

Top health tips your internist wants you to know

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For many Americans, the point of entry to the health care system is their internist, whose main job is the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of illnesses that affect adults. But before they even set foot in their internist's office, just about all of them have been bombarded by aggressive product marketing, misinformed opinions on social media and various other socio-cultural forces that can undermine their health and the patient-physician relationship. One of internists' biggest challenges is therefore ensuring patients look to them first for health education.

Here is a list from the AMA's What Doctors Want Patients to Know™ series—which provides physicians with a platform to share what they want patients to understand about today's health care headlines—on some important health tips that internists want their patients to know.

1

The "tincture of time" is the best cold medicine

There's a reason they call it the common cold. It happens a lot, especially in the wintertime. With runny noses, sore throats and persistent coughs, patients' demand for effective cold remedies is understandable. But does cold medicine help relieve symptoms of the common cold? It depends. But knowing how to find relief from the common cold and what cold medicines to use is key.

There are more than 200 viruses that can cause a cold, but rhinoviruses are the most common type, affecting more than 3 million people in the U.S. each year. Symptoms of the common cold typically peak within three to five days and can include sneezing, stuffy and runny nose, sore throat, coughing and fever. Some symptoms—especially runny or stuffy nose and cough—can last up 14 days but improve over time.

One of the physicians who took time to share their insights on this was internist Jeanine Bulan, MD. She is associate chief medical officer of primary care and population health at Atlantic Medical Group, which is part of the Atlantic Health System.

Atlantic Health System is a member of the [AMA Health System Program](#), which provides enterprise solutions to equip leadership, physicians and care teams with resources to help drive the future of medicine.

2 It pays to be honest about your family health history

Does anyone in your family have breast cancer? What about heart disease or high blood pressure? How about drug and alcohol use or the state of your family's mental health? This information is part of your family health history, and it is a big predictor of your overall health risk.

Understanding and sharing one's family health history is a pivotal aspect of proactive health care management. By openly communicating and documenting family health history, patients can provide physicians with valuable insights into potential genetic susceptibilities and hereditary conditions. It also establishes a foundation for more personalized and targeted medical care. Atlantic Health System internist Jason Ricks, MD, shares more.

3 Social factors play a huge role in your health

Health outcomes are not solely determined by medical interventions. Rather, they are heavily influenced by factors that extend far beyond the walls of a hospital or exam room. From the neighborhoods that patients inhabit to the economic resources at their disposal, social drivers of health—also called social determinants of health—play a pivotal role in a person’s susceptibility to illnesses, access to health care and the effectiveness of medical treatments.

While often overlooked, understanding and acknowledging social drivers of health can empower patients to take charge of their health. Meanwhile, physicians and health care organizations have a role in screening for these factors and working with community partners to address them. Three physicians laid out what every patient should know about social determinants of health.

Among the physicians weighing in was Eboni Price-Haywood, MD, MPH, who is an internist and system medical director for [Ochsner Health’s Healthy State initiative](#). She is also medical director for Ochsner Xavier Institute for Health Equity and Research. Ochsner Health is another member of the [AMA Health System Program](#)

4 **Life expectancy is falling—for a bunch of reasons**

In 2021, for the second year in a row, life expectancy in the U.S. declined—this time to the lowest level since 1996. That marked a disturbing turn from the historical trend. In 1900, U.S. life expectancy was 47 years, and by 2019 it hit 79. But in 2020, life expectancy fell to 77 and dropped further to 76.4 in 2021, according to a report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

This alarming trend was clearly not an anomaly and was primarily due to heart disease, cancer, COVID-19 and the ongoing drug-overdose epidemic. The same report found that heart disease remained the leading cause of death, followed by cancer and COVID-19, which accounted for about 60% of the decline in life expectancy. Meanwhile, overdose deaths—which accounted for

more than one-third of all accidental deaths in the U.S.—had risen five-fold over the previous two decades. Life expectancy rebounded a bit in 2022 but remained below the pre-pandemic number. Three physicians discussed why life expectancy has been declining and what to do about it.

5 **When using a patient portal, brevity is best**

An online patient portal is a website that is used to access personal health information. The patient portal is helpful for patients to keep track of their medical visits, test results, billing, prescriptions and insurance, among others. Yet patient portal inbox messages have risen by 157% since 2020, according to a study published in *JAMIA*, serving as an added burden on physicians and their care teams.

Knowing how and when to use the patient portal can help improve patients' outcomes and could lighten the workloads that contribute to physician burnout. Three physicians summarized what doctors want patients to keep in mind when using a patient portal.

6 **Taking supplements safely means asking for help**

While vitamins and nutritional or dietary supplements can be beneficial to your health, they can also involve health risks. Notably, the Food and Drug Administration does not have the authority to review dietary supplement products for safety and effectiveness before they are marketed. And with more than 90,000 different supplements on the market, it can be confusing to understand what is safe and what is not. Two AMA members outlined what doctors want patients to know about vitamins and nutritional supplements.

When it comes to effective doctor-patient communication, it's important that both parties are speaking from a base of shared knowledge. The AMA's What Doctors Want Patients to Know™ series explores dozens of health topics, including [Lyme disease](#), [norovirus](#) and [anti-obesity medications](#).