Mind + Body

Looking after your physical health when you have a mental illness

SANE Factsheet

Looking after our physical health is important for everyone, but it can be an extra challenge if you have a mental illness.

This may be related to the symptoms of the illness or the side-effects of medication. It may be because of smoking, not getting enough exercise, or other lifestyle factors. Physical health problems can also get overlooked when everyone's focus is on looking after your mental health.

Whatever the reasons, people affected by mental illness often have some of the following problems:

- weight gain, especially round the midriff
- high blood pressure
- high cholesterol
- high blood glucose levels.

These problems may lead to heart disease, diabetes or other illnesses.

Having a mental illness, then, makes it all the more important you look after your physical health too. Here are some simple but effective things that you can do to look after yourself.

A healthy lifestyle

A healthy lifestyle means enjoying yourself without risking your health. It also means stopping or reducing as much as possible things that are not healthy (such as smoking or abusing other drugs).

Being physically and mentally healthy in your day-to-day life helps make all the difference, and includes:

- eating and drinking healthily
- being physically active in your daily life
- sleeping well
- managing stress
- staying in touch with others
- stopping smoking or cutting down.

Health Checks

It's a good idea to have a general health check when you first see your GP or psychiatrist. It's also important to have a check-up when you start on a new medication.

Regular health checks are important for all of us to identify early signs of any problems. Early detection of any problem means earlier treatment and a better outcome.

In a health check, the doctor may:

- ask about your physical health history and that of your family members
- ask about your lifestyle (for example, about smoking or how much exercise you get)
- check your blood pressure and pulse rate
- test your blood for fats (lipids) and sugars (glucose), and how well your liver, kidney and thyroid are working
- take an ECG measurement of your heart
- measure your weight and waist (over 90 cm for women and over 100 cm for men greatly increases the risk of health problems)
- examine you for involuntary muscle movements (for example, restlessness, tremors or stiffness)
- ask you about contraception and any sexual difficulties, and for women changes relating to periods or breast-milk
- ensure regular pap smears and breast screening for women, and prostate checks for men.

See a dentist yearly and optometrist at least every two years to check the health of your teeth and eyes.

Monitoring and follow up

Seeing the same doctor regularly is ideal (or at least a doctor at the same clinic). It allows the doctor to get to know you, and makes it easier to talk about any issues.

After the first health check, ask your doctor to follow up regularly on your general physical health and any specific conditions or concerns you have.

Monitoring of some measurements, such as weight and waist measurement is best done every three months. Try doing this yourself too.

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Taking action

Talk to your doctor about the risks that are specific to your illness, its treatment or your lifestyle. Ask them to test for a broad range of symptoms. Remember, you are entitled to these health checks.

If any physical health problems are found, talk with your doctor about the options for improving your health. These may include:

- starting a specific treatment
- considering a change of medication
- discussing lifestyle changes, like eating habits and sleep patterns
- referral to low cost supports or programs, like a dietitian or a quit smoking program.

Small changes can make a big difference.
Removing or decreasing even one risk factor can make a big difference. By taking control of your life in this way, you can improve your long-term health, and feel better too.

Shared Care – sharing information.
Often there are a number of services involved in looking after your health (for example, a GP, psychiatrist or other health professional). It's important that these providers make contact with each other so they know what the others are doing .

Benefits of prevention and early detection

- *Feeling better mentally*
  Being physically healthy is good for your mental health.

- *Fewer health problems*
  Lowering the risk of developing illnesses.

- *Getting help sooner*
  Identifying problems early, so they can be treated sooner.

- *Taking control*
  Getting regular health checks helps you feel you are taking control of your life.

Fast facts

- Looking after your physical health is especially important for people with a mental illness.

- People affected by mental illness often have health problems caused by being overweight or having high blood pressure.

- It's important to talk to your doctor about your physical as well as mental health. Ask your doctor for a regular physical health check, including weight and waist measurements, blood pressure and blood tests.

- If any health problems are found, talk to your doctor about the best treatments, and also what you can do yourself to improve your health.

- A healthy lifestyle can make a big difference to your mental as well as physical health – for example, improving eating and sleeping habits, as well as staying in touch with other people.

- Looking after your physical as well as mental health means you will feel better and are likely to have fewer health problems later in life. It also helps you take control of your life, and improve your overall wellbeing.

SANE Guide to Health Living

Call 1800 18 SANE (7263) or visit www.sane.org for information about this helpful guide full of information and advice about how you can have a healthier lifestyle.