

WHEN SICKNESS IS OUR BIGGEST INDUSTRY

When I first moved to Manhattan years ago, I remember being taken aback by just how healthy New Yorkers really were. It surprised me that here in this artificial Mecca, people were searching for a natural life. My roommate was downing mega doses of vitamins each day, and I noticed stopping off at the local juice stand was a regular activity. I started jumping in with my carrot-beet-apple-ginger about every third day!

Were they trying to counteract the pollution, noise, light and other unhealthy things that surrounded them? Maybe... of course, we all seek a certain level of excitement and rest to stay balanced. By all reports juicing and taking vitamins is healthy. And if life expectancy is any gauge, we are certainly making some strides against illness. Yet, when sickness is our biggest industry (hospitals, pharmaceuticals, etc.), it does make one pause and wonder.

Perhaps you've seen the charts that layover the industrial and chemical revolution with cancer rates. The proliferation of chemicals and technology seems to mirror cancer. We know there are thousands of carcinogens and suspected carcinogens that surround us. What most people don't realize is that common household items like that bottle of insect killer or can of paint stripper can cause illness. Part of it depends on timing of exposure (pregnant woman, infant, elderly); another part has to do with threshold (did you ingest enough). In Roxbury, MA, it was well-known that asthma rates were higher in this African American neighborhood because a major bus terminal was sited there. This is just one example of many that shows—our surroundings and choices affect our health every day.

Lately, we've been hearing a lot about vitamin D deficiency and various ailments. The government has stepped in on various health topics banning trans-fats in New York City, fortifying our milk and so on. But really, it's up to us. We know that chemicals tend to bond with animal fats so buying lean meats or avoiding animal fat is certainly wise. But then again, we can't live in a bubble.

One central tenet that I've used in trying to stay healthy is to keep active. Let's say you are exposed to any of the items I've just been discussing. By pushing materials through your body via exercise, breathing, yoga or just drinking lots of water, we can limit what is deposited. Of course, you're not going to be able to push heavy metals out of your body, but there are lots of toxins and additives that you can get rid of. My old Tai Chi teacher said, "Just like a body of water that becomes stagnant, your body will also become cloudy and murky."

How does this work? Have you ever noticed that when you have a cold, you often feel better when you get off the sofa and take a walk? This is because you are moving lymph through your system, which is critical for building immunity. Lymph moves by muscular contraction and breathing. You can shorten the length of your cold by moving. Water also dilutes the poisons and actually softens the tissues of your body lessening tension.

The Berkshires is a great place, but it's also a place that faces many challenges. Energizer is upstream in Bennington, Vermont; GE created massive surface water contamination with PCB's on the Housatonic and elsewhere; the Vicon incinerator looms just over the mall in Pittsfield. We breathe; we drink. These may seem like massive problems, but there are a few things you can do. Keep moving. Be careful what you buy, consume and use in your house. Drink clean filtered water. Get out into the forest and breathe the air.