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## **To take or not to take shouldn't be the question**

The award-winning film *A Beautiful Mind* illustrated what can happen when people don't take their prescription drugs. The movie is based on the true story of John Nash, a brilliant mathematician who succumbs to, but eventually prevails over, a mental illness. The movie, to me, is all about prescription drug compliance. He's a classic paranoid schizophrenic. His symptoms are very much worse when he doesn't take his medication, and much improved when he does. Over time he remains compliant and as new medication becomes available, he becomes more and more functional.

Prescription drug non-compliance is about more than simply not taking meds, though. The term encapsulates a whole range of improper usage - not taking enough of a drug, taking too much, not filling a prescription, discontinuing use early, and not taking a drug as prescribed, such as on an empty stomach or with alcohol. It also includes a phenomenon common in cases of long-term chronic diseases, where patients initially take their medications as directed, but then fall into an alternating cycle of complying and not complying with their drug regimen. Regardless of what form non-compliance takes, the result is that the medication does not have the effect it should on health outcomes. Creating a drug, writing a prescription for it and reimbursing someone for that prescription is simply not enough.

The problem of non-compliance is much more common than most realize. The department of epidemiology at McGill University says estimates for non-compliance range between 30% and 40% of people who take prescription medication in Canada. Rates can vary widely, depending on a number of factors, including the type of health problem being treated and the medication being used. For instance, people with mental illness often have difficulties with compliance because, if they don't take their medication, their ability to think clearly is diminished and the cycle repeats itself.

Patients taking drugs for conditions that have no obvious symptoms are also less likely to be compliant. If you're taking medication for blood pressure, you may not feel it one way or another. But if you're taking medication for arthritis, you can't get out of bed if you don't take the medication. Surprisingly, while the complexity of the drug regimen and number of drugs the patient is taking does have a significant effect on compliance, the severity of the condition being treated does not. Other demographic factors, such as gender, age and income, don't

seem to play a part in whether an individual will take his or her drugs properly. Amazingly, there is no one single group that stands out. It doesn't matter who you are, chances are that if you check your medicine cabinet, you will see leftover medications, all examples of improperly taken medications.

The consequences of non-compliance run much deeper than a few unfinished bottles of pills. For employers, the costs can be enormous, not only in terms of the health of their employees, but also in terms of their bottom line. Employers are paying the bill for unused or misused drugs that line the medicine cabinet. A 1995 report, [Costs of non-compliance and inappropriate use of prescription medication in Canada](#), pegged the cost of this problem at \$7 billion to \$9 billion annually for Canada's healthcare system - making it one of the country's most expensive problems. The figure includes both direct expenses, such as hospitalization, medical visits, interventions and homecare, as well as indirect costs such as lost productivity.

Employers aren't only affected when their members use drugs reimbursed by the plan improperly- they also pay the price when employees' family members aren't compliant. If a child is losing time from school, the parent is usually losing time from work. Employers need to make an effort to measure absenteeism-related costs. Tracking it will allow employers to see the benefits of improving their employees' health. Programs around the cost of prescription drug non-compliance need to be implemented and monitored.

This growing problem has yet to register on the radar screens of most organizations. Instead, companies have directed their focus to keeping the direct cost of drugs under control. Employers are focusing on managed formularies, communication about drugs and healthy workplace initiatives - all worthwhile objectives, but communication efforts need to be tailored to the specific health needs of the workforce population being targeted, and encouraging good compliance around the medications being prescribed is just smart business.

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## Summer Smarts - It's time to energize ourselves!

It's that time of year again when we get the urge to re-energize ourselves by running, biking, roller blading, swimming, golfing, gardening, hiking and more. But all that activity also brings a greater risk of injury. More than 90 percent of incidents that result in injuries are predictable and preventable. So, if you want to prevent injury and maximize your enjoyment, you need to be smart about how you approach your activities. Here are some smart tips to keep you from getting hurt this summer.

"May and June are always the busiest months at our clinic" says Judy Boivin, physiotherapist and owner of Milton Physiotherapy and Sports Injuries Clinic, in Milton, ON. "We get a large increase in sports injuries that are a result of people doing too much too soon, without properly warming up. A hamstring muscle pull from soccer or baseball, for example, is very common at this time of year. Running and stretching regularly through the winter or at least for several weeks before the season opener, dramatically reduces your risk of injury. The beginning of every sports season requires an extra focus on injury prevention."

