



The Health Detectives

They aren't M.D.'s, but they can detect disease—and maybe even save your life

BY AVIVA PATZ • PHOTOGRAPHS BY LEVI BROWN

WHEN IT COMES TO SEEKING MEDICAL HELP, men tend to have tunnel vision. They see doctors and no one else. Which leaves an essential supporting cast waiting in the wings—people who aren't M.D.'s or D.O.'s but who can still help prevent the big DOA. We're talking about everyone from pharmacists to physical therapists, dentists to optometrists. Heck, even massage therapists play a part. "All of these health professionals

are critical players on your health-care team,” says Ted Epperly, M.D., a *Men’s Health* family-medicine advisor. “Yes, they can fill cavities and prescribe contact lenses, but they’re also important watchdogs for your overall health and for potentially saving your life.” The catch: You have to know *how* they can help in order to take full advantage of their skills. Ready to assemble a true medical A-Team? Read on. And remember, if one of these professionals does spot something, you should see a medical doctor—often a specialist—for a follow-up.

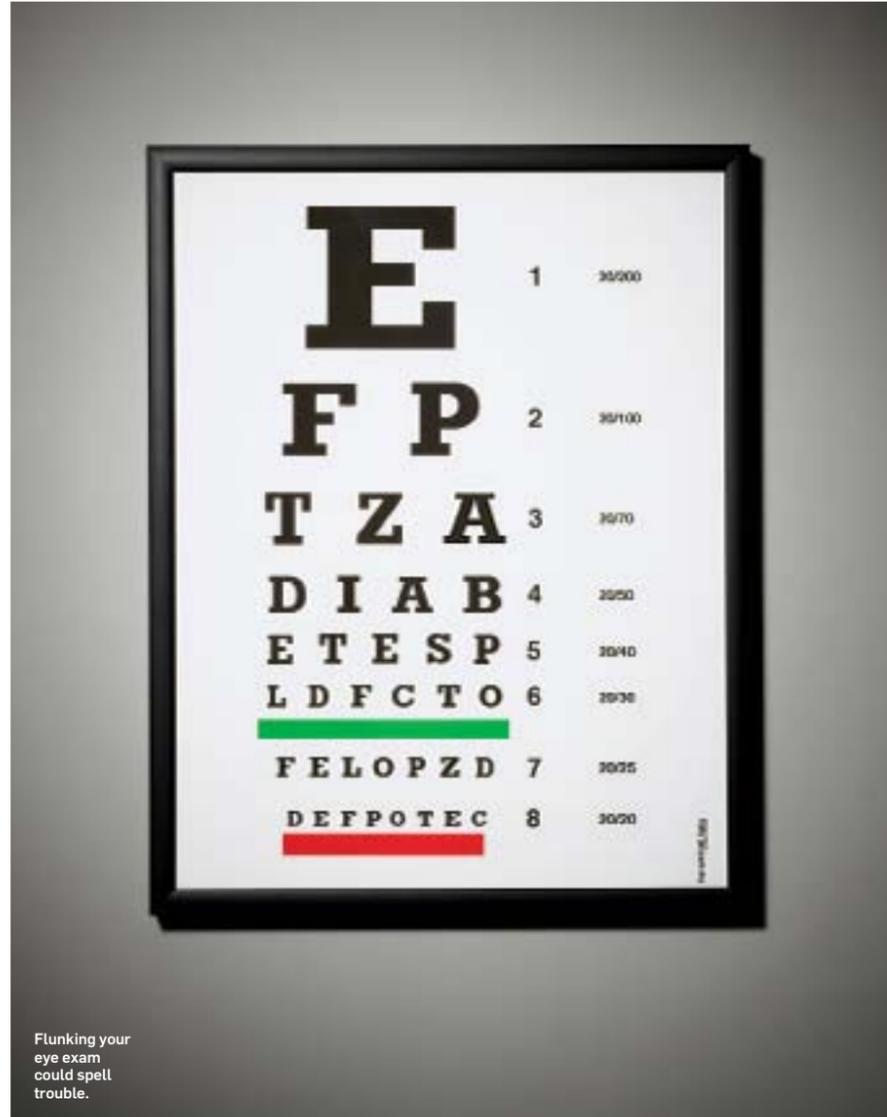
Health detective: Your dentist

Even if you brush and floss as if a hygienist were looking over your shoulder, your mouth may still hold a dirty secret: oral cancer. What’s that you say? You never smoked or chewed tobacco? Doesn’t matter. You may be at risk for a form of oral cancer caused by HPV, a virus transmitted through oral sex. So open wide for your dentist. “We look for any lesions on the back of your throat, inside your cheeks and gums, and under your tongue as part of our regular exam,” says Kenneth Young, D.D.S., the *Men’s Health* dentistry advisor. You should also ask your dentist to check for these more subtle signs of trouble.

