



## YOUR PERSONAL MANDATE

*It's clear that health care is changing on the national front. But how about right there in your own home? What really merits space in that medicine cabinet? And do you honestly need a checkup every year? Here's everything you need to know to devise a wellness plan that works for you.*

BY LAURIE TARKAN

**REMEMBER WHEN THE** toughest thing about personal health was getting through the shots so you could claim your lollipop at the end? Sure, our medical needs were bound to grow more complicated as we got older, but who knew the whole enterprise would become so convoluted? Between the ever-shifting recommendations, the whip-lash headlines, and the requisite second (not to mention third) opinions, overseeing your personal well-being these days often feels like a full-time job.

Even that sacred cow known as the annual checkup has come under scrutiny. The United States Preventive Services

Task Force, an independent agency that provides recommendations to Congress, lists no test that needs to be done annually in healthy people. On the other hand, the recently passed Affordable Care Act *expands* coverage of certain screenings.

So how should you go about maintaining your personal health? We had a panel of experts weigh in on everything from what to ask when you finally get to see the doc to which alternative specialists you should consult for various issues. We can't promise a lollipop at the end, but we do guarantee that after you've finished reading this handbook, you'll feel a whole lot better.

LESSON | 1

## BE MERCILESS WITH THE MEDICINE CABINET

*Sure, it's important to have remedies on hand for colds, upset stomachs, and minor cuts and scrapes, but now that the kids are in junior high, don't you think it's time to toss that teething gel? And do you really have plans for those decades-old prescription pills? The key to good home health care is focusing on what you truly need.*

### CABINET MEETING

When writer Laurie Tarkan let an internist and a naturopathic doctor peek inside her medicine chest, she figured they'd find a few things wanting. What she didn't expect them to unearth were drugs older than her 9-year-old son, triplicate packages of decongestants, and enough Percocet to numb her brain for weeks. Many Americans keep too many medications on hand, says Eric Alper, an internist at the University of Massachusetts in Worcester, in part because the U.S. allows companies to advertise prescription drugs directly to consumers, prompting them to buy more than they need. "It's not good to have so many drugs around," he says. "They can get into the wrong hands."

Tarkan's home pharmacy was also noticeably lacking in natural alternatives. "Most Western drugs are aimed at stopping processes that are the body's way of healing itself," says Lysanji Edson, a naturopathic doctor in Portland, Oregon. She believes that alternative drugs target causes of illness instead of symptoms. With Alper and Edson's guidance, Tarkan gave her cabinet a full-body makeover. Here's how it looks today:



1

### A BETTER BREW

Chamomile tea is calming and has anti-inflammatory effects. \$6.50 for 4 oz, [mountainroseherbs.com](http://mountainroseherbs.com)

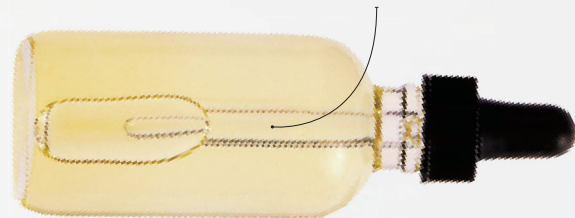


### 1 PROBIOTICS

These shelf-stable beneficial bugs may help prevent diarrhea caused by antibiotics. \$47, [florastor.com](http://florastor.com)

### 2 ANTIBIOTIC OINTMENT

The effective blend of bacteria killers in this treatment helps



### HERBAL REMEDY

Oregano oil has anti-viral properties. Tarkan learned to swallow two drops in a half-teaspoon of olive oil at the first sign of a cold. \$11 for 0.25 oz, [auracacia.com](http://auracacia.com)



2

ensure that minor cuts and scrapes remain free from infection. \$8, [drugstore.com](http://drugstore.com)

### 3 VITAMIN C

Edson prescribes 1,000 mg twice daily to reduce the severity and duration of cold symptoms. \$12, [solgar.com](http://solgar.com)



3

### 4 ACETAMINOPHEN

Many doctors consider this the safest of the fever reducers and pain relievers because it has a low risk of gastrointestinal upset. High doses can cause liver damage, so Alper advises avoiding the extra-strength variety. \$9, [drugstore.com](http://drugstore.com)



4

**5 ANTIHISTAMINE**

A non-sedating allergy medicine can battle fall flare-ups. \$30, [drugstore.com](http://drugstore.com)

**6 DIGESTIVE ENZYMES**

By aiding food breakdown, these can relieve occasional bloating and gas. \$26, [purecapsdirect.com](http://purecapsdirect.com)

**7 CALAMINE LOTION**

The classic treatment contains zinc oxide, which quells the itch from bites and rashes and may dry out lesions, Alper notes. \$4.50, [walgreens.com](http://walgreens.com)

