



PUT THE BOOT INTO MACHISMO . . . IT COULD DAMAGE YOUR HEALTH

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BY JOHN GRIFFITHS

Men today, we are told, are more in touch with their feminine side and pay more attention to the way they look. But while personal grooming habits have improved, it would appear not all men's attitudes towards their bodies have changed. Wales' deputy Health Minister John Griffiths argues it is time men stopped hiding behind macho stereotypes and started paying more attention to their own health

FORMER champion jump jockey Bob Champion raised a few eyebrows when he told an interviewer his testicular cancer was diagnosed by a vet. He went on to explain that he was in bed with her at the time.

This exchange may have caused a few giggles, but it highlights a very serious issue - far too often, men fail to check their own bodies for signs of illness, and fail to take sensible and possibly life- saving precautions.

Men's health is not a subject discussed widely, and this is reflected in our unwillingness to go to the doctor with concerns about our health.

Evidence shows that men see their GPs less than women and are more likely to wait until health problems become serious before they seek help.

It seems that 'macho' attitudes contribute, directly or indirectly, to men's ill health.

These include bravado, risk-taking, refusing to ask for help, and putting work before health needs.

Although young men today are probably more in touch with their feminine sides, and may pay more attention to personal grooming, traditional stereotypes of male behaviour remain strong.

It is important to take these into account when providing services and developing health messages for men.

Average life expectancy for men is 75 years - five years lower than for women who can expect to live to an average ripe old age of 80. This is partly down to biological differences, but also reflects social and cultural factors.

The main killers of men are heart disease, which was responsible for the deaths of almost 4,000 men in Wales in 2002; cancer - lung, colorectal and prostate - which killed more than 4,000 men in Wales in 2002, and stroke, which accounts for the deaths of more than 1,000 men in Wales every year and is also one of the main causes of disability.

But men's lives are also at risk from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) - an overall term for a group of conditions including emphysema and chronic bronchitis, which killed nearly 1,000 men in Wales in 2002 - and accidents, which are often alcohol-related. Almost 400 men died in Wales in 2000 from accidents.

So what can men do to stay healthy?



Smoking is a major risk factor for heart disease, stroke, lung cancer and COPD. Giving up is not easy but it is probably the most important thing anyone can do to improve their health.

Making sure your diet is as healthy as possible is another way to prevent ill health. That doesn't mean waving goodbye to junk food forever as you can still have the occasional kebab if, most of the time, you eat a wide variety of foods, including your five portions of fruit and vegetables every day, meat, fish, soya and small amounts of dairy products.

Go easy on foods that contain fat, and avoid sugary foods and drink.

Many men love sport, but probably spend more time watching it from the armchair than taking part.

Physical inactivity is the single biggest risk factor for heart disease, so it's important to get moving more often.

Try to make physical activity a part of your daily routine by walking, dancing - you may want to do this in the privacy of your living room if you aren't blessed with twinkle toes - gardening, or using the stairs instead of the lift.

Start small and work up to a total of 30 minutes a day, five times a week.

Eating healthily and doing some exercise should prevent obesity, which has become a big problem in Wales. Half of all men in Wales are overweight or obese and the solution is to burn off more calories than you take in.

You can work out how much you drink, and stay within sensible limits by counting units - one unit is equivalent to half-a-pint of beer, one glass of wine, or a pub measure of spirits.

The good news is if you drink three or four units a day you aren't putting yourself in significant danger. But excessive drinking is linked to cancer of the mouth and throat, stroke and accidents.

As I said earlier, men are becoming more aware of taking care of their skin, and if this included slapping on factor 15+ sunscreen, we could really reduce the risk of skin cancer.

Skin cancer is largely preventable, so don't get burnt, wear a hat, sunglasses and a T-shirt when it's sunny, and stay in the shade around midday.

Back to Bob Champion, check your testicles regularly for any lumps or swelling and see your GP if you are concerned. Testicular cancer is easy to treat successfully if detected early.

As men get older, they are likely to have some symptoms due to the prostate getting larger. These include more frequent urination and sometimes discomfort, and are usually nothing to worry about, but it is important to see a doctor to have prostate cancer ruled out. Blood in the urine is a symptom that should be seen to urgently.

This is what you can do, but what is the Assembly Government doing to promote men's health?

Health Challenge Wales, our national drive to improve health and prevent ill-health, stresses that everyone has a role to play in protecting and improving health in Wales.



The Assembly is playing its part through a range of prevention initiatives that are relevant to men.

