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Take Control of Your Health

The Symptom-Centered Model of Conventional Medicine

Analysis by Dr. Joseph Mercola | October 30, 2026

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Many people are now on medications, yet chronic illness remains common, which reflects a focus on symptom management over addressing underlying metabolic and cellular dysfunction
- Nearly half of people in the U.S. took at least one prescription drug in the past 30 days, with 13.5% taking five or more medications. This polypharmacy can raise the risk of side effects and drug interactions, particularly in older adults
- Prescription drugs like statins, insulin, and antidepressants are not designed to correct metabolic dysfunction on their own. They manage symptoms and can have side effects that sometimes lead to additional medications, which is why regular medication reviews with a healthcare provider matter
- Many patients continue taking unnecessary medications because doctors rarely reevaluate prescriptions. These drugs are treated as permanent solutions rather than treatments to be reassessed over time with a healthcare provider
- Long-term health means going beyond symptom management alone to support your body's natural healing abilities. Supporting your cellular health, in addition to — not instead of — the care your healthcare provider recommends, may help address more than isolated symptoms

Modern healthcare may not be doing enough to make people healthier. Chronic diseases like diabetes, heart disease, and autoimmune disorders are now widespread, yet treatment often centers on managing symptoms.

Instead of looking at the root cause of disease, the medical system often focuses on treating symptoms. You feel pain? Take a pill. Your blood pressure is high? Here's another prescription. But masking symptoms alone may not address underlying causes, and for some people it can contribute to a cycle of added medications and side effects.

The concern is that conventional medicine often gives little attention to the role of cellular energy in maintaining health. Every function in your body depends on your cells producing enough energy. When energy production slows down, disease develops. But instead of focusing on supporting this energy, many treatments primarily manage the symptoms that appear when things start breaking down.

If you've ever wondered why so many people take daily medications yet do not always seem to get better, you're not alone. The healthcare system is largely built around treating disease and managing symptoms, which can leave less room for addressing underlying causes. It may be time to rethink the way you approach your health. By understanding how the symptom-centered model works and how it can contribute to a cycle of added medications, you may be able to take a more active role in your health.

Could There Be More to Healing Than Symptom Relief?

When you visit a doctor for a chronic health problem, a common outcome is leaving with a prescription. If your cholesterol is high, you may be prescribed a statin. If your blood sugar is high, you may be prescribed insulin or other medication. If you're feeling anxious or depressed, you may be offered an antidepressant. These medicines are sometimes even framed as "preventive" treatments, but may not address why your body is out of balance in the first place.

- **Medications manage symptoms without addressing root causes —** Your body may not randomly produce too much cholesterol or struggle with blood sugar regulation. These may be signs of deeper metabolic dysfunction.[1] Instead of investigating the cause, you may be given medications to manage symptoms without the underlying cause being fully explored.

- **Symptom management may maintain the disease state —** If you need to take medication for life to stay "healthy," then the underlying condition may be managed rather than resolved. Instead, it's controlling symptoms while the disease state may remain. Managing a condition with medication can be important, and decisions about long-term treatment are best made with your healthcare provider.

- **Statins lower cholesterol but may not directly address arterial damage —** These drugs lower cholesterol, but cholesterol is likely only one of several contributors to heart disease. Your body produces cholesterol because it is essential for cellular integrity, hormone synthesis, tissue repair, and overall health.[2]

  Heart disease is thought to involve endothelial damage from poor diet, smoking, pollution, toxins, and stress. When the arterial walls are damaged, cholesterol may accumulate at the site as part of the body's response to injury.

- **Cholesterol is a response to damage, not the cause —** Cholesterol appears to accumulate at damaged sites as a response to injury, not the cause of it. Lowering cholesterol without addressing these underlying causes may not fully address heart disease risk.

  In addition, statins can have side effects, including muscle pain, digestive problems, and, in some people, memory problems or a small rise in blood sugar.[3] Talk with your healthcare provider about your individual risks and benefits before changing any medication.

- **Insulin use is not intended to reverse insulin resistance —** Insulin injections lower blood sugar, but they are not designed to address the reason your body became insulin-resistant in the first place. Insulin therapy is also associated with weight gain, which may complicate metabolic health for some people.[4,5]

  In addition, alongside any insulin therapy prescribed by your healthcare provider, supporting proper energy production in the cells by addressing diet, movement, and environmental stressors may help improve metabolic health. Do not stop or reduce insulin without medical supervision.

- **Antidepressants may not address underlying causes —** Antidepressants can follow the same symptom-focused approach. Some medical experts argue that they are overprescribed, given to people who may not actually need them, and used as a quick fix for emotional distress rather than diagnosed clinical depression.[6,7] This may leave underlying issues, like chronic stress, poor diet, sleep deprivation, and unresolved trauma, unaddressed.

- **Long-term use can lead to new side effects —** Over time, the reliance on antidepressants can lead to long-term use, even when the original problem has improved or may not have required drug intervention in the first place.