The Canadian Physiotherapy Association (CPA) encourages each of us to consider the following S.M.A.R.T. choices to build and maintain our personal mobility.

S.M.A.R.T. is the acronym for Stretch, Move, Add it up, Reduce strain, Talk to a physiotherapist.

### 1. STRETCH

Stretching is important for physical mobility. Every activity requires an appropriate

warm-up and cool-down. Keep your muscles flexible and relaxed, your joints mobile, and relieve tension and strain by doing a few gentle stretches before and after your activity.

### 2. MOVE

Build activity into your whole day. While it's important to find enjoyable, safe activities tailored to suit your level of fitness, it's also important to make activity a regular part of your day. Build movement and position changes into your routine - answer the phone standing up, and stretch during a break.

### 3. ADD IT UP

Add up the time spent doing particular activities. Planning and pacing are very important. Don't over exert yourself. Health Canada recommends 60 minutes of activity every day but this doesn't have to be done all at once. You can add up your activities, 10 minutes at a time, to get that daily total. To keep it interesting:

Alter the route you take for a walk or run - get off the bus one block early, take the stairs, not the elevator

Vary the sports or activities you have chosen - each sport or activity uses muscles in a different way

Drink water before, during and after activity to ensure proper hydration.

### 4. REDUCE STRAIN

Physiotherapists encourage us to keep active with sensible exercises suited to our age and physical condition.

Change positions and tasks often. If a position is causing discomfort, move out of it.

Don't let little hurts turn into big hurts. Pain and discomfort are the body's signals that something is wrong. If you

experience pain for more than 48 hours after your activity, reduce the level of activity. If pain persists, take some time off or change the activity. For example, if running is painful, switch to cycling.

If you do become injured, allow for adequate recovery. Respect your body - it's an incredible machine.

Follow the R.I.C.E. formula - Rest, Ice, Compression and Elevation.

Watch for recurring or persisting pain - if concerned, seek early professional attention from a physiotherapist who can diagnose and treat your injury and muscle imbalance to help you regain your mobility and get you back 'on track'.

Stretch and strengthen regularly. Proper stretching and strengthening exercises can counteract the impacts and imbalances to joints and muscles that activities may cause.

Use proper equipment. Worn or ill fitting equipment limits your enjoyment and may even contribute to injury. For example, well fitting shoes are essential for sports like walking, running or racquet sports. Go to a specialized shoe store and get properly fitted with a shoe tailored to your individual needs and biomechanics.

Do a proper warm up and cool down. Whether walking, running or gardening, a proper warm up readies the muscles and joints for the coming activity and may lessen the chances of muscle tears and pulls. A cool down is an excellent time to work on flexibility - a warm muscle can be stretched to its optimal range of motion.

### 5. TALK TO A PHYSIOTHERAPIST

Physiotherapists are the health care professionals who can advise people of all ages and activity levels with specific concerns about their mobility. With their applied knowledge and understanding of the human body in action, physiotherapists are able to help increase mobility, relieve pain, build strength and improve balance and cardiovascular function. A physiotherapist will assess any injuries or pre-existing conditions and provide appropriate treatment that will promote an earlier return to the activity, as well as provide advice on how to prevent a recurrence of the injury.

"Don't let a minor muscle strain be your excuse for not exercising," remarks Judy. "Many sports injuries can be easily remedied with a visit to your physiotherapist. People often avoid seeking treatment for injuries, thinking it will just go away if they rest. Physiotherapists can help you get back on the field or into the gym, allowing you to stay active. After-all, physical activity is vital to your health and quality of life."

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So, where do we start? Pharmacists are the key. They are the common link between the physician and the patient. They look at the non-compliance issue more closely than doctors. Pharmaceutical companies have to make a better effort in ensuring that consumers use their medications properly, and just as importantly, patients need to understand that they are part of the problem and the solution. After all, when looking in the medicine cabinet mirror, "We've seen the enemy and he is us."

Until next time...