



# Health Matters

Great Smokies Medical Center of Asheville

A small, occasional publication

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## An Integrative Medical Model of Health Assessment

### Mainstream Medical Assessment

Mainstream medicine does a good job of providing healthcare and does so in a system that requires doctors to see patients in 10-15 minute appointments. Americans who see their mainstream doctor for a non-urgent health concern will likely receive a brief physical exam and lab tests to evaluate their concerns, followed by reassurance or, if needed, further evaluation.



About 80 percent of Americans are prescribed drugs at doctor visits. For many, an office visit just isn't complete without a prescription (Rx). Surveys show that being prescribed an Rx results in higher levels of patient satisfaction (the same level from being listened to, however, even without an Rx). Educating patients (e.g., re: the development of super strains of bacteria from overuse of antibiotics) takes time.

### Integrative Medical Assessment

Integrative medicine uses mainstream medical approaches and also strives to determine underlying causes of symptoms and diseases that burden patients' biology. Investigating stressors on health takes time—1 to 1½ hour initial appointments are common to allow integrative practitioners to take their patients' histories and conduct complete physical exams. The process and the information gathered give a unique view of a person and his biology, not only his disease. Integrative medicine is not one-size-fits-all.

The age-old holistic principles governing biology have never been more relevant than they are today. All diseases have roots in non-negotiable biological certainties, even today when the end-stages of disease are often dealt with heroically by using modern medicine's machinery and newest drugs.

The body's connected and holistic nature is apparent in the words, "Multiple symptoms have common causes."

### Impaired Immunity

The immune system is the "neighborhood cop" of the body, walking its beat 24/7. The immune system is responsible for the important task of running surveillance on and defending the body against toxic and infectious threats and inflammation. A chronically over-burdened immune system can contribute to the breakdown of general health, a fact that makes defining immune system stressors important in an integrative health model.

Immune system stressors considered in an integrative medical assessment at GSMC include environmental exposures (toxins, including heavy metals), nutritional deficiencies, delayed food allergies, hormonal imbalances, impaired digestion, low-grade chronic infections, and dental health. (over)

## Polypharmacy, n., [pol-ee-fahr-muh-see]

### Pill Popping Population

The caduceus, the age-old symbol of the medical profession, may soon be replaced by a newer icon: the prescription pad. More than 3.3 billion prescriptions were filled in America in 2002—that's 12 for every man, woman, and child.

Americans are increasingly turning to prescription drugs to help them go to sleep, have sex, wake up, relax, lose weight, boost energy, and feel good. And these are all in addition to drugs prescribed to treat other health problems. The collective American psyche has tapped into the allure of the "quick fix" suggested by an average of 23 hours per year of televised direct-to-consumer drug advertisements that are targeted to would-be consumers, most often viewers of the evening news.

An article in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) in 2006 stated that 106,000 deaths occur each year in U.S. hospitals from negative side effects of *properly administered* drugs.

### Polypharmacy

Polypharmacy is a designer word recently crafted to describe the risk-laden use of unnecessarily numerous or complex prescription drugs by an individual who often has numerous health problems and consults with several doctors.

The price to pay for polypharmacy includes increased adverse drug reactions and risks of drug-drug interactions that now involve so many drugs that they can't be studied adequately. Treating side effects of drugs with more drugs can result in not being able to tell whether symptoms are "real" or side effects.

### Geriatric Polypharmacy

An estimated 38,000,000 U.S. seniors are most at risk for the adverse effects from polypharmacy. On average, U.S. seniors aged 65 to 69 take 14 prescriptions per year, and those aged 80 to 84 take 18 prescriptions per year.



Seniors live longer now than ever before and have more chronic diseases that are unique to aging—diseases for which many drugs have been specifically developed and marketed. Seniors are vulnerable to developing side effects as a result of their metabolizing drugs more slowly than younger people, taking drugs incorrectly due to forgetfulness and confusion (which are also side effects of many drugs), and not recognizing or reporting side effects. (over)

## Integrative Health Assessment, cont.

### Nutritional Deficiencies

All biological processes require nutrients –vitamins, minerals, amino acids, etc. Identifying and replenishing depleted nutrients can significantly improve how people feel and function. Measuring anti-oxidant status can determine if cells are being silently damaged by oxidation and can point to treatments to protect health.

### Impaired Digestion/Food Allergies

The importance of digestion in general health is too seldom considered in modern medicine. Given that people eat every day and that the digestive system has to break down food so nutrients can be absorbed, impaired digestion (including insufficient hydrochloric acid and digestive enzymes) is a common contributor to poor health.

