

## Life, Risk, and Prevention

Risk in life is unavoidable. There is a small risk of being attacked by a shark or struck by lightning. There is a small, but considerably greater risk of being injured by a car when crossing a street. Everywhere we go and everything we do, there are germs, and obstacles, and hazards of all variety. Risk is unavoidable.

Yet we do go to the beach, or cross the street, or brave the germs in the environment. The rationale for doing so is not that there is no risk, but rather that the risk involved is worth it. The small risk of being hit by a car, reduced to negligible but not zero by looking carefully in both directions, is worth it to us if we have business on the other side.

In some sense, we accept risk whenever alternative risks are higher. If one is unwilling to risk something as rare as a shark attack, one runs the much greater risk of missing out on the fun at the beach for nothing. If one is unwilling to risk crossing the street, one runs the risk of being left behind, or missing some important activity or obligation.

I mention all this not to discourage you from going to the beach or crossing the street, but to place medical risk in context. Many of my patients who are prescribed medication call or see me afterward and express grave concern at the potential side effects listed on the package insert or by the pharmacist.

Hearing about potential side effects, many patients decide that they should not be taking medication prescribed to them. Some discuss this with their doctor, others discard the medication and don't tell.

The problem with this reasoning is that it fails to consider the *risk of not taking the medication*. The pill bottle doesn't mention that. This is especially important when the condition being treated does not produce any symptoms, such as high blood pressure or high cholesterol. These conditions are risk factors for heart attack and stroke. The risk of not taking medication prescribed for high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, and other conditions can be very high. Taking medication is never risk free, but not taking medication can be even riskier.

Both doctors and patients need to respect the potential hazards of prescription medications. There is every reason to avoid taking medication when it is reasonable to do so. But medication should not be avoided simply because there are potential hazards in taking it. In fact, medication should only be prescribed to you when your doctor is convinced that the risks for you in taking it are smaller than the risks in not taking it. If you are uncertain if your doctor has considered the risks before prescribing you medication, ask. If taking medication lowers your risk of illness overall, it is appropriate even though the medication is not completely free of risk.



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The other thing to note about risk is that we all tend to have distorted perceptions about how big a risk is, depending on whether or not we feel in control. The risk of dying from driving without a seat belt, or riding a motorcycle without a helmet, is considerable. The risk of dying from cancer induced by radon or dioxin in the environment is trivial in comparison. Yet many people willing to engage in dangerous activities are preoccupied with very low order environmental hazards, like radon or the pesticides used in growing produce.

Life is full of risk, and managing risk is a challenge. In medicine, and for that matter in general, the challenge is best met when all of the options are considered, and choices are made that reduce the overall risk for adverse outcomes. While that risk will never be zero, it can be kept low if you are reasonable in your behaviors, and candid with your doctor. Remember in making choices that natural doesn't necessarily mean safe, that risks are not large simply because you don't control them, and that there may be risk in choosing not to do something. There is a small risk of *cryptosporidiosis* from drinking a glass of water, but I'm getting thirsty-so I'll take my chances.

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*Preventive Medicine Column*

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