  Antidepressants also can cause side effects, ranging from dizziness, restlessness, headaches, and dry mouth,[8] to sexual problems in some people and, particularly in teenagers, an increase in suicidal thoughts. Read "**The Dark Side of Antidepressants**" to learn more about the side effects of this drug.

- **Even heartburn medications may make the problem worse —** Proton pump inhibitors (PPIs) commonly prescribed for acid reflux work by blocking stomach acid production. However, some clinicians argue that heartburn can stem from having too little stomach acid, not too much.

  Taking a PPI may worsen the underlying issue by further reducing your stomach acid levels. They've also been linked to a higher risk of heart problems like myocardial infarction.[9] Find out more about the dangers of PPIs in "**More Proof Heartburn Products Are Dangerous**." Talk with your healthcare provider before stopping a PPI, since the right approach depends on your condition.

- **Suppressing symptoms may not restore health —** This symptom-first approach may be one reason so many people take medications for life without getting better.

  Chronic illness rates remain high even as prescription use has grown, which suggests that medications alone are not addressing underlying drivers, although other factors, such as an aging population, also contribute. When you only treat the surface-level problem, the real issue may continue to get worse beneath it.

The Rise of Polypharmacy

Many people don't realize how widespread prescription drug use has become. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC),[10] nearly half of all people in the U.S. (49.9%) took at least one prescription drug in the past 30 days, and almost a quarter (24.7%) took three or more, based on survey data from 2017 to March 2020.

About 13.5% of people took five or more prescriptions in a 30-day period, and about 1 billion drugs were provided or prescribed at physician office visits in 2019. This phenomenon is called polypharmacy, which means taking multiple medications at once.

- **Polypharmacy can add layers of treatment over time —** A person might start with a single blood pressure medication, but within a few years, they may be on drugs for cholesterol, reflux, diabetes, and depression. Every new prescription is meant to "help" manage symptoms, but each additional medication also adds the potential for side effects and interactions, which is why regular reviews of your medication list are recommended.[11]

- **Multiple medications can increase the risk of serious side effects —** Polypharmacy can come with serious risks, as the interactions between multiple medications can lead to unpredictable side effects. For instance, a blood pressure medication combined with an antidepressant may increase the risk of falls, dizziness, and cognitive decline.[12] Meanwhile, statins mixed with diabetes medications may affect blood sugar control in some people.[13]

- **Medications can become long-term treatments —** Over time, polypharmacy has been associated with greater care dependency in older adults. In a 10-year study of people aged 85 and older, each additional prescribed medication was associated with a 10% lower chance of recovering from low dependency to independence.[14] Many drugs can cause withdrawal effects if you try to stop taking them, making it feel like you "need" them forever.

Antidepressants, for example, can cause withdrawal symptoms, which can be severe if stopped too quickly.[15] Stopping should be done under the guidance of your healthcare provider. Acid reflux medications may cause a rebound effect, where stopping them can make your reflux worse than before.[16]

- **Side effects can lead to more prescriptions —** The long-term side effects of medications can sometimes create new health problems. For example, some pain relievers, such as acetaminophen, may damage the liver, especially when taken often, in high doses, or with alcohol,[17] antidepressants can cause weight gain,[18] and some blood pressure medications, such as beta blockers, may cause fatigue.[19]

  In addition to treating health problems, medications can sometimes create new ones that lead to even more prescriptions. This may be how people end up on an expanding list of drugs, sometimes without clear improvement in their health.

- **Prescriptions may not always be reevaluated —** Doctors may not always reassess whether all prescribed medications are still needed. Once a prescription is started, it can become permanent, even when the original condition has improved.[20]

- **The real goal is supporting proper function —** Some medications are best used short term. Instead of focusing on adding more drugs, the real goal is to find ways to support the body's natural ability to function properly.

To learn how to assess whether your current prescriptions are excessive may be causing harm, read "**How to Tell if You're Overprescribed Medications**."

Real Stories of Medications Creating More Problems Than They Solve

Many people believe that if they follow modern medicine, they'll get better. But for some, that isn't the case. You might know someone who did everything right — took the prescribed medications, followed the recommended treatments — yet their health still

declined. Sometimes, medications that are meant to help end up doing more harm than the original condition they were prescribed for. This cycle can happen.

- **Dora's drug-induced Parkinson's-like symptoms resolved after medication was stopped —** The World Health Organization has published a series of real-life cases where patients experienced harm from the drugs they were prescribed.[21] Among those case studies we have Dora, a 79-year-old woman, who developed uncontrollable shaking, head bobbing, and tongue movements.

  She was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease and told nothing further could be done. However, during their discussion, the doctor noted that the only time she'd seen a reversal of symptoms was in cases of drug-induced Parkinson's. This prompted Dora's daughter to review her mother's long list of prescriptions.

  Her daughter stopped all of the medications without medical consultation. After about a week of withdrawal symptoms, including hallucinations and disordered thinking, her Parkinson's-like symptoms resolved and she regained her independence.

