

## What Keeps Me Healthy?

Three broad themes have been put forward as having a bearing on our health. These include: the social determinants of health, the health care system and individual choice. The social determinants of health are believed by many to be the prime explanation for why people are healthy. These determinants include: genetics (healthy family history), education, secure housing, employment, social and community connections, and access to good nutrition and preventive care. Sadly, there is strong evidence that lower levels of education lead to more poverty and poverty leads to poorer health. Encouraging young people to stay in school, and offering upgrading programs for adults will result in a healthier population, as will ensuring adequate affordable housing is available.

The health care system is also thought by many as the reason we are kept healthy, yet with the exception of preventive health services (e.g. immunization, prenatal care, early screening for disease), this system is usually accessed only after our health has broken down in some way, and is sought out for treatment or cure.

That leaves individual choice...what we each choose to do to promote and preserve our own health...and of course many think that this is the key to why we are healthy. Not wanting to argue these various points, I think we can see how each of these three broad themes impact upon us throughout our lives, and how they all interact to affect our health.

Take genetics. We may have a family history of early heart disease, but knowing this we can go for regular medical check-ups and blood pressure screening, eat nutritious heart healthy foods, exercise, get enough sleep and take measures to avoid stress. We may have a parent or sibling who has depression, so need to be mindful of symptoms, and consult a health care professional for treatment if needed. As well, good nutrition, exercise, sleep, and stress reducers like sports and socializing can help to keep us mentally healthy.

It has been said that “everything I need to know I learned in kindergarten”, and there is some truth in that. We seek miracle cures, but neglect the basics that we all know really are the answer to many of our health problems. Perhaps we find the solutions boring: limit your alcohol, don’t smoke, wear a bike helmet, don’t drive when you are too tired, have been drinking, or are ‘texting’, choose healthy foods and find time for ‘fun’. But these ‘boring little suggestions’ will go a very long way to keeping you healthy.

Yet there are times when despite having an education, secure housing, good food, and employment, and even though we practice good health habits and have strong community connections, we do acquire an illness or disease, and will be grateful for the presence of a first rate health care system, with access to physicians, pharmacists, physiotherapists, nurses and hospitals. For most of us, we hope such times will be just a short break in our healthy lives, but we definitely want to have this system available to us when needed.

So, what do you think keeps you healthy?

*This article was written by Janet Fowler, member of the Open Mind Committee and a retired public health nurse.*

*The “Open Mind” column is sponsored by individuals and organizations concerned with mental health issues in rural Wellington and Dufferin counties. Contact Canadian Mental Health Association at 519-766-4450 ext. 231 or [parkinsons@cmhagrb.on.ca](mailto:parkinsons@cmhagrb.on.ca). For access to all Open Mind columns and local mental health resources/ information, visit [www.cmhagrb.on.ca](http://www.cmhagrb.on.ca) or [www.communitytorchlight.com](http://www.communitytorchlight.com)*