Lack of beneficial bacteria (probiotics) and the presence of pathogenic bacteria and parasites affect general health over time by taxing the immune system.

A comprehensive digestive stool analysis can help define digestive abnormalities.

Delayed food allergy has been addressed in a previous issue of Health Matters: <http://www.gsmcweb.com/wp-content/HealthMattersJulAugSep2008.pdf>.

### Toxins

Environmental chemical exposures (e.g., pesticides, industrial runoffs and stack emissions) that are in our water, air, and food supplies, in addition to an expanding grid of wired and wireless energy, moldy homes, etc., are inescapable parts of everyday life in the 21st century. They do not support health and can seriously undermine it in susceptible persons. Identifying toxic exposures and hypersensitivities can lead to treatment through detoxification, desensitization, and immune system support.

The body burden of heavy metals impacts cardiovascular, immune, neurological, skeletal, and endocrine (especially thyroid) health. Detoxifying heavy metals (mercury, lead, aluminum, etc.) with chelation therapy, though best known for treating heart blockage, benefits general health at the same time.

### Infections/Yeast

Identifying chronic, low-grade, or hidden infections, in particular the overgrowth of yeast (*Candida albicans*), which can have particularly widespread effects on overall health, is the first step to treating these triggers of impaired immunity.

### Hormone Imbalances

Hormones affect the health of every organ and tissue, and especially impact immunity, energy, mental performance, and mood. Identifying thyroid, adrenal, and sex hormone imbalances is often part of an integrative health assessment.

### Dental Health

Today, biologically-trained dentists know what their professional predecessors have known for years: that poor oral and dental health can trigger general health problems. Even so, the mouth is routinely overlooked as a cause of immune stress and health problems. Periodontal disease and metals in mercury amalgams are two dental issues often considered in an integrative health assessment.

## Polypharmacy, cont.

### Pain and Psychotropic Medications

The facts that women receive more healthcare and take more psychotropic drugs (those affecting behavior, emotions, and mood) than men, puts them at greater risk for polypharmacy's effects.

Aside from recreational drug use, for many, the use of prescription pain killers begins innocently enough after surgery or injury. Rx drug use can escalate to abuse, especially when used combined with other mood-altering substances—a practice that can be fatal. Too often the media reports accidental deaths of celebrities who overdose on these toxic drug cocktails. These reports are the tip of an iceberg of far less famous people who abuse Rx drugs and whose deaths won't be reported on the evening news.

### Pediatric Polypharmacy

Children are increasingly exposed to psychotropic drugs, often as a result of treating behavioral or attention deficit disorders with mood-altering drugs, especially for depression. Adding the indiscretion of youth to experimentation with combining alcohol, street drugs, and Rx drugs is a proven formula for disaster for developing bodies and minds.

### Prevention and Natural Alternatives

The fix for Americans' reliance on drugs for what ails them is multifaceted. Awareness and education of healthcare providers and consumers are needed to foster wiser and safer use of drugs.

The immune system relies on nutrients to combat the four enemies of healing: infection, inflammation, pain, and stress. Healing from surgery or injury can be dramatically enhanced by IV nutrient therapies or pre- and post-surgical oral nutrient protocols designed to support the body's innate ability to heal itself. Chiropractic, homeopathy, meditation, healing touch, etc. can decrease pain and the use of pain medications.

When possible, taking psychotropic drugs short term, rather than long term, limits their adverse effects. Proactive self-monitoring and addressing causes of stress can help prevent overwhelming emotional states. Cognitive therapy, relaxation, and exercise, in addition to neurotransmitter balancing and stress reduction are examples of drug-free treatments for mood disorders. The health benefits of making lifestyle changes (improving diet, sleep and exercise) are too often underestimated.

Geriatric patients are advised to keep a current list of Rx drugs to show every doctor they see. Seniors or their caretakers should communicate any concerns about their Rx drugs to their physicians or pharmacists.

### Precaution

Medical supervision is advised when stopping any drug. Some drugs are absolutely necessary and should not be stopped. Others should not be stopped suddenly. The best solution for some health problems for some people may be drugs. People who take numerous prescription drugs are advised to consult their doctors to help determine whether all their drugs are necessary.

### Biology First, Pharmacology Second

GSMC's practitioners are guided by the principle "Biology first, pharmacology second," i.e., first using low-risk therapies to support health and then using drugs to treat disease. They do not treat drug addiction, are not anti-drug, and advocate the safe, conservative use of prescription drugs.

**All content in this newsletter is intended to be informational and is not to be taken as medical advice or to replace medical care.**