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Symptoms That May Trip Up Even Top Docs

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By Lewis, Kristyn Kusek

A lump in your breast. A flutter in your chest. You know to hightail it to your doctor if you experience these symptoms. But some common illnesses are so difficult to spot that many women-and even their doctors-may miss them. "It's crucial to familiarize yourself with the warning signs so you can bring them to your physician's attention," says Phyllis Greenberger, president and CEO of the Society for Women's Health Research in Washington, D.C., and a Shape advisory board member. Take control of your health by learning more about the following four often-overlooked diseases and how you can lower your risk. IF YOU HAVE...

Insomnia, melancholy, loss of appetite

IT COULD BE: Depression

Everyone's battled a bout of the blues, which makes it easy for many women to write off a glum mood. But symptoms that persist for at least two weeks may signal depression, a disease that affects more than 12 million women.

Caused by an imbalance in your brain chemistry, depression has been shown to quadruple your risk for heart disease, reports the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). Doctors aren't sure why there's a link, but some research suggests mental distress causes blood platelets to clump together, increasing the risk for high blood pressure and clots. "Depression also causes your body to pump out stress hormones at a high rate, which, over time, can weaken bones and raise your chances of developing osteoporosis," says Esther Sternberg, M.D., a researcher for the NIMH. If you've been experiencing symptoms for a few weeks, ask your physician for a referral to a mental-health professional.

WHAT'S YOUR RISK? Everything from low self-esteem to hormonal changes increases the risk; depression can also be triggered by a specific experience, such as the loss of a loved one. Assess your odds with a test at ndmda.org.

PROTECT YOURSELF

* Take a trip down memory lane Ten minutes of reminiscing twice a day can raise flagging spirits, finds a study from Loyola University in Chicago. "Reflecting on meaningful times in your life prevents you from feeling bogged down by everyday worries," explains study author Fred Bryant, Ph.D.

* Stop smoking As if you needed another reason to quit, a new Finnish study reports that longtime smokers (those who have smoked for five or more years) are more likely to suffer from depression than those who never light up.

* See your doc if you snore It can be a sign of sleep apnea, a condition marked by disrupted breathing that's five times more common in people with depression, according to a Stanford University study.

IF YOU HAVE...

Fatigue, achy joints, fever, a rash

IT COULD BE: Lupus

Because the most common signs of lupus mimic the signs of so many other familiar conditions, it takes an average of three to five years for someone with this chronic autoimmune disorder to be diagnosed. "Lupus causes the immune system to lose the ability to distinguish foreign substances from normal cells," explains Dawn Isherwood, R.N., the health educator for the Lupus Foundation of America in Washington, D.C. "So the body creates antibodies that attack healthy cells." As a result, sufferers experience chronic inflammation, especially in the joints and surrounding tissues, which triggers an attack, called a "flare." It can be mild to crippling and occur as often as once a week or as rarely as once every few years. "Women with lupus often go to their doctors with different complaints," says Isherwood. Other signs may include muscle pain, extreme fatigue, swollen glands, and hair loss. "Because symptoms come and go, it's kind of like watching a Polaroid develop-it takes a long time for the whole picture to come into focus."

But it's critical to get diagnosed early, because the consequences of the disease can be life-threatening. The inflammation raises the risk of heart disease tenfold and kidney disease by 50 percent, and it can damage several other areas of the body, including the brain, lungs, and skin. Although there's no known cure for lupus, there are medications to manage flares and treat symptoms, such as steroids, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs like ibuprofen and naproxen, antimalarial drugs, and immunosuppressive drugs to relieve pain and lower the risk of damage to your organs and joints.

WHAT'S YOUR RISK? Lupus primarily strikes women between the ages of 15 and 45; in fact, females make up 90 percent of the 1.5 million people with the disease. To assess your odds, answer the questionnaire at lupus.org.

PROTECT YOURSELF

* Know your family history Research suggests that the illness, along with other common autoimmune disorders like rheumatoid arthritis, may be hereditary. So if you have a relative with lupus, be sure to mention it to your physician.

* See the right expert Since there's no simple test to screen for lupus, doctors must piece together symptoms to make a diagnosis. Rheumatologists, physicians who specialize in treating arthritis and certain autoimmune disorders, are more likely to spot the signs than general practitioners are.

* Let go of little worries It's hard not to focus on things that make us anxious, but day-to-day stressors can make lupus symptoms worse, according to a study from the University of Granada. "Chronic tension may increase the levels of hormones that trigger flares or exacerbate them," says Isherwood. "Techniques to reduce stress, such as deep breathing and exercise, can make a huge difference."

