

# INVESTIGATIONS DURING PREVENTIVE HEALTH CHECKS: TOO FEW OR TOO MANY?

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DR HEMANT MADAN

"Whole body tests are just a means and not an end to the road to good health."

Care and concern for one's own health is great and should be encouraged across all strata of society. Most evidence-based guidelines now recommend health checks, and they are an important component of a desire to stay healthy.

Medical investigations are a routine component of all health check protocols. There has been an immense surge in their popularity among urban Indians, further fuelled by the post-pandemic fear and concern for one's own health. Many of these tests and packages are now self-prescribed and patients often consult

a doctor only after these tests have already been performed. In many cases, even their reports are self-interpreted, after the abnormalities have been highlighted by the artificial intelligence of the laboratory software.

I was in a busy cardiology OPD recently when two patients consulted me one after the other. They had a completely contrasting views and attitudes about the role of investigations in preventive clinical practice. This made me wonder if one could ever devise a comprehensive list of investigations which would be applicable during preventive health checks in all patients.

Case 1 - Mr Ram Bahadur (name changed) 60 years old obese, diabetic, presented with recent onset breathlessness. Based on his clinical background, I advised him a few general blood and urine tests, along with some specific tests to evaluate for the status of his heart and lungs. The patient's first response on reading the prescription was to question the appropriateness of investigations and enquire whether he was being over-investigated?

Case 2 - Mr Karan (name changed) aged 25 years consulted me immediately after the previous case for getting a "whole-body checkup". He had no symptoms and is in good health. When I asked about the reason for his keenness for a health checkup at such a young age, he mentioned that he had recently lost his father, unexpectedly - that too a few days after visiting his family physician. He felt that his father could've been investigated in greater detail - in order to prevent this unanticipated misfortune.

So what's ideal - too many or too few?

To understand the role of preventive health investigations - we need to get the right perspective. While medical investigations play an important part in early diagnosis and preventing disease, they are not the only component of staying healthy and living long. Other measures such as a good diet, regular exercise, adequate sleep and abstinence from substances of abuse play an equally important role in good health.

Health of a person is often determined by a fine



balance of nature and nurture. Investigations need to be ordered, based on background factors such as family history, risk profile and previous disease as well as presenting symptoms of a patient. An important additional factor determining the thoroughness of evaluation in an individual is his job profile. Those in high intensity jobs such as armed forces or flying, obviously need a more thorough evaluation. This principle - even in the contemporary era of liberal

availability of investigations - remains the guiding principle of clinical medical practice.

## WHOLE-BODY TEST IS A STARTING POINT, NOT THE END POINT

A commonly encountered phrase in recent times is a "whole body test". A human body is a highly complex machine consisting of more than 35 trillion cells organised into multiple organ systems

- each beautifully and accurately controlled by hor-

mones, chemical, genetic as well as external influences. The body is so complex that calling it a machine trivializes the complexity of a human being. An abnormality in any of these can trigger disease. To expect that the health of all these components can be predicted by a few blood and urine tests is akin to predicting the results of a national election with a sample size of a few individuals. The currently included tests in a "whole body test" protocol can, at best, only serve as beacon of direction to look for specific diseases. To that extent, they form an important baseline from where one goes ahead.

## INVESTIGATION REPORTS ARE DYNAMIC

Dynamism is yet another variable in the process of predicting disease. Human body is ever changing. What's applicable and relevant today, may be meaningless in a few months. The same applies to medical investigations. The validity of investigations is time bound. Hence the reports of these tests may become irrelevant after a few months

to a year - depending on which test one is referring to. A periodicity, therefore, needs to be followed in case one wishes to derive meaningful conclusions from the tests. Additionally, observing trends in a report is far more important than a solitary reading. A single time test protocol is not expected to assure health or predict disease for one's entire life.

Medical tests serve an important purpose of conveying the current status of one's health. When a series of tests is performed, it is a scientific way to predict the health of specific organs. The statistical chance of harbouring disease in that organ with a normal report is low. But the risk is not zero. In a few cases, disease can occur despite normal reports.

## ONE MUST ACT ON THE REPORTS

Medical investigation results provide us with valuable information about what needs to be done. To that extent they are a means and not an end to evaluation. A test report will culminate in good health only if one acts on the abnormal

variables - either by lifestyle modification or by getting treated for it. It serves no purpose to gather information and not take remedial action.

