

February 6, 2012

Today's Health for the Empowered Woman

RESOLUTIONS FOR 2012

Once a year on New Year's Eve cultures all across the globe celebrate the ending of one year and the beginning of another. This is done with much pomp and fanfare to extirpate the past demons and to placate the future ones to ensure prosperity, health, love, etc. Whether the ritual is performed by screaming, fireworks, dragons, bells, banging pots or throwing garbage out of windows, the same result is sought. The morning after, in the clear light of day and sobriety, resolutions are made: some in remorse for a bad previous year and others in hopes of "turning things around". Without critiquing the usual nonsensical resolutions that are never kept, as a physician for women, I would like to offer some resolutions that I believe will have a positive impact on all people, women especially. Young women should take charge of their reproductive health and seek appropriate contraception when not immediately interested in child bearing and, if considering a child in the near future, maintain a lifestyle that is healthy to a developing embryo and fetus. Daily vitamins that include folic acid, no alcohol or drugs and healthy diet not only improve the chance of conceiving but also reduce certain birth defects. Many women do not receive regular health care and especially are reluctant to have pap smears done. It would be wise to put that fear aside and resolve to see a primary care provider AND a gynecologist. Lab tests can help detect previously nonsymptomatic disease and a careful physical exam will hopefully be negative but possibly detect lumps, bumps, tumors malignant or benign. The Pap smear detects early cervical changes that might lead to cervical cancer and, if early, can be treated easily in office. These office visits will also, when appropriate, lead to screening colonoscopy, bone density, mammogram, cholesterol screening, and chest x-rays, ekg's and vaccinations for flu and pneumonia. Most of these tests are covered by third party payors and when and if positive need not have a grim prognosis. Early detection and treatment is paramount so indeed RESOLVE to get this done. This past year there was a push to educate women about the risk of heart disease. While the "push" might be over, the risk still exists. The number one killer of men and women in the United States is heart disease. Women do not have quite the same symptoms as men. They are usually more subtle and might not be anything more than feeling a little warm and a slight tingling in the arm or chin. Women with these symptoms should RESOLVE to be seen and to get a stress echocardiogram and evaluation for heart disease.

So, everyone swears off alcohol after the debauchery and excesses of the holiday season. This is laudable but usually not long lasting and a more prudent approach would be to RESOLVE to change lifestyle. I have written here exhaustively about obesity and the attendant risks. A resolution to lose weight would include avoidance of carbohydrates; limit or eliminate products with high fructose corn syrup; not eating "fast food", portion control, and simply "not eating anything white"—that includes pasta, pizza, bagels, donuts, potatoes, etc. A life style change must include a resolution to stop smoking. No one would even debate the cause and effect. There is no early diagnosis for lung cancer and the death is a miserable one characterized by slow strangulation. There are a few

prescription products to help cure the addiction and nicotine patches to slowly wean off cigarettes. These all fail without the WILL to stop. Unless the habit of smoking is stopped the addiction to nicotine cannot be helped. All physicians are trained in therapy for this, New York State has a hot line, counselors, hypnotists and acupuncturists abound and will be successful if the patient truly wants to quit. A discussion about resolutions would not be complete without some advice concerning medications and recreational drugs. As the economy has worsened and joblessness has increased, drug use has gone up through the roof. Recreational drugs such as marijuana, ecstasy, are showing up in blood tests of newborns and odd behaviors in patients usually point to drug use. A very large problem now is the use of prescription narcotics for a wide range of maladies, usually chronic back pain. Sadly, these patients are rendered addicted by these “chronic” conditions and the impact on the rest of their health care is tremendous. Anesthesia is more difficult, pain control from surgery is difficult, blood loss is increased, etc. A wise resolution would be to have all medications, especially narcotics reviewed by a physician periodically with the goal of wellness through appropriate treatment and not just masking pain with addictive and expensive drugs. This list of resolutions can be just the beginning of empowerment. I would also add that a resolution to improve relationship with spouses, partners and family members can make for a happier life. The New Year has arrived. Get going! Make it happen and next year you will be cheering about how great the year was and not just hoping for a better one.