

Naturopath bridges gap in treatment, prevention

Noelle Robbins, Special to The Chronicle

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Like most doctors, Karen Peters is gearing up for a flu season that threatens to unleash two strains of the virus: regular seasonal flu and swine flu.

But her strategy is a bit different.

As a licensed ND - doctor of naturopathic medicine - Peters believes that the body has an innate ability to heal itself. And she has some advice about bolstering the body's natural defenses, advice that goes beyond and, in some cases, seems to disagree with, media messages focused on hand washing, coughing or sneezing into elbows, getting flu shots and getting plenty of rest after the flu strikes.

For example, following natural seasonal instincts means slowing down and sleeping more as winter approaches - before the flu has a chance to take hold - but that's just the time when schools, businesses and holiday parties are in full swing.

"In the shorter, darker days of fall and winter, we need more rest," says Peters, 35, who opened her East Bay Naturopathic Clinic in Albany in 2008. "Getting a good night's sleep, and managing stress, are crucial to a strong immune system."

Hand sanitizer risks

She is also wary of frequent use of hand sanitizer, which kills 100 percent of the germs on our hands. "Our skin is covered with good bacteria, it is part of a very complex defense system," she says. She recommends hand washing with old-fashioned soap and water, which does not kill off beneficial bacteria.

Peters also warns against eating too much of the processed comfort food - refined flour, sugar, fat and salt - our bodies may crave in stressful times. She does suggest adding garlic, naturally anti-bacterial and anti-viral, and immunity-boosting mushrooms - maitake, shiitake and reishi - to our diets.

For her younger patients, with less savory tastes, she recommends supplemental probiotics, slightly sweet in flavor, which build resistance from the inside out, by encouraging a healthy gut environment and good digestion. Elderberry syrup is another pleasant tasting, protective strategy for children.

Ventilation in winter

Flying in the face of 24/7 energy efficiency, she prescribes ventilating airtight houses, even during the winter. "Indoor air is actually more polluted," she says, "than the air outdoors."

When it comes to promoting mass flu vaccinations, she pauses, choosing her words carefully. "Vaccines are about public health, not necessarily personal health," Peters says. "What is good for the community may not be good for every individual." She urges people to consult with their physicians to determine risk and benefit.

"We cannot always count on science to solve all our health problems," she says. "Sometimes flu viruses mutate so fast, there is no time to develop a vaccine." Naturopathic doctors advocate developing high levels of natural resistance in whole communities, she adds - the essence of preventive medicine.

Support fevers

If, despite her patients' best efforts, they're felled by the flu, Peters encourages a light, broth-based diet. "We want to shift our body's energy from digestion to fighting the virus and regaining health," she says. She suggests herbal cold and flu remedies adjusted to personal needs; and she cautions against trying too hard to lower fevers.

"Spiking a fever can be a good thing, it is part of our body's natural defense system," she says. While all fevers need to be monitored - very high temperatures can be dangerous - taking heavy doses of medicine to reduce fevers may work against the body's virus fighting power.

Interestingly, Peters does not have many patients particularly concerned about contracting the flu. She says this is because they're already on individualized programs designed to optimize their health and resistance.

Personalized approach

That, Peters notes, is one of the key differences between naturopathic medicine, geared to prevent illness, and more conventional medical protocols, devoted to treating illness. Naturopathic medicine is a personalized, not a mass, approach to health care. She tells her patients there is no one-size-fits-all flu fighting formula. What buffers one body against the onslaught of flu symptoms may not work for others.

Peters' office looks like a typical exam room in a typical physician's office. Except for the spa-like sense of unhurried calm and spa-like lavender scented the air.

According to Peters, naturopathic medicine fills the gap between conventional and alternative medicine. "It is Western, but holistic," she says. "I order labs, X-rays and ultrasounds for my patients. At the same time I use natural herbs and botanicals for treatment." Peters considers herself an old-fashioned family doctor, building relationships with patients, attuned to their subtle changes in health.

Manual diagnostics

Peters also relies on manual, not digitalized, diagnostic tools, to take blood pressure, for example. "I get different information, like the quality of the pulse, not just the rate," she says. "I use all my senses to identify health issues."

California only began licensing naturopathic doctors in 2004. By contrast, NDs have been licensed in Arizona since 1935, in Oregon since 1927, and in Washington since 1919. There are about 50 licensed NDs in the Bay Area, about 350 in the state. Seattle alone has more than 300.

Patient Crystal Paul, 28, of Pinole, said: "Dr. Peters and I are a detective team, working together, to solve my health issues. Dr. Peters never dismisses Western medicine - she knows there's a time and place for it."

But, Paul adds, "she listens to me, and gives me hope and confidence in my body's ability to heal itself."

Garden herbs that help common ailments and promote health. **C2**

Herbs for health

Dr. Karen Peters, who has worked with medicinal herbs from seed to bottle, suggests garden herbs can promote health.

Her top choices include:

Medicinal calendula: Helps heal wounds, sprains and minor burns

Lemon balm: Calming, promotes sleep and aids digestion

Chamomile: Aids digestion and reduces anxiety

Yarrow: To stop bleeding and treat wounds

Boneset: For flulike symptoms, fever and achy muscles

Marshmallow: Soothes sore throats and coughs

To find a naturopathic doctor: California Naturopathic Doctors Association:
www.calnd.org

E-mail us at datebookletters@sfchronicle.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/09/21/DDCP19NQ32.DTL>

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