and even then come in a lot of times unwillingly,” said Dr. Frederick Lennon, who has a concierge practice in Fairfax, Virginia, through Concierge Choice Physicians. “But the older we get, we reach a point in life where we sort of realize we’re not going to last forever.”



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+ BREAKING FREE OF MANLY ATTITUDES

In order for men to take charge of their own health, they need to break free of some of the personal and societal beliefs that have been instilled in them since childhood.

“It’s critical that men learn that others are concerned about their health, and that they’re seeing doctors,” said Courtenay. “As men increasingly recognize this, they’ll be getting to the doctor sooner because it will be seen as what men do.”

This means letting go of ‘traditional’ beliefs about manhood, but it also means men need to face their own fears.

“We may think guys are tough,” said Courtenay, “but nearly half of American men say that doctor visits make them nervous, anxious or scared—and their biggest fear is finding out they have a serious health problem.”

Doctors may never be able to convince

a guy to show up for a visit, but a spouse can certainly help. In fact, some research has shown that married men are healthier and live longer than single men.

This could be the result of a spouse doing things like making sure a man takes his meds or shows up for a follow-up appointment, cooking healthy meals or encouraging him to exercise regularly. Or just educating him about the importance of seeing a doctor regularly.

This approach is never easy. Women need to avoid pressuring him to visit the doctor before he’s ready.

“If a man doesn’t want to see a doctor, don’t give him an ultimatum,” said April Masini, author of the “Ask April” advice column.

Masini also suggests women get creative with how they handle the subject of their man’s health.

“I advise women who are concerned about health issues their men possess to back away

from being the mother figure, and instead, make it a dual appointment,” she said. “Get joint physical exams and go have a nice dinner afterwards.”

But men shouldn’t wait until they are really sick to find a primary care doctor. You only take your car to a mechanic you trust, so you want a doctor you are comfortable talking to about your most personal health problems.

“Doctors build a relationship with a patient,” said Lennon, “which makes patients more likely to come in for something that they might not otherwise come in for.”

It may take a long time before men no longer have to ‘walk it off,’ but already there are signs that male culture is changing.

“Thirty years ago this whole machismo thing was so much more important,” said Verheul. “I think society is slowly changing and understanding that guys are allowed to be human beings.”



STEVEN B. HOPSON, M.D., F.A.C.S., Director



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