- **A FLOPPY TONGUE** If you don’t have a bed partner to kick you, you may never know that you’re a hard-core snorer. That’s risky because snorers are more likely to suffer from sleep apnea, a condition in which the airway is cut off by an obstruction. Fortunately, during a dental exam your head is tilted back, allowing your dentist to see if your tongue slips back or if your soft palate might collapse during sleep, says Dr. Young. Some dentists are trained to help manage sleep apnea, but most will refer you to a sleep specialist.

- **WEAK JAWBONE** Dental x-rays can be a valuable window into the overall state of your skeleton. Specifically, studies have linked the bone-mineral density of a person’s lower jaw to that of his spine and hips. “Because patients come to see us once or twice a year, we can compare x-rays and catch bone loss early,” says Dr. Young. And before you dismiss osteoporosis as an old-lady problem, consider this: As many as one in five men will develop the condition, according to a 2008 Mayo Clinic review. If caught early, bone loss can be stopped and even reversed with strength training and a diet rich in calcium and vitamin D, says Dr. Young.

- **BAD TEETH** High blood sugar doesn’t cause cavities, but it can still screw up your teeth—and worse, lead to diabetes. In a 2011 study, Columbia University scientists were able to correctly diagnose prediabetes and diabetes in 73 percent of people just by looking for a combination of gum trouble and four or more missing teeth. The reason: High blood sugar is high-octane fuel for oral bacteria. If your dentist tells you that your oral health is this bad,



consider seeing your primary-care doctor for a hemoglobin A1c test. The Columbia researchers found that adding this blood-sugar test boosted identification of prediabetes and diabetes to 93 percent.

Health detective: Your optometrist

You know to book an appointment with an eye doctor when you need a new pair of specs, but did you know that an optometrist can peer right inside your body, too? “The eyes are the only place in your body where we can directly examine blood vessels without making an incision,” says Stephanie S. Chan, O.D., a private-practice optometrist in Los Altos, California. “They’re representative of vessels throughout your body.”

- **NARROW BLOOD VESSELS** An eye exam is an essential (and painless) tool for early dis-

ease diagnosis. Diabetes can show up as small areas of bleeding in your retinas, while irregular, narrow blood vessels in your retinas are one of the first signs of high blood pressure, says Chan. In fact, people who had narrow blood vessels in their retinas were 60 percent more likely to develop severe hypertension over the next 10 years than those with wider vessels, according to a recent Australian study.

- **RINGS AROUND YOUR CORNEA** You might see slight discoloration, but your optometrist sees trouble. A gray or white arc around your cornea—a condition seen more often in men than in women—may indicate high cholesterol, says Chan. A 2010 study in the *American Journal of Ophthalmology* found that people with high LDL (bad) cholesterol were 94 percent more likely to have the telltale arcs around their corneas.

Photo styling: Elizabeth Pease

- **POOR PERIPHERAL VISION** Your skills on the basketball court aren’t the only thing at risk. Poor peripheral vision could indicate a time bomb in your brain. Ask your optometrist to perform a “visual field” test; it assesses your peripheral vision and may pick up on tumors that impact your visual system, says Chan. Optometrists may also suspect a brain tumor if they spot a swollen optic nerve when peering into your dilated eyes. “Tumors increase the pressure of fluid in your brain, pushing on the optic nerve and causing it to swell,” says Chan.

Health detective: Your massage therapist

A deep-tissue massage could save your hide. “Most people think we just relieve muscle pain, but we’re also trained to notice signs and symptoms of bigger problems, both internal and external,” says Anita Benedictis, L.M.T., a licensed massage therapist and a regional chairwoman of the American Massage Therapy Association.

- **SUSPICIOUS SPOTS** Your massage therapist may be checking you out—in a good way. “We see more of your skin than you do,” Benedictis says. “We can be the first line of defense in spotting melanomas and other suspicious lesions, moles, and skin disorders.” A massage therapist can’t replace your dermatologist’s mole check, but many are trained to spot problems you can point out to your doctor. Stick with the same massage therapist year after year so he or she can visually track changes over time.

Health detective: Your pharmacist

The guy working in the Walgreens window does more than just dole out pills—he has an expanding arsenal of weapons to help customers diagnose and prevent disease. “Pharmacists are trying to make preventive care more convenient and accessible,” says Norman Tomaka, B.Pharm., a clinical consultant pharmacist in Melbourne, Florida.