**8 BOTANICAL PAIN-RELIEF GEL**

This homeopathic salve

includes natural anti-inflammatory ingredients and can help relieve bruising and stiffness. \$17, [traumeelusa.com](http://traumeelusa.com)

**9 ELDERBERRY SYRUP**

The herb may relieve flu symptoms, Edson says. \$13, [sambucolusa.com](http://sambucolusa.com)



**SWEET RELIEF**

Soothe a cough by taking a half teaspoon of organic honey a few times a day, Edson suggests. \$9 for 16 oz, [wholesomesweeteners.com](http://wholesomesweeteners.com)

**DRUG BUST**

*Edson and Alper found lots of redundant or simply ineffective suspects in Tarkan's cabinet. The following didn't make the cut.*

**1**

**DECONGESTANTS**

Edson says that many decongestants (such as pseudoephedrine) are painfully drying, spark rebound stuffiness, and can interfere with the very process that helps the body flush out a virus or allergen.

**2**

**CHILDREN'S COUGH SUPPRESSANTS**

Research suggests they're no better than a placebo.

**3**

**RECALLED MEDS**

Tarkan found out that one of her children's medications had been recalled. Visit [fda.gov/safety/recalls](http://fda.gov/safety/recalls) for a list of recalls or to sign up for e-mail alerts.

**4**

**MYSTERIOUS PILLS**

If a pill no longer has a label or a box, get rid of it. It's imperative to know the dosing instructions and expiration date.

**SCRAP SAFELY**

To dispose of unused meds, combine them with coffee grounds (to keep kids and animals out), seal them in a bag, and toss. Research suggests that bringing them to a take-back center for incineration doesn't keep drugs out of the environment and isn't worth the time, money, or emissions. Never flush medications—they can end up in the water supply.



LESSON | 2

**BONE UP FOR THE EXAM**

“At checkups, doctors automatically look at the ears, eyes, and throat,” says Miriam Alexander, M.D., president of the American College of Preventive Medicine. “But instead of examining patients by rote, physicians should be focusing on their individual issues.” If you walk in knowing what you want to get out of it, a visit to the doctor should be anything but routine.

**DULY NOTED**

The most important tool in the exam room might just be a spiral-bound notebook. Doctors appreciate prepared questions, and consulting your notes may make it easier for you to broach personal topics.

- YOUR SPECIALISTS** Arrive with a list of specialists you're seeing and the problems (stress, back pain, allergies) they're addressing. “This helps your physician know what’s going on with your health,” says Cecil Wilson, M.D., former president of the American Medical Association.
- STRANGE SYMPTOMS** Note anything out of the ordinary, such as rashes, changes in digestion, or headaches. The doctor might see a pattern.
- GOALS FOR THE VISIT** Turn any concerns (weight, fitness level) and family history of illnesses into to-do items to go over. Some examples: “Find out if I’m getting enough exercise”; “Talk about how my father’s heart disease affects me”; “Discuss my migraine management.”
- TESTS, SERVICES, AND VACCINES** Include screenings you may need based on age, family history, and health, and ask about vaccinations for the flu, tetanus, hepatitis B, and, if you’re over 55, shingles.
- MEDS AND SUPPLEMENTS** Make a list or use a smartphone to store the names of over-the-counter and prescription medicines you take, along with the dosages and how long you’ve been on them. Don’t forget supplements and any drugs you were prescribed but didn’t use. The AMA’s My Medications app (in the iTunes store) keeps track of such information. Be sure to discuss potential side effects and review dosages.
- MENTAL HEALTH** Changes in mood are important discussion points, since they affect your susceptibility to illness. If you have insomnia, for instance, write down how many hours of sleep you’ve been getting.
- DISCHARGE PLAN** Collaborate with your physician on three or four goals, such as riding a bike twice a week, taking vitamin D, or checking back about your cholesterol levels after three months.

**SCREENING ROOM**

The ideal frequency for any given test seems to be a moving target. (The National Cancer Institute and United States Preventive Services Task Force disagree about when to begin getting mammograms, for example.) Your doctor might recommend particular evaluations, such as a thyroid test, but here are some basic guidelines.

