

## **STAY HEALTHY AT HOME: Managing Chronic Health Conditions**

### ***What are chronic health conditions?***

Chronic diseases and conditions are those for which there is no cure, and include common conditions such as heart disease, arthritis, hypertension and some kinds of cancer. Chronic conditions account for most health care expenditures and are the cause of 70% of deaths in the United States. Many chronic health conditions can be effectively managed through a combination of lifestyle changes and appropriate treatments.

### ***Does having a chronic health condition mean I'll need to move into a nursing facility?***

Where you can live safely, and the help you need, will depend on your overall level of health and your ability to participate in management of your condition. For many conditions, effective self management will keep you feeling well and able to do the things you normally do; treatments and management approaches can adapt very well to your home environment. Because so much of the management of chronic conditions revolves around your lifestyle and behaviors, you can help control the course of your condition.

### ***What should I do after I or one of my loved ones is diagnosed with a chronic health condition?***

A three-step approach is a good place to start:

- Gather information
- Find resources to help support you,
- Have a good management plan

## **Information**

### ***What's a good first step towards gathering information about my diagnosis?***

You can begin by making sure you understand what your health care provider has told you. Often, people don't hear a lot of what the provider tells them after they hear their diagnosis. Take some time to absorb what you've heard, then make a list of the questions you have. Either call you provider or make another appointment time to get your questions answered. Consider taking a family member, or a friend to that appointment to make sure your questions are asked and answered. CareLink Nurse Care Coordinators attend appointments with clients when needed to make sure the communication between provider and patient is clear.

### ***What should I ask my doctor?***

The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality has developed a list titled “Ten Important Questions to Ask Your Doctor after a Diagnosis.” This list provides an excellent basis for a good conversation with your healthcare provider.

1. What is the technical name of my disease or conditions, and does that mean in plain English?
2. What is my prognosis (outlook for the future)?
3. How soon do I need to make a decision about treatment?
4. Will I need additional tests, and if so what kind and when?
5. What are my treatment options?
6. What are the pros and cons of my treatment options?
7. Is there a clinical trial (research study) that is right for me?
8. Now that I have this diagnosis, what changes will I need to make in my daily life?
9. What organizations do you recommend for support and information?
10. What resources (booklets, Web sites, audiotapes, videos, DVD's, etc.) do you recommend for further information?

Your provider may not be able to address all these questions immediately or at one time, but this is information you can gather over time to help you make decisions and manage your situation.

*Where can I go for more information about my chronic health condition?*

There are many resources available. Most chronic conditions and illnesses have non-profit associations that provide resources that can be very helpful. See the contact information and links on our Resources page for some places to start. These resources will be able to provide accurate, up-to-date information that you can trust.

*What about a second opinion?*

Seeking a second opinion is your right, and can help you better understand what you have and what your options are. Your insurance may or may not cover a second opinion, so check your benefits. It is certainly appropriate to ask your doctor who he or she would recommend for a second opinion. He or she will understand that you want that opinion to come from someone in a different office or group.

*What about treatments advertised on TV and the internet?*

Beware of any product or treatment plan that sounds too good to be true. There are no miracle cures or secret ingredients that will cure your chronic illness. Treatment advertisements that promise “money back if not satisfied” or “available exclusively through this offer” are generally not the breakthrough cures they may sound like. Your health care

provider will provide you with information about research-based treatment options that may be applicable to your situation.

## **Support**

### *Where do I find support?*

Many communities have support or self-help groups for common chronic conditions. Contact your local hospital or ask your health care provider for that contact information. There are also on-line support groups where you can post questions and get answers, or simply connect with someone in similar position. Be careful about some of the ideas or treatments you may hear about online. It's a good idea to check out these out with your healthcare provider, to weed out ideas that are not based on solid research.

Don't underestimate the value of talking with people who have been in your same situation. Just knowing others are coping can help you feel more optimistic and confident about your ability to cope.

## **Management**

### *After I've gathered the information and support necessary for making good decisions, what happens next?*

The key to living as safely and comfortably as possible with a chronic health condition is a good on-going management plan. The steps in that plan will be the result of decisions you make based on information you've gathered and the recommendations of your provider. Make sure you've learned about and discussed the pros and cons of your treatment options, and make sure your provider understands your preferences regarding:

- Medical versus surgical treatment approaches
- Staying within your local health care system or seeking care at a medical center
- End of life care
- Staying in your own home versus in-facility care

Then it's time to make your plan, including what you will do as your condition changes and your treatment needs change.

### *What needs to be included in the plan?*

The plan will consist of the treatments that you and your provider have decided on, including, as appropriate any medications, surgery and therapies. For most chronic conditions, another important component relates to your lifestyle, including your level and type of physical activity, your nutrition, your mental health, including stress management. Self-monitoring is another important component. For some chronic conditions you will be weighing yourself regularly, taking your blood pressure, noting certain changes, etc.

**Depending on your health status and your family situation, you may need help to implement the lifestyle and self-monitoring parts of your plan. For example, you may need to consider:**

- **Who will help me get the appropriate amount of physical activity or assist me with prescribed exercises?**
- **How will I handle my nutritional needs? Do I need assistance with a special diet?**
- **Can I adequately monitor my own condition? Do I need assistance with taking and recording vital statistics?**
- **What about my activities of daily living? Do I need help with my housekeeping, my personal care, or my errands?**

***Is it realistic to think I can remain in my own home?***

**For most people with chronic health conditions, remaining in your preferred living arrangement is a very realistic option. As you organize your management plan, you will identify areas where you need assistance and use resources you've identified to find the help you need. A CareLink Nurse Care Coordinator can be a very helpful resource in pulling together the assistance you need to live safely and as healthy as possible in your own home.**