- **Naila was nearly placed on long-term opioids —** Naila, an 88-year-old woman, was prescribed oxycodone for pain after fracturing her back, adding to the 10+ medications she was already taking. When she returned for a follow-up, her back had healed, but instead of discontinuing the oxycodone, the doctor suggested placing her on a long-term pain management plan. This would have left her on a powerful opioid she no longer needed.

  Fortunately, Naila's daughter questioned this decision. She asked the doctor to review every medication her mother was taking and check whether each one was still necessary. One by one, they went through the list, and to their shock, all but one medication was removed. Naila had been continuously taking drugs for conditions she no longer had without regular reassessment of whether they were still needed.[22]

- **Rahul's case illustrates what can happen when no one steps in —** Dora and Naila were fortunate to have someone advocating for their health, but how many others are still taking unnecessary medications without questioning them?

  Rahul, a 76-year-old man, was one of those people. He was given a diuretic for high blood pressure. Three weeks later, he developed a urinary tract infection, which doctors believed was caused by dehydration from the diuretic. Instead of adjusting his treatment, they simply added more medications — a course of antibiotics and an ACE inhibitor to replace the diuretic.

  Rahul also had Type 2 diabetes and was prescribed insulin, an oral diabetes medication, and a cholesterol-lowering drug. When community health pharmacists reviewed his medications, they found he was on a higher starting dose of the ACE inhibitor, which was reportedly causing dizziness and fainting. He was also taking a double dose of cholesterol medication by mistake and storing his insulin in the freezer, making it ineffective.[23]

- **Patients may not always be monitored after prescriptions are written —** These cases, documented by the WHO,[24] illustrate how patients may be prescribed medications without being monitored to determine whether the drugs are actually helping or causing harm.[25,26]

- **Being proactive may help reduce the risk of harm —** Overprescription, misdiagnosis, and drug interactions can put people at risk.[27] This is why patients and their families may benefit from being proactive in asking questions about medications, asking about possible risks, and ensuring prescriptions are necessary, together with their healthcare provider. Too often, people assume that more medications mean better health — but more medications do not always lead to better health.

The Wakeup Call

The burden of chronic disease today is not just a matter of genetics or aging — it may also reflect broader factors in medicine, nutrition, and consumer health education. For decades, conventional medicine has often focused on treating symptoms rather than always addressing the underlying cause of disease.

- **Symptom management is not healthcare —** If you follow this model, you may find yourself on a lifetime of prescriptions, managing symptoms but not addressing the underlying causes.

- **Better health may begin with asking questions —** To change the course of your health, it may help to look beyond the symptom-centered approach. This can include asking your healthcare provider whether each medication is still necessary, having long-term prescriptions reviewed regularly, and where your provider agrees it is appropriate, working toward a lower reliance on medication. Do not stop or change any prescribed medication on your own.

- **Your body has natural healing abilities that lifestyle choices can support —** True healing doesn't come from simply waiting for the next prescription. It can be supported by nurturing your body's natural ability to repair and restore itself, alongside the medical care you need.

- **Modern medicine falls short on chronic disease —** Just because the current system falls short doesn't mean you have to rely on it alone. The good news is that research suggests many chronic conditions are influenced by lifestyle factors, and some may be improved by changes in diet, movement, and sleep.

- **Start where health truly begins —** The key to improving the current trajectory of declining health is to focus on where true health begins — at the cellular level. It's time to stop treating the body like a collection of symptoms and start supporting it as a whole, self-healing system, alongside appropriate medical care.

This article is for informational purposes only and does not constitute medical advice. Consult a qualified healthcare provider before making changes to your health regimen.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About Modern Medicine and Chronic Disease

Q: Why is conventional medicine often focused at managing chronic diseases than resolving them?

A: Modern medicine often treats symptoms rather than always addressing what's causing the problem. You're often given pills for blood pressure or pain, but the underlying issues, such as poor diet, low energy, or stress, may not always be addressed.

Q: What happens if you stay on medication for years?

A: Long-term medication use can lead to new health problems. Many drugs come with side effects that may cause fatigue, weight gain, or other issues — and can sometimes lead to more prescriptions over time. Reviewing long-term medications regularly with your healthcare provider can help.

Q: What is polypharmacy and why is it dangerous?

A: Polypharmacy means taking multiple medications at once. This can increase the risk of side effects, drug interactions, and confusion. It's common in older adults and can sometimes make health problems worse.

Q: Can medications do more harm than good?

A: In some cases, yes. Some people are given drugs they no longer need or may not have needed in the first place. Over time, this can lead to more health problems, especially when no one checks whether those prescriptions are still necessary,

which is why regular medication reviews with your healthcare provider are important.

Q: How can I support my health alongside my medical care?

A: Start by supporting cellular energy through nutrition, movement, sleep, and environmental detox. Reducing exposures that may harm your body and giving it what it needs may help it work better. Many health problems may improve when you address the basics. Talk with your healthcare provider before stopping or changing any medication.

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