



## Sierra Sacramento Valley Medicine

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### Take Your Medicine



By Stephen A. McCurdy, MD, MPH

#### **Our choice is not whether we take medication, but which we take.**

The last several years had not been kind to Adam Sawyer.<sup>1</sup> In his early 40s, he had come to see me because of a job-related knee injury that stubbornly refused to resolve. Despite the usual medications and physical therapy, his knee was still “not right.”

A review of his recent medical history showed that his knee was not our only concern. He had recently been diagnosed with diabetes and high cholesterol, for which he was taking three expensive medications. Although his blood pressure was not in the range requiring medication, it was above the ideal, and it was likely simply a matter of time before he would be taking medication for this as well.

Finally, he had gained approximately 50 pounds in the past several years. In an effort to reverse his weight gain, he had purchased a home exercise bicycle and was using it two to three times per week.

The common thread for all of Mr. Sawyer’s medical conditions was his weight gain. Successful treatment for this — with a mix of increased exercise and dietary change sufficient to bring his weight down — held the potential not only to improve his medical problems, but to cure them.

That’s right: cure. Exercise is a medicine with a “triple whammy”: with an appropriate diet, it can prevent, improve, and cure conditions of increasing importance in our society, such as high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, high cholesterol, and others.

I shared with Mr. Sawyer this perspective of exercise as a medicine. Virtually everyone in our society who lives long enough will eventually have to take medications. Usually this is for high blood pressure, but diabetes, high cholesterol, and heart disease are also important causes.

The need to take medications eventually is essentially universal, so we have little choice in *whether* we take medications. Our choice, then, lies in *which* medications we take. In choosing, we must consider side effects and cost.

“Mr. Sawyer, you are at the point where you must take medications, but you still have a lot of choice in which ones you take. Here is my question to you: Would you rather continue the medications you are now taking, which improve but will not cure you, cost money at the pharmacy, and have a range of side effects including dizziness, stomach upset, sexual difficulties, and others?”

“Or would you rather take a medication that will definitely improve and has a good chance of curing, can be obtained for free, and has side effects that are desirable, including more energy, improved mood and sense of well being, and better sleep? The only bad side effect of this medication is that, for approximately 40 minutes when taking it, you sweat and breathe hard. But that is over quickly, and after a shower you will feel great.”

A thoughtful look came over Mr. Sawyer as he realized the medication I was talking about was daily exercise: five to six days a week of 40 minutes or so. Were these side effects so intolerable when stacked up against the side effects he had accepted from the medications he bought at the pharmacy?

“If I were to write the next chapter in your life, Mr. Sawyer, I would want you to make that exer-cycle your best friend. I would want you to get up a little earlier in the morning to start your day on it, five to six days per week. And when your enthusiasm flags with the sweating and the hard breathing, and you ask yourself why you are doing this, I would want you to answer yourself that you are doing it because it is your daily medicine, and you have chosen this side effect instead of those the come with the medicines for sale in the pharmacy.

“If you do this and, in combination with your diet, get your weight down into the normal range, there is a good chance that your diabetes will go away, your high cholesterol will normalize, and your blood pressure will remain low. At the very least these conditions will improve, and you may reduce or no longer need your pharmacy medications. It may well be that the only medication you will need is exercise.

“And did I mention? It will likely help your knee as well.”

While we all have heard and know that we need to exercise more and eat less, most of us don't view this from the perspective I offered Mr. Sawyer, *i.e.*, that exercise and diet are medicines that must be taken in the proper dose. The plain truth is, we all will eventually require medications as we move through life.

Our choice, then, is not *whether* we take medication, but *which* we take. Will we choose the kind that helps but doesn't cure, costs us our hard-earned money in the pharmacy, and may have numerous undesirable side effects? Or will we choose the kind that prevents and cures, with side effects are all positive but for the sweating? (In fact, many people enjoy this side effect.)

Like it or not, we must choose.

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*In addition to office hours at UCD Medical Center, the author can be found six mornings a week at Sacramento's Bertha Henschel Park, taking his medicine. — J.L.*

1. Names and some details altered.