FREQUENCY	TEST
EVERY <b>2</b> YEARS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• BLOOD PRES-SURE TEST</li> <li>• MAMMOGRAM (FOR WOMEN AGED 50-74)</li> </ul>
EVERY <b>3</b> YEARS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CLINICAL BREAST EXAM</li> <li>• PAP SMEAR</li> <li>• TYPE 2 DIABETES TEST (IN ADULTS WITH HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE)</li> </ul>
EVERY <b>5</b> YEARS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• BLOOD TEST FOR CHOLESTEROL LEVELS (IN ADULTS WITHOUT HIGH CHOLESTEROL)</li> </ul>
EVERY <b>10</b> YEARS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• COLONOSCOPY TO CHECK FOR COLORECTAL CANCER (STARTING AT AGE 50)</li> </ul>

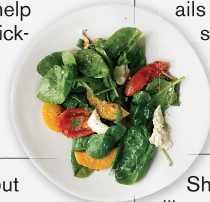
Adults should get a standard physical every one to five years—the frequency depends on age and individual health issues. Experts advise working out an appropriate schedule with your doctor.

LESSON | 3

**THINK OUTSIDE THE STANDARD-DOC BOX**

Americans make an estimated 354 million visits to complementary practitioners every year. Below, our crib sheet of some of the most popular kinds of specialists and the types of issues you can count on them to address. Before booking an appointment, ask about rates and whatever reimbursements, if any, your insurance carrier might offer.

	<b>ACUPUNCTURIST</b>	<b>CHIROPRACTOR</b>	<b>DIETITIAN</b>	<b>HOMEOPATHIC PRACTITIONER</b>	<b>NATUROPATHIC DOCTOR</b>
<b>NICKNAME</b>	<i>The Big Chi</i>	<i>The Bone Corrector</i>	<i>Champion of the Chew</i>	<i>Small Wonder</i>	<i>Whole in One</i>
<b>PHILOSOPHY</b>	Acupuncture taps into 12 meridians where energy, called <i>chi</i> , flows. Blockages or imbalances in these channels can result in illness, pain, or other symptoms.	The spine regulates the nervous system. A chiropractor fixes “subluxations”—dysfunctional spots in the spine that can cause muscle spasms or nerve inflammation.	Registered dietitians see food as the first medicine. The right diet can help prevent sickness and control disease.	Like cures like. If you take a microdose of the very thing that ails you, you can stimulate the body’s self-healing ability.	The body has a natural ability to heal itself. An N.D. focuses on preventing illness and treating its root causes through lifestyle, diet, homeopathy, and natural herbs.
<b>METHODOLOGY</b>	The acupuncturist will insert thin needles at several points in your body. You’ll lie still as your chi finds its flow. Many also practice Traditional Chinese Medicine and will suggest herbal remedies.	Running her hands down your back, the chiropractor will look for subluxations, tight muscles, and other imbalances. Then she’ll push and pull on the spine and hips to make corrections.	You’ll fill out a food diary or questionnaire. Your R.D. may take body measurements and order blood tests (for your vitamin and lipid profile). Together, you’ll make long- and short-term goals to fine-tune your diet.	She’ll suggest diluted doses of natural elements that match your issues. (Note that the National Institutes of Health finds “little evidence to support homeopathy as an effective treatment.”)	After an in-depth talk about your health, you’ll get an education in how to use diet, exercise, and natural therapies to prevent illnesses and treat symptoms.
<b>REFERRAL</b>	Acupuncture appears to work well for stress-related conditions like insomnia, high blood pressure, premenstrual syndrome, anxiety, and muscle tension.	Go if you have headaches, back pain, or neck pain—all are conditions research has shown chiropractic can treat. It may also help with sports injuries.	See one if you want to lose weight or need to control diabetes, high blood pressure, or heart disease. They can also be helpful for pregnant, athletic, or vegan women looking to ensure they’re eating right.	Some people with chronic problems like arthritis or fibromyalgia find homeopathy helpful where Western medicine has fallen short. The practice might also offer relief from colds, headaches, and other everyday ailments.	Visit one if you prefer a holistic approach to health. In some states, an N.D. can be your primary care doctor and prescribe medications (although many prefer to rely on nutrition and homeopathic or herbal meds).
<b>CREDENTIALS</b>	Completion of a four-year program and state license (L.Ac.) after about 3,000 hours of training and passing an exam	Graduation from a four-year chiropractic college that’s similar to medical school and earning a doctor of chiropractic (D.C.) after passing an exam	Earning an R.D. after a one-year internship and passing an exam (about two-thirds of states also issue licenses to credentialed R.D.s)	Certified Classical Homeopath, Diplomate in Homeotherapeutics, Diplomate of the Homeopathic Academy of Naturopathic Physicians, or Registered Homeopath of North America	Completion of a four-year accredited postgraduate program and earning a license (in 17 states and Washington, D.C.) after graduating and passing an exam
<b>BUMPER STICKER</b>	“Get to the Point Already”	“I’ve Got Your Back!”	“My Other Car Is a Lemon”	“You Had Me at Tiny”	“Herb Your Enthusiasm”



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