

What is Your Supportive Care Plan?

I am an epidemiologist. I love statistics and patterns...but today I am not going to talk about outbreaks, epidemics, pandemics or R-0 (rate of disease spread...we want it to be below 1). Instead, I want to talk about COVID-19 and how we can use the current experience to educate and empower instead of provoke confusion and fear.

There is understandably some fear when we see headlines that shout *“number of cases have jumped dramatically”*, *“state of emergency”* or pictures of people in Hazmat suits pushing gurneys. These messages and images are scary.

A bit of a Coronavirus refresher ...there are seven strains of the Coronavirus that have infected humans. Four of these are routinely transmitted from human to human and cause the common cold. The last three are more serious and can lead to complications. These are MERS, SARS and COVID-19.

MERS has a high mortality rate (30-40% of infected people) but does not have a high reproduction rate (that is one person infects fewer than one person, nothing like the measles where one person can infect 15-18 others just through the air). It has been contained mostly to the Arabian Sea area.

SARS caused an outbreak in 2003 and had a fairly high mortality rate (about 1 in ten confirmed cases) but the virus transmission was slowed and then stopped. Without any anti-viral medication or vaccine, there has not been another case in the world since then.

The newest “wild card” is COVID-19 which was first identified in China in December 2019.

All seven viruses cause respiratory symptoms in different degrees. All share a similar shape that you have seen – the spikes which look like a crown, hence the word “Corona”. But wait, there’s more!

What else do they have in common?

- There is no vaccine for any of these viruses.
- There is no treatment for any of these viruses.

And that’s just the start of the good news!

What, is that a typo? No, it is not. Let me tell you why...

- Without a vaccine or direct treatment, our amazing immune system is the true warrior! Supportive care provided by the health system helps the immune system do its job.

What is Supportive Care?

Supportive care refers to treating the symptoms – pain medication, controlling fever, isolation (stay in bed and rest), hydration and nutrition support. Another integral aspect of supportive care is ensuring all other pre-existing conditions are managed.

For those at highest risk of becoming critically ill (about 5% of cases according to data from China) – elderly people and those living with other chronic conditions - it is most important to ensure care plans are being followed, medications are being used as intended, and there is no disease progression or complications. For example, people with asthma are using preventative medication if prescribed, people with diabetes are managing blood sugars and kidney health is checked.

The reason supportive care is important is NOT because it is treating COVID-19, but because it is meant to keep you as healthy as possible **to allow the immune system to fight the COVID-19 virus. That is, ONLY YOUR OWN BODY** is fighting the virus.

Let's stop and think about how remarkable that is – a resilient immune system is our best tool in avoiding dangerous complications, such as pneumonia, hospitalization, and, in some cases, death.

If we treat our body right our immune system has the best chance of successfully fighting viruses even when there are no vaccines or anti-viral medications. We can avoid over-crowding emergency departments and in-patient care where we increase our chances of contracting other illnesses.

Our public health care system, our front-line health staff and our community leaders, are working tirelessly enhancing the capacity of the health system to respond to this new virus. However, they cannot create resources that do not exist or at the speed of light, they cannot test the entire population, they cannot double the size of hospitals. We, as community members, can do our part to help the system by maintaining our own health to the best of our ability.

If you start feeling very sick, seek medical help – your immune system may be losing the battle and you may be at risk for developing a complication and need treatment. Remember, the treatment will ONLY be for the complication – an antibiotic may treat pneumonia, but your remarkable immune system continues to be solely responsible for battling COVID-19.

How can we use this event to EDUCATE and EMPOWER?

How do we take this lesson and incorporate it into daily life for *our own long-term supportive care plan*?

- ✓ If you just started washing your hands consistently – great job – keep it up!
- ✓ If you just learned to cough into your elbow, not your hand – great job – keep it up!
- ✓ If you have a chronic condition and just stocked up on your medications – great job – keep it up!
 - *Sidebar - unmanaged chronic conditions are major drivers of avoidable emergency department and inpatient care use. This is not new – it is just another new virus triggering these consequences. Stopping your medications for periods of time is never a good idea - your body needs consistency to have an optimal immune system.*
- ✓ If you have a chronic condition and are following your care plan – great job – keep it up! But if you aren't managing your asthma, aren't following the diet or exercise plan you need to help your body manage your illness such as diabetes, time to start.
 - If you don't have an individual care plan, make an appointment to see your primary care provider -- get fully informed and in control of your condition.
- ✓ If you smoke or vape, consider stopping. It will enhance the ability of your body to fight disease as well as give your respiratory system a chance to become stronger. It will also reduce the number of times you bring your hand to your mouth and face area!!
- ✓ Plan to get your influenza vaccine next fall (put it in your calendar!). It won't help you fight COVID-19, but the more you support your immune system, the more able you will be to fight other "wild card" viruses in the future. Your tax dollars have already paid for the research, development, testing, distribution and easy access so plan to get it!

Let's celebrate the miracle that is our immune system. Let's empower and educate instead of panic. Let's not use hyperbolic terms and scary images to entice TV viewership. Let's trust and respect our front-line staff, public health and leadership. Trust me, they are monitoring, planning and responding.

The more we as community members do our part to develop our own supportive care strategies keeping our immune systems in tip-top shape, the better off is our whole society in moving toward long-term improvement in health and well-being.

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