These include a major programme to reduce smoking, with campaigns including specific messages to young men about the benefits of not smoking.

Recent data shows falling rates of smoking among boys, a trend we hope will be reflected in future declines in tobacco-related deaths and illnesses among men in Wales.

The Nutrition Strategy for Wales, launched in 2003, highlights the poorer diet of men compared to women, and the need to target men in particular with nutritional information and support.

Climbing Higher, the Assembly Strategy for Sport and Active Recreation, aims to increase levels of physical activity in Wales. Research shows that boys are more active than girls, but there is still a lot to be done to meet the activity levels needed to achieve health benefits across the nation.

We recently collaborated with BBC Wales on the Big Fat Problem campaign to tackle obesity by encouraging people, especially men, in Wales to eat more healthily and get active.

The campaign reached 2.2 million people, 75% of the population of Wales.

Since 2001, the Assembly has run a campaign in colleges, pubs and nightclubs to raise awareness of sexually-transmitted infections and promote sexual health. Posters have targeted men, resulting in increased awareness of diseases such as chlamydia. We also support a number of projects across Wales which offer information and advice on sexual health issues to young people, including young men, and fund the Terence Higgins Trust to carry out an all-Wales HIV prevention programme for gay men.

The workplace is an important setting for reaching men, so we have developed the Corporate Health Standard programme to support, develop and reward good health practice in **workplace health promotion**.

Men's health issues are already included as a specific component of the programme, and a recent review has recommended further development of this section to further address risk factors for cancer.

The message is clear - forget about the outdated notion that real men don't eat salad or go to the doctor.

Your health is too important to let machismo get in the way. Testicular cancer: Testicular cancer is the most common form of the disease in men aged 15 to 44 - its main victims.

But, overall it is not very common - every year about 80 men in Wales are diagnosed with the disease and there are almost 2,000 new cases in the UK.

Testicular cancer responds well to treatment, and more than nine in 10 patients are cured - figures from the Welsh Cancer Intelligence and Surveillance Unit reveal only 10 men die from the disease every year in Wales.

The cancer develops from the cells within the testes, which not only produce and store sperm but also provide the main source of the hormone testosterone, which is responsible for male sexual characteristics.



If it is not treated, cancer cells from the original site may spread to nearby lymph nodes or, rarely, other organs.

There is no evidence that an injury or a sporting strain increases the risk of developing testicular cancer.

Risk factors include age, having an undescended testicle (called cryptorchidism), a family history of the disease, HIV and a having had a previous diagnosis of testicular cancer.

The symptoms of testicular cancer include:

A painless lump or swelling in either testicle;

Enlargement of the testicle;

A feeling of heaviness in the scrotum;

A dull ache in the scrotum or the groin;

A sudden collection of fluid in the scrotum;

Pain or discomfort in the testicle or scrotum. 1,320 new cases of prostate cancer diagnosed every year in Wales: Prostate cancer is the most common form of cancer in men and has a lifetime risk of one in 14.

In Wales about 1,320 new cases are diagnosed every year - in the UK the figure stands at more 24,700.

The cancer develops from cells within the prostate gland, but because the majority of prostate cancers are slow growing many men are unaware that they have the disease. However, a small number of prostate cancers grow more quickly and may spread to other parts of the body.

Prostate cancer is rare in men under 50 and the risk of developing the disease increases if there is a first-degree relative (father or brother) who was diagnosed with prostate cancer at a young age.

Having an elderly relative with prostate cancer is not uncommon and does not increase the risk. In a small number of cases, prostate cancer runs in families because of a faulty BRCA2 gene.

Exposure to certain radioactive substances, such as those produced in the nuclear industry, may increase the risk of prostate cancer.

The prostate enlarges as men get older, and most men have some symptoms affecting urination because of a common condition, known as BPH.

Many of the symptoms of prostate cancer are similar to those of BPH and can include:

Having to rush to the toilet to pass urine;

Passing urine more often and/or at night;

Difficulty starting the flow of urine;

Starting and stopping whilst passing urine;

Discomfort (pain or burning) while passing urine;



A feeling of not having emptied the bladder fully;

Blood in urine or semen;

Pain in the back, hips or pelvis.

Because the symptoms are similar for BPH, men who notice any of them should consult their doctor for advice on treatment, and to rule out prostate cancer.

There is a blood test for a protein called PSA, which can help to detect prostate cancer but more tests are usually needed to be certain of a diagnosis.

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