**Do You Have Signs of a Hidden Health Problem?**

**By Dr. Ramona Warren**

Growing up, my parents instilled many basic principles in me, such as:

*Treat others the way you want to be treated.*

*Don’t judge someone until you walk a mile in his shoes.*

*Honesty is the best policy.*

One principle that has been particularly helpful when working with patients is to “not judge a book by its cover.” In our society, it is so easy to just look at someone and say, “She is the picture of health!” But, sometimes, we can be surprised when that same person is diagnosed with a serious condition such as cancer, suffers a stroke, or dies unexpectedly. When someone who “seemed so healthy” experiences a major health crisis, it can leave us wondering about the condition of our own health.

Jim Fixx, the famous runner and author of *The Complete Book of Running*, is a textbook example. He was very fit and logged many miles a week on his runs with seemingly little effort. Yet, one day, he went out for his normal run and never came back. The world was stunned to learn that this “running guru” had died of a heart attack while doing what he loved best. While many were quick to blame running as the culprit, the autopsy proved otherwise. The final report showed atherosclerosis – a 95 percent blockage in one artery, an 85 percent blockage in a second artery and a 70 percent blockage in a third artery. Jim Fixx had been the “picture of health” on the surface, but below the surface a degenerative state had been developing for years. He was definitely fit, but he wasn’t truly healthy.

There is a difference between being fit and being healthy. Our goal should be to have both fitness and health. True health is not just the absence of symptoms, but when all of the systems of our body — the cardiovascular, digestive, emotional, hormonal, mental, muscular, skeletal, nervous and all other systems are balanced and functioning optimally.

We don’t go from a state of health to disease overnight. It is a progression that evolves over time, usually over decades. Many times, our bodies give us signals that can let us know we are headed toward disease if we don’t make some changes. Symptoms such as fatigue, insomnia, constipation and poor memory can be indicators of declining health, but can also easily be overlooked if we’re not aware of the connection these symptoms have to our body systems and what they might indicate.

So how can we know if we are truly healthy? While there are many elaborate and expensive tests that can assess our health, there are also some very simple ways to evaluate how our body is functioning. In Chinese medicine, practitioners often begin determining an individual’s health by conducting an observational assessment. (Yes, this is one of those times when you can judge a person by his “cover” by considering certain outward physical clues.)

How healthy is the patient’s hair? Hair that is brittle or falling out could indicate a weak thyroid or adrenal stress. The patient’s eyes can point to a possible food sensitivity if they are blood shot and/or have dark circles. Even the tongue can convey health clues. If the tongue has cracks or grooves, it could indicate a Vitamin B deficiency or chronic digestive problems. A splotchy tongue with red patches might also indicate a deficiency in B vitamins.

Fingernails offer a great deal of health information. White spots on nails can indicate a zinc deficiency, as well as possible overconsumption of sugar. Longitudinal ridges on the nail could indicate an insufficient amount of essential fatty acids or low thyroid function, while soft nails are often the result of a mineral deficiency. Clubbing of the nails could be an indication of heart or lung disease. Spoon-shaped nails or very pale, whitish nails suggest iron-deficiency anemia. Brittle nails might be a signal of decreased protein, calcium and/or essential fatty acids. An absent or reduced half-moon could indicate decreased hormonal status, insufficient vascular or lymph activity or decreased lung function.

Our bodies give us signs and symptoms so we can know what is happening within us. The body is designed to be well. When we move away from a state of health, our body lets us know. The trick lies in learning to read and interpret the “body language” so we can get back on track and make choices that will lead us back to health.