



[MIND YOUR BODY]

The Doctor Is Within

YOU CAN JUDGE YOUR HEALTH BETTER THAN YOUR DOCTOR. BY KATIE GILBERT

WE PUT A lot of faith in the medical establishment these days, and doctors can certainly tell us a great deal about our constitution. But there's one person who knows more about your health than any doctor—you. As it turns out, the answer to one deceptively simple question—"How would you rate your own health?"—predicts disease and longevity more accurately than even the most thorough medical records.

Why are our own health assessments so dead on? Maybe because we monitor our ups and downs and symptoms 24/7—a perspective no doctor has access to.

"We know things that physicians cannot physically detect," says Yael Benyamani, a health psychologist at Tel-Aviv University in Israel. Fatigue and appetite fluctuations, for example, can be symptoms of declining health, and you're likely to be much more attuned

to them than is your doctor.

Decades of studies show that people who say their health is poor are likely to die sooner than those who rate their health excellent, even after controlling for how sick people actually are. The association is independent of medical diagnoses, symptoms or level of disability. In other words, the way we rate our own health reflects something beyond what doctors have the power to diagnose. But what?

Part of the answer lies in how your body reacts to stress. A recent study in the *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine* found that people who considered themselves healthy had wider fluctuations in their levels of the stress-fighting hormone cortisol: low levels most of the time, with big spikes during tense situations. People who felt unhealthy had high levels of cortisol all the time—a symptom of chronic stress, which is linked to cardiovascular disease, among many other problems.

Measures of psychological stress showed the same pattern: People with good coping skills or strong social support perceived themselves to be in better health—and they were. The researchers conclude that the way a person handles life's inevitable strains is a big part of how he judges his well-being.

Our assessments don't just predict health outcomes; they may cause them too. "It's possible that the frame of mind of being a healthy person leads you to be more active, take better care of your health and take more preventive measures," Benyamani says. By the same token, getting stuck in the rut of considering yourself unhealthy could incline you toward picking up risky behaviors like smoking or slacking off on eating well and working out.

Recent research also suggests that believing you are healthy can have a positive influence on your endocrine and immune systems. "There may be ways in which pursuing a healthy behavior leads to health outcomes by totally other routes," explains Daniel Bailis, associate professor of psychology at the Univer-

sity of Manitoba. "A behavior like exercise may have positive health implications not only because you're more fit, but because you're creating a healthier state of the self through multiple pathways."

While our ratings of our own health predict our actual health regardless of culture, race, gender and age, people arrive at their answers differently. A study in *Medical Care* found that people under age 25 tend to focus on their health behaviors, like whether they work out or smoke cigarettes, while people over 25 think more about their health problems. This makes sense, since people generally don't have to deal with serious health problems until later in life. It also reveals that people intuitively concentrate on the health considerations most salient to them. This is another possible reason their responses are so predictive.

There's also evidence that men's health ratings predict health slightly better than women's do. Women tend to incorporate their current mood into their appraisals, and moods shift much more quickly than health.

To stay healthy, use intuition to guide your behavior. Changes are much more likely to stick if the motivation behind them is intrinsic. Let's say you want to work out more. Thoughts like, "Exercise is enjoyable," will fare much better than, "My doctor thinks I need to get in shape."

And don't try to fit into a prescribed behavior change. Make the change fit you. Bailis notes, "What's important is to recognize that there are strategies that may not be the latest diet, the latest craze. They might suit a person's tastes and desires, even if they don't exactly conform to a set level of calorie intake or activity that the professionals may be recommending."

Experts hasten to issue a word of warning: All these findings don't mean you should start disregarding your doctor's advice. But you may be taking a risk by closing off another crucial source of information—yourself. Don't dismiss that inner stethoscope.

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NONPHYSICIAN, HEAL THYSELF

GET AN INTERNAL ASSESSMENT WITH THE POWER TO PREDICT.

- Pay close attention to changes in your daily functioning. Alterations in basic patterns like sleep, appetite, energy or general activity levels—or the development of what Benyamani calls "vague bodily sensations, not things you would necessarily tie to specific illness"—are possible red flags that only you would notice.
- In assessing your health, focus on behaviors that put you at risk for a wide number of diseases, like smoking, says Ellen Idler, a health psychology researcher at Rutgers University.
- Draw on your experiences of illness to compare your current state with the past. Idler's research finds that people with no history of serious illness aren't as good at predicting their future health.
- Your health is not a checklist. According to Benyamani, "Simply knowing how many chronic conditions you have is not very useful, because you don't know very much about the severity of those conditions."
- Depression or mood will cloud your crystal ball. Disposition isn't as closely linked to mortality or the onset of disease as other factors, such as diet and energy level.

QUIZ

HOW HEALTHY DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

Excellent =5 | Very Good =4 | Good =3 | Fair =2 | Poor =1

IN GENERAL, HOW WOULD YOU RATE:

- Your overall health? _____
- Your energy level? _____
- Your ability to perform daily physical tasks? _____
- Your response to everyday stressors? _____
- How well you avoid unhealthy habits like smoking? _____
- Your level of exercise? _____
- Your health compared with other people your age? _____

TOTAL: _____

YOUR HEALTH IS PROBABLY:

30-35: Excellent. You're at the top of your game.

24-29: Very Good. Not a cloud in the sky.

18-23: Good. Keep it up.

12-17: Fair. Proceed with caution.

7-11: Poor. Better get that checked out.