Medical investigations are an important component of any healthcare strategy. The idea of this writing is not to discourage one from getting tested. In fact, the aim is completely contrary. When medical investigations are done, it's important to have the right expectations without over relying on them as being the only road to good health or downplaying their importance. While investigations serve an important predictive role of an individual's health status, disease can rarely occur outside the realms of statistical forecasts. A regularly needs to be followed while getting health checks and most importantly, one must act on abnormal reports and aberrations. Only then will medical investigations contribute to better health and longevity.

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# AUTHOR VIPUL VARSHNEYA ON HER LOVE OF HERITAGE CITIES



VIPUL VARSHNEYA

Built heritage is as important to preserving our historical legacy as works of art and folklore. Vipul B Varshneya, author and founder, director and principal architect of STRAPATI has made it her mission to record India's built heritage from ancient times through her books. The Sunday Guardian speaks to her about her chosen field and her latest project. Excerpts from an edited interview:

Q. Why did you choose to focus your work on heritage cities?

A: I have been writing on heritage cities since 2009. With a passion for heritage, I have authored four coffee table books on Lucknow's heritage including 'Lucknow - A Treasure' encompassing the grandeur and heritage of Lucknow and 'Cultural Legacy of Lucknow'. Other books, 'Lucknow - A City of Heritage and Culture', and 'Shaam-e-Awadh', were published in 2017. I've also written one on Kashi, which is another city of living heritage. It's called 'Musings in Benares' and was published in 2021. As an architectural consultant, our project on designing the airport in Ayodhya made me learn about the rich cultural heritage of

the city. That's also when I began researching the temples of Ayodhya. My latest offering is on Ayodhya and it's called 'Ayodhya: A Walk Through the Living Heritage'.

Q. What was the process of your research?

A: When I started studying the city in-depth by visiting Ayodhya, I learnt that it was the first city of Adipur of Vishnu. It is the first among Saptapuri - the seven Mokshadhyani or salvation-giving cities around India and is therefore the base for the great epic Ramayana.

In popular discourse, it is the place where the seventh avatar of Vishnu, Sri Ram took birth in Treta Yug. This is the city that he returned to rule after his fourteen years of exile that took him across the country and to Lanka. However, Ayodhya has many more stories to tell as well. It has been a witness to a long line of illustrious kings of Suryavansh, or the solar dynasty, who ruled here.

Meanwhile, I met many saints and mahants of Ayodhya over the two years I spent there and came across the Ayodhya Mahatmaya of Skand Puran in English. It was a scripture totally devoted to the importance of Ayodhya. Poets like Valmiki, Tulsidas, and Kalidas have written glorious accounts of Ayodhya, as have poets and storytellers in every language in India.

Q. What are some of the challenges you faced while writing



Nayaghat



Sunset at Saryu

this book? And how did you overcome them?

A: As we all know, the city of Ayodhya is going through change with tremendous infrastructure

development, and the physical conditions of the city were not very comfort-

ably described by poets and authors like Kalidasa and Tulsidas. This has inspired me to write my next book on the temples of Ayodhya - a subject that has hardly been touched by authors and writers. There are some very picturesque temples and some humble ones found all over Ayodhya due to this region's vagaries of time and invasions. Many of them have asso-

Hence, a vimana is a thing that measures the sky as it traverses through it. There are many stories in the Purana and in the epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, that speak about vimanas. Separate technical literature is available, such as the Vaimanika Shashtra by Maharishi Bharadwaja, which discusses the vimana from a technical perspective. It explains the

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Q. What would you say was your most interesting learning while researching your new book?

A: I came across very interesting findings during the course of my research. One such was about the Pushpak Vimana. I found out from various literature studies that the Pushpak Vimana of Ravana, in which Rama returned to Ayodhya from Lanka after his victory over Ravana, was just one among many vimanas.

I was very fascinated to read about this feat of engineering recorded in ancient times and I hope my readers will enjoy it too.

The word vimana means 'the sky' and 'measure'.

Pushpak Vimana's special capacity to contract (sankocha) or expand (vistrita) in size. Maharishi Bharadwaj mentions about 120 different vimanas that were present at different times in different lands. He also gives glimpses of fuels used, aerodynamics, avionics, metallurgy and other manoeuvres that were deployed in flying these vimanas.

Noor-Anand Chacra pens lifestyle articles for various publications and her blog www.Nooranandchacra.com.