



Know Your Ailment: A Ready REckoner

by Dr Ravi Bapat & Dr Kamxi Bhate

Foreword by Dr Aroon Tikekar

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About the book

A must-read for General Practitioners as well as laypersons and a valuable source of reference for every home!

As per the statistics provided by the World Health Organisation, approximately 70 percent of illnesses do not require medication. Simple home remedies can help alleviate them. About 30 percent of illnesses do need treatment. Of those, 25 percent can be resolved with the help of routine investigations and standard medication. About 3 percent of the patients need antibiotics and simple investigations. Specialists, super-specialists, and sophisticated medical investigations are necessary in only about 2 percent of cases.

So how do we determine whether our illness requires intensive medical treatment or not? How would we know whether the treatment would lead to recovery or is likely to create further complications? What are the measures we can take at home before we decide to consult a doctor? In view of the escalating cost of medical care and the plethora of tests and investigations that are often prescribed, what must a patient know about his illness to ensure that he gets the correct treatment? Two leading doctors address precisely these questions in this ready reckoner.

Leaving politics for spiritual work, Sri Aurobindo developed a method of spiritual practice that he called Integral Yoga. The central theme of his vision was the evolution of human life into a divine life.

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Introduction

At the start of our dialogue with you, there is one fundamental truth we wish to underscore: **You are the master of your body.** The human body is a unique creation of nature. It is endowed with a defence mechanism in the form of an immune system which is a boon. Immunity can be enhanced by proper diet, exercise, rest, and stress-free mental and physical environment.

Immunity can also get suppressed by irregular/disagreeable diet, unhealthy lifestyle and various addictions. One must learn simple methods to maintain/enhance immunity to combat the seasonal, periodic and stress-related diseases.

Now, why have we made the effort to write this book? The purpose is to make you aware of common medical problems that occur often in our day to day lives, in a simple yet scientific manner. Most ailments do not require medication and can be cured with simple home remedies. *Dadima ka batua* or a grandmother's pouch, which used to contain home remedies for common ailments, was enough to treat many illnesses. Doctors prescribe drugs to cure a disease and to restore good health. Interestingly,

the philosophy of modern medicine is: “Fall ill and I shall treat you”. As against this, we would like to tell you: It is of paramount importance to preserve your immunity which is entirely in your own hands. This book also aims to clear certain presumptions, doubts, and myths prevailing in society.

Another important reason for writing this book is to make people understand that once you get into the vicious cycle of investigations and expensive treatments, then the escape route is very narrow.

A controlled diet; importance of fasting, practising yoga, and fibre in diet; and understanding the role of home remedies and simple measures—all these play an important role in maintaining good health and this has been practised in our country for centuries. We belong to the land of *Surya Namaskar* and *yoga kriyas*. Then why is the condition of our health so pathetic? Why do our countrymen have to depend on multinational pharmaceutical companies for their healthcare and treatment?

The fact is that we have not realised the importance of our own rich legacy in healthcare and medicine. Our own treasure goes to the West, is researched, packaged and sold back to us in an expensive format. Only when that happens do we understand its significance.

For example, yoga is a part of our heritage. It is becoming fashionable among the elite in India, after it became fashionable in the West.

Nature has given us two important things: One is in-built defence mechanism or immunity; the other is clean air, sunshine and water. Yoga makes maximum use of these principles and has devised asanas and various *kriyas*. We have ignored it. We have lost this heritage established by our forefathers. *Yog* became yoga and dhyana became meditation and we run after them. Unfortunately, until recently, we had not bothered about them. Even if we teach our children to practice *Surya Namaskar* every day, they will be saved from back problems and respiratory problems. Remember that while modern medicine does not have any certain antidote to dust allergy, *Kapalabhati* cures it most effectively. When it comes to cold, flu, and cough, merely gargling with hot water, steam inhalation, and a concoction of liquorice roots is enough. You do not need expensive investigations and medicines, nor do you have to pay exorbitant fees to doctors. The same is true for dhyana. There is no other cure like dhyana for high blood pressure and heart troubles, and if *shavasana* is coupled with dhyana, controlling blood pressure is very easy. But dhyana had to turn into a modern fashionable practice of “meditation” in the West for us to acknowledge its significance.