- **HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE** Some pharmacists can check your blood pressure, blood sugar, and testosterone levels (saliva swab), and your prostate function and cholesterol levels (blood tests), according to the American Pharmacists Association. Certain screenings are free; and even if there’s a charge, pharmacists’ services are usually cheaper than the equivalent tests scheduled through your doctor’s office, says Tomaka. Bonus: You often receive results on the spot.

- **DRUG SIDE EFFECTS** Your doctor prescribed your medication, but your pharmacist knows it best, including whether that weird rash is a side effect or if your headache could be the result of a drug interaction. Bottom line: If you ever suspect that something’s amiss with a med—be it Rx or OTC—call the expert. Pharmacists have access to drug data-

bases that alert them to interactions and side effects (often discovered after a drug is approved), and they talk to dozens of people who take the same meds you do. “Pharmacists observe trends that may be of clinical benefit to patients,” says Tomaka. “For example, people with certain sensitivities to foods and coloring may be at higher risk of allergic reaction to a new drug.” Alert your pharmacist to any allergies or sensitivities you have as well as any supplements or nonprescription drugs you take; this way he or she will have all the clues to properly assess your condition.

related conditions), such as slight twitching, stiffness, and rigidity in your arms, legs, or joints, says O’Neill. Nervous-system disorders may also slow your reflexes and reduce your muscular strength—and the changes may be so subtle that it takes a therapist’s touch to bring them to light.

- **SWOLLEN JOINTS** Because Lyme disease often mimics the flu—it’s characterized by fever, chills, and body pain, followed by a period of erratic symptoms—people commonly go without a definitive diagnosis. But a physical therapist can easily spot the

Poor peripheral vision could indicate a time bomb in your brain.

Health detective: Your physical therapist

If you see your primary-care doctor for muscle pain or an injury, the exam might last 20 minutes, tops. But a physical therapist’s initial evaluation lasts an hour, and then he or she will see you two or three times a week for months, depending on your condition. “We’re putting our hands on you, talking to you, listening to you, watching your body move,” says Gail O’Neill, P.T., a Manhattan-based physical therapist. That kind of repeated close-up scrutiny gives physical therapists the unique opportunity to identify certain serious illnesses early.

- **STIFF LIMBS** As they manipulate your body, physical therapists can detect early signs of Parkinson’s disease (and other nerve-

abnormal muscle movements, joint swelling, and muscle weakness caused by this inflammatory tickborne disease, says O’Neill.

- **WEAK MUSCLES** Physical therapy may not be on your to-do list, especially if you’re fit and healthy, but perhaps it should be. “No matter what your fitness level, if you don’t have good alignment or posture, you will end up with an injury down the road,” warns Jen Lausten, P.T., of Tompkins Orthopedic Physical Therapy Services in Leesburg, Virginia. Your solution? Schedule a fitness checkup, during which a physical therapist can assess your alignment, upper- and lower-body strength, flexibility, and core control. From there, the therapist can design a custom workout to shore up any worrisome weak spots.

5 CONDITIONS YOUR DOCTOR SHOULDN'T TREAT

Watch out when your general practitioner tries to play specialist

1 Depression

GPs often prescribe antidepressants without a proper diagnosis, a 2011 study in *Health Affairs* found. But psychiatrists monitor symptoms of depression and are better able to customize treatment, whether with drugs or therapy, says Michael Peterson, M.D., Ph.D., of the University of Wisconsin. Psychiatrists suss out the problem before prescribing.

2 Knee aches

In a 2010 University of Utah study, primary-care doctors underused x-rays and overused MRIs when assessing knee pain—a likely cause of incorrect diagnosis. Unless the reason for your pain is obvious, go to an orthopedist.

3 Back pain

Most GPs will write prescriptions for pain pills, but exercise is a better fix, a 2010 Japanese study reports. “Physical therapists perform detailed assessments and build treatment plans based on your strength, flexibility, and mobility,” says Joyce Maring, P.T., director of George Washington University’s physical therapy program.

4 Suspicious moles

Keep your shirt on. “GPs may recommend unnecessary removal of moles,” says Jessie Cheung, M.D., an assistant professor of dermatology at Rush University medical center. “Dermatologists can recognize specific patterns in moles and decide if a biopsy is really necessary.”

5 Weight problems

Your regular doc can confirm that you are, in fact, fat, but won’t be effective at helping you lose the lard, according to a 2009 University of Colorado study review. If you want expert advice, consider hiring a dietitian. Unlike your GP, a dietitian will have the time to work with you on a daily basis to shed the weight.

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