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Speaker's corner

Health proverbs

A proverb is a short popular saying that expresses effectively some commonplace truth or useful thought. It can help people remember important messages and therefore is an important tool for information dissemination.

Our ancestors have left us a great wealth of health proverbs, such as “Prevention is better than cure (1240)” (prevention), “Eat to live, not live to eat (1387)” (obesity), “Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise (1496)” (sleep), “Better to wear out than to rust out (1557)” (physical activity), “Never let the sun go down on your anger (1642)” (stress), “A stitch in time saves nine (1732)” (early treatment), “An apple a day keeps the doctor away (1866)” (fruits), and “You are what you eat (1940)” (nutrition).¹

Health proverbs that we have today were created by our ancestors based on their personal experience and observations. However, many of those health proverbs have not been scientifically verified. Now that we have access to modern clinical trials and scientific studies, it is perhaps time for us to create new science based health proverbs for future generations.

For example, based on results of modern scientific dose-response studies, would it be more correct to say “One and a half apple a day keeps the doctor away”? Should there be health proverbs with advice on no smoking, drinking alcohol in moderation, maintaining a balanced diet, or being physically active? How about telling people to watch and keep within normal range their blood cholesterol, body fat, or blood pressure? While there are dozens of existing proverbs about general health problems such as the common cold, balanced diet, sleep, hygiene, etc, should there be modern proverbs warning people of the four major chronic diseases (heart disease, cancer, lung disease, and mental disorder)?

A proverb is usually a homely illustration of a general truth and is never meant to be a dry scientific statement. As long as it works to promote the health of the general population, it is a good proverb. In addition to health proverbs for the grown ups, we also need health proverbs for children.

On this note, here are some potentially promising health proverbs for the 21st century: “A smile is an inexpensive way to improve your looks” (optimism); “To get angry is to punish yourself with other people's mistakes” (stress management); “The more you smoke, the more you croak”

(smoking); “Smoking makes you ugly” (smoking—it causes facial wrinkles and hair loss)²; “Drinker's liver, smoker's lung, couch potato's flab, binger's bulge” (drinking, smoking, inactivity, overeating); “Drinking and driving don't mix” (traffic safety)³; “Seven days without exercise makes one weak” (physical activity); “Eat well, be active, feel good about yourself” (nutrition, physical activity, positive attitude)⁴; “Tri-colour meal is a good deal” (nutrition—tri-colour as in traffic lights—that is, red, yellow, green, for example, tomato, corn, lettuce, etc); “Imagine everyone has a fixed lifetime amount to eat: the less you eat, the longer you live” (diet); “Double cheeseburgers and large fries, How does diet pop make that wise?” (diet).

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