We think that the idea of a “Laughter Club” is novel and oh-so-Western! But a book called *Hasya Vinod Mimansa* (An Analysis of Humour and Laughter) was published more than half a century ago in our country by noted author and philosopher N. C. Kelkar. He writes about how laughter helps various parts of the body. Some of them are:

Lungs and laughter: Your diaphragm moves more while laughing, increasing the size of the lungs as also the process of expansion and compression supplying more oxygen to the blood. Naturally the process of blood purification and circulation is much better, providing better oxygen to the body and increasing its vitality.

Digestion and laughter: Kelkar says in his book that laughter increases the secretion of digestive enzymes, evacuates the bowel well, stimulates pancreas and stimulates good control over sugar. Laughter is proved to enhance your nonspecific immunity by controlling the stress factors. A scientist has called laughter “internal jogging”. Unfortunately, we learn this from the West and believe it to be a science. It helps the internal organs and intestinal tract aiding in the absorption and digestion process

and increasing the flow of bile. It stimulates the bowel, thus helping to relieve constipation. It keeps sugar under control. Laughter also increases immunity because it stops the destruction of infection-fighting antibodies.

We have developed a devotional attitude towards modern medicines and tend to find an answer to all our ailments through pills and injections.

I remember a schoolgirl who, after running 200 m and 1000 m during a sports meet, complained of calf pain. This was nothing unusual, hence, I advised her to massage it with oil and foment it with warm water. However, she wanted instant relief and requested me to give her some injection instead!

We have seen in detail the side effects that painkillers can have on the body when we suffer from backaches and other such things. Excessive physical exertion and weak muscles cause aches and pains and backaches. Painkillers can offer only temporary relief. However, the muscles remain weak and the pain recurs and the vicious cycle of excessive exertion, pain and painkillers sets in. They can also cause acidity and constipation. Of course, the aches continue as well.

In this book, we have attempted to stress the importance of continuing the full course of treatment and the preventive measures for tuberculosis, malaria, and several other major diseases. At times, surgery is inevitable. It should be performed by experts only. Thousands of unindicated surgeries are being performed. When we were in the process of writing this book, I received a phone call from a 22-year-old woman. She said, "I am seriously ill and hospitalised in a nursing home and I am being operated on in the next one hour." We told her to take discharge and come to KEM for a checkup. On inquiry, she had lost 8 to 10 kg of weight and was suffering from chronic abdominal pain. She had all the x-rays and other investigations with her, which were normal. She had chronic constipation because of irregular diet and inadequate intake of fluids, leading to hard stools. We advised her to drink plenty of water, use *isabgol*, eat more green leafy vegetables, and practise *Ganesh Mudra*. Within 8-10 days she was completely alright and there was no need for surgery.

Misconception is not the prerogative only of lay people. Even doctors fall prey to it. As mentioned in the chapter on breast-feeding, sometimes doctors create fear in the mind of the mother by telling her that there might be inadequate milk production and hence she has to feed her baby with supplementary bottle-milk.

The point we wish to stress is simply this: Only you can take care of your health. Your body is not a laboratory for pharmaceutical companies. In the olden days we used to pound grain and our diets were rich in fibre. Today the use of polished rice and wheat has led to increased constipation. In the West people are forced to eat bran biscuits to acquire adequate fibre. Hopefully, we will not reach that stage here. Adequate fibre in the diet, drinking plenty of water and regular exercise, disciplined lifestyle and personal hygiene and awareness of seasonal variation, if observed, will be the key to protecting your health. The key to good health is with you. Why look for it elsewhere?

Epidemics: Hepatitis A

Jaundice is a dreaded illness that spreads in the monsoons due to contaminated water. It is a symptom of liver disease. If the liver comes under excessive strain or is infected, a person can develop jaundice. In jaundice, a patient's eyes, skin, his stools and urine start appearing yellow.

Jaundice is of three types:

Inflammation of the liver: The inflammation is caused by viral infection of the liver. Hepatitis A and hepatitis B are types of viruses. Hepatitis A spreads through the ingestion of contaminated food and water. It is caused by the HAV virus. Hepatitis B is caused by the virus HBV. The virus infects the blood through infected blood, injection needles and unsafe sexual practices.

Obstructive jaundice: Here, jaundice is caused by blockage in the bile duct. The blockages are either due to gallstones, or cancer of the bile duct or the pancreas. Progressive jaundice, dark yellow urine, white stools (clay coloured stools) and itching all over the body are the cardinal symptoms. Such symptoms need urgent ultra sonography to detect the cause and site of obstruction.

Jaundice caused by abnormality of blood: The incidence of this type of jaundice is very rare and is caused due to hereditary blood disorders.