IF YOU HAVE...

A nagging cough, chest tightness



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IT COULD BE: Asthma

You might chalk up your respiratory problems to allergies or a cold, but if they linger, asthma may be the cause. Also characterized by wheezing, the disease is caused by a chronic inflammation of the walls of the airways inside your lungs. "Most people associate asthma with sudden attacks, which is common in childhood cases," says Andy Nish, M.D., an allergist in Gainesville, Georgia. "But among adults, the symptoms may be persistent and less obvious."

The bulk of adult-onset cases are caused by allergies, such as those to pet dander, dust mites, and pollen. Exercise can trigger symptoms in about 80 percent of those with asthma; for some people it's the only time they experience problems.

If you have symptoms that last more than two weeks, or if it's hard for you to breathe, see an allergist who can do an evaluation and prescribe medication, such as an inhaled steroid. Left untreated, asthma can lead to sleep problems, pregnancy complications, and even heart disease.

WHATS YOUR RISK? Women are 33 percent more likely than men to have the disease, which affects 20 million adults. If you have a history of allergies, your chances of getting asthma are higher. Experts have also linked the disease to obesity-extra weight may reduce your lung capacity, making you more susceptible.

PROTECT YOURSELF

* Eat an apple a day A recent Harvard School of Public Health study found that eating less than one and a half cups of fruit-the recommended daily intake-is associated with symptoms like wheezing.

* Make mold history Inhaling the spores of these fungi growths are a big asthma trigger. Mold may be lurking in minuscule amounts in and around your shower. To get rid of it, scrub bathrooms at least once every two weeks.

* Warm up before you work out

Before starting your normal run, do a few 30-second sprints. A new study from Indiana University in Bloomington found that this kind of pre-workout routine can reduce the airway-tightening that occurs in asthmatics during exercise by as much as 50 percent.

IF YOU HAVE

Excessive thirst, fatigue, hunger

IT COULD BE: Type 2 diabetes

Nearly a third of the almost 10 million women with the disease don't know it. That's because if the signs, which include an increased need to urinate, are present, they may be easy to overlook. But without proper treatment, diabetes can prove deadly. Two out of three diabetics die from heart disease or stroke-in fact, research from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge shows that diabetic women between the ages of 18 and 44 are 14 times more likely to have either condition than nondiabetics are.

Type 2 diabetes occurs when your body doesn't make enough insulin or use it efficiently to control your blood sugar (glucose) levels. This can adversely affect your nervous system, heart, eyes, and more.

WHATS YOUR RISK? If you're overweight, ask your doctor about getting a blood sugar test. Having a body mass index of 30 or higher means you have a 55 percent greater likelihood of developing type 2 diabetes than someone who is slender. "The upside is that losing weight is often enough to prevent the disease or even reverse it," says Larry Deeb, M.D., the president of medicine and science for the American Diabetes Association. If slimming down doesn't lower your glucose levels, an oral medication (like metformin) may be prescribed. People with a family history of diabetes are at an increased risk, as are women who had gestational diabetes, or high glucose levels during pregnancy.

PROTECT YOURSELF

* Change your diet Research has shown that eating more fruit, vegetables, and beans-and less white flour and sugar-can help prevent or control diabetes. A new Harvard study found that women who consumed at least two and a half servings of whole grains a day were 32 percent less likely to develop the disease than those who ate less than half a portion daily. Getting more dairy may also help: According to a new review from Tufts University in Boston, the vitamin D and calcium in milk may reduce the risk of developing diabetes by up to 15 percent. * Schedule a dental cleaning Gum disease can trigger diabetes, according to a new study by researchers at the University of Copenhagen in Denmark. Although it's not clear why, gum disease seems to interfere with the body's ability to control blood sugar. The most common sign of gum disease is tender gums that bleed easily.

* Do an emotional checkup A Northwestern University study showed that depression is strongly correlated with future diabetes risk. Researchers believe that feeling down can negatively influence your eating, sleeping, and exercising habits.

Feeling fatigued? Don't shrug it off; you may need more than extra sleep

Exercise can trigger asthma symptoms in 80 percent of those with the condition.

Pears and apples are high in antioxidants that protect your lungs

Losing weight is often enough to prevent diabetes or even reverse it.

Whole grains and fruit keep blood sugar levels steady

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