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Chronic Health Problems: Risk Factors, Prevention, Adjustment, and Management

Chapter Summary

Chronic health problems include chronic diseases as well as chronic health problems, such as pain. *Chronic* refers to a condition, usually occurring longer than six months. More than half of Canadians over age 20 have at least one chronic health condition with children under five now experiencing increases in chronic disease, such as inflammatory bowel disease at a rate of 7.2 per cent per year. Indigenous populations are 1.5 to 2 times more likely than the rest of the Canadian population for chronic heart disease. Major impacts of chronic health problems include fatigue, pain, physical disability, sleep problems, financial, social and psychological consequences. Premature death is the most significant.

Risk factors associated with the development of chronic health problems are stress, lifestyle, adherence issues, and personality characteristics, such as the hostility dimension of Type A personality, and high levels of neuroticism. These personality factors are associated with chronic inflammation, a key factor for the development of cancer, arthritis, and heart disease. Physical inactivity, the fourth leading risk factor for global mortality (WHO), and poor sleep behaviours, especially amongst shift workers, have been implicated in the development of such chronic diseases as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and hypertension. Prevention of chronic health problems is targeted towards managing work and life stress, enhancing positive lifestyle factors such as physical exercise, sleeping behaviours, and improving diet, as well as decreasing negative lifestyle factors like alcohol consumption and smoking.

Adjustment to chronic disease is unique to each person but there are commonalities. Erosion of personal relationships and family structure, loss of roles such as being a financial provider, and personal degradation of health can all occur over time.

Management of chronic disease includes strategies such as the use of social media for online chat systems. These often involve health-care providers, education, and group or peer support. Other types of chronic disease management include self-management techniques, CBT, mindfulness training, and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT).

Essay Topics

1. Chronic disease is now found to affect children as young as five years of age. What preventative measures could be put in place to help reduce this risk? How could they be effectively implemented? (pp. 167–170)
2. Stress is implicated in most chronic diseases as a risk factor. How can stress be managed to control the severity of chronic disease, such as irritable bowel syndrome? (pp. 167–168, 179–184)
3. Individuals living with chronic disease must make many adjustments to enable them to experience a positive lifestyle. Considering the biopsychosocial make up of a person (their biology, their psychology, their social relations), what are some adjustments which help them manage their disease? (pp. 172–176)
4. What role can health psychologists play in helping individuals manage their chronic disease? (pp. 176–177)

Weblinks

<https://www.symplur.com/healthcare-hashtags/>

Healthcare Hashtag Project is a free open platform for patients, caregivers, advocates, doctors, and other providers that connects them to relevant conversations and communities. (Symplur, 2018)

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/chronic-diseases.html>

Government of Canada Public Health Agency website for chronic disease information and support.

<https://www.selfmanagementontario.ca/>

Information on a self-management of chronic disease program.

<https://www.spine-health.com/blog/cyber-hugs-how-online-support-groups-help-chronic-pain>

Veritas Health online support site for chronic health conditions, particularly chronic back pain.

Glossary

Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) An evidence-based psychological intervention that emphasizes acceptance and mindfulness strategies as well as commitments towards living consistently with one's values.

Advance directives A legal document prepared by an individual when in a state of competence regarding the specific actions that should be taken medically if the individual loses decision-making capacity or is no longer able to communicate with his or her medical team.

Chronic disease A disease of long duration and generally slow progression. Not all chronic diseases are progressive.

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) Refers to a family of progressive lung diseases that result in difficulty breathing. Asthma, emphysema, and chronic bronchitis are examples of obstructive pulmonary disease.

Comorbidity The presence of two or more conditions simultaneously.

Diabetes A disease in which the body's ability to produce or use insulin is impaired. This results in high levels of sugar in the blood. Type 1 diabetes occurs when the immune system attacks and kills the cells that produce, store, and release insulin in the pancreas (beta cells). Type 1 diabetes requires insulin therapy. Type 2 diabetes occurs when the body does not make enough insulin or resists the effects of insulin. Type 2 diabetes may require insulin therapy, but may also be managed through diet and exercise changes.

Dialysis Dialysis is a treatment procedure used in patients whose kidneys are no longer removing enough wastes and fluids from the blood. In peritoneal dialysis, the lining of the abdomen and a cleaning solution are used to remove wastes and extra fluid from the body.

Fibromyalgia A chronic condition that is characterized by widespread musculoskeletal pain, fatigue, and tenderness to touch in areas of the body.

Hemodialysis A form of renal replacement therapy that uses an artificial dialyzer to filter the blood. It is usually performed under medical supervision in a hospital or clinic setting.

Inflammatory bowel disease Disease that involves chronic inflammation of all or part of the digestive tract. The two most common types of inflammatory bowel disease are Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. Inflammation in Crohn's disease can occur anywhere but is commonly found in the lower part of the small intestine (ileum). Inflammation in ulcerative colitis affects only the colon (large intestine).

Multiple sclerosis (MS) A chronic disease of the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord) that involves progressive damage to the myelin sheath (the protective covers) of the nerve fibres.

Osteoarthritis The most common form of arthritis in which the protective cartilage on the ends of the bones wears down over time. It commonly occurs in the weight-bearing joints of the hips, knees, and spine.

Rheumatoid arthritis A chronic and progressive form of arthritis in which inflammation occurs in the joints, causing swelling and pain around the joints. The most commonly affected joints are those of the hands, feet, wrists, elbows, knees, and ankles.

Saturated fats A type of fat in which the fatty acids all have single bonds. Saturated fats are typically solid at room temperature.

Self-management A process in which the patient is actively engaged in understanding and implementing the day-to-day tasks involved in managing a chronic health condition.

Trans fats A type of unsaturated fat that can be found naturally in some animal-based foods or can be industrially produced.

Type A personality A personality type characterized by hostility, competitiveness, and impatience.