In this chapter, we will discuss hepatitis A which is caused by contaminated food and water. In hepatitis A, the HAV virus enters the body through ingestion of unclean food and water. But the virus multiplies only in the liver and harms the liver cells. In India, the illness is usually reported between June and September. Like other monsoon-related infections, hepatitis A is also found predominantly in Asian countries that do not have access to clean drinking water and proper sanitation. Several studies have observed that 80-90 percent of children under the age of ten in South and South East Asian countries are infected by the virus but hardly 5-10 percent of the patients display the symptoms. (The immunity or the resistance of each individual will determine whether or not he/she will develop jaundice.)

The hepatitis A virus can survive in polluted water in a well for 8-10 weeks. The level of chlorination of water will determine the survival period of the virus. Sometimes, the virus is not destroyed even if water is boiled at 60-70 degrees centigrade. It is destroyed only if water is allowed to continue boiling for five minutes after reaching the boiling point. In one of my articles on purification of water, I had mentioned that if drinking water is stored and left covered for 24 hours, it automatically purifies the water up to 99 percent. But the jaundice virus is an exception.

The virus spreads only when human excreta comes in contact with drinking water. When is the virus detected in a person's stools and urine? If 100 people consume food and water infected by the virus, only 80-90 percent of them get infected. The rest who are infected may not actually develop jaundice, but they will excrete the jaundice virus through their urine and faeces. Only 5-10 percent of the infected people will actually develop jaundice. In children, there is higher incidence of infection by the virus. Between the age group of 15-40, the number of people afflicted by jaundice rises. Filthy living conditions, lack of sanitation and adequate sewage disposal, non-provision of drinking water, and lack of hygiene spread jaundice.

Symptoms

One experiences fever with chills, malaise, body ache, nausea headaches, loss of appetite, vomiting, deep yellow-coloured urine, and overall yellowness of the body. This type of jaundice is self-limiting and does not require any specific treatment. It is cured on its own within a few weeks. But the patient has to take plenty of rest. His body and gastrointestinal system need rest, mainly his liver. Adequate vitamin, mineral supplements, and instant nutrition by glucose will hasten the recovery process. Fruit juices should also be consumed as there is a large amount of glucose and essential vitamins in them. Powdered glucose is available. Every day, the patient should have a packet of around 75-100 gms of glucose powder dissolved in water. If the patient is vomiting, then the glucose has to be given intravenously.

In case a pregnant woman develops this type of jaundice, she should immediately be hospitalised. There is a risk to the lives of both the mother and the foetus. Not many hospitals have a separate department for jaundice and a completely separate ward for pregnant women suffering from jaundice. Kasturba Hospital in Mumbai is an exception.

Diagnosis

One should undergo liver function test, urine test, examination of stools for type A virus, and viral screening of blood which may indicate increased antibodies.

Patient Care

Jaundice requires a lot of care and nursing. The patient should have ample rest and reduce the intake of oil, fatty foods, spice, and pulses in the diet. The diet should be light composed of carbohydrates and vitamins. The importance of fruits, fruit juices, and ready glucose cannot be stressed enough. Even after the liver function tests normal, a rest for three weeks is recommended.

How can the spread of the illness be prevented?

The patient must be kept in isolation. His/her excreta has to be disinfected with sodium hypochloride solution (bleach). If you suspect that the vegetables you consume may be grown in fields near waste water, wash and cook them very carefully. Fish from such sources also needs to be washed and cooked thoroughly. Boil water during the outbreaks. Don't eat food cooked in unhygienic conditions in the open. Sadly, a lot of poor working people in Indian cities depend on street food, where municipal bodies do not care to enforce high standards of hygiene.

Vaccines

It is very important to understand which vaccine is to be taken and how it works. I once visited a village where a vaccination programme was being held at the initiative of the people in the village. Each person was required to pay Rs. 700 and get the vaccination done. If a family had around 2-3 members, then they ended up spending close to Rs. 2,000. I also came across people who did not get vaccinated themselves, but got their children vaccinated. Some even borrowed money for it. I went to visit this campaign. I heard the organisers of the campaign, and also some who received the vaccines, say, "We eat out in hotels, now we don't have to worry about anything after taking this vaccine!" The vaccine given was that of hepatitis B, which does not spread through food and drink! It spreads through blood,

unsafe sexual practices and infected syringes. Though the vaccine was genuine, and it offered protection, it was not against jaundice that spread through contaminated food and water.

The vaccine for hepatitis A is available in the market. There are two doses that are to be taken six to eighteen months apart. However, the protection offered is not life-long.