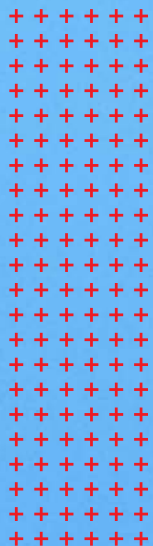


The Intuition Intervention

Heeding that “Something
doesn’t feel right” instinct
can be the difference between
unnecessary suffering and
getting the treatment you need.

BY AMY PATUREL



FOR YEARS,

44-year-old Tracy L. Rosa of Los Angeles suffered from troubling symptoms. She couldn't lose weight, constantly felt run down, and suffered from severe inflammation and joint pain. Trained in holistic bodywork and hypnotherapy, Rosa sensed that her thyroid gland was compromised. Supporting that idea was the knowledge that her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother had all had thyroid problems, including thyroid cancer. But since her own blood work had come back normal—with no evidence of any type of thyroid disease in the tests Rosa's doctor had ordered—the doctor brushed off her concerns.

Despite these assurances, Rosa's internal alarm bell got louder. When she heard a commercial that mentioned a link between swollen lymph nodes and thyroid cancer, she touched her neck and felt a swollen node. For someone with illness anxiety (formerly referred to as hypochondria), the power of suggestion might have been a strong

factor here, but not in Rosa's case: "I knew at that moment that I had thyroid cancer," she says. She felt so sure partly because of her family history and partly because of her symptoms, but particularly because of an internal certainty that something was wrong.

She pushed her doctor for additional testing, which ultimately uncovered papillary thyroid cancer that had spread to her lymph nodes. "Within a month I had surgery to remove my thyroid and seven lymph nodes—three were cancerous," Rosa says. "The pathology report also showed that I had undiagnosed Hashimoto's disease" (an autoimmune condition characterized by hypothyroidism). She finally had proof of what she'd thought for years: Her thyroid had been "off" even before she had developed cancer.

"Something Isn't Right"

 While advances in medicine have led to critically important diagnostic tools to identify and treat disease, we all have an underutilized symptom tracker operating in our subconscious minds. It's that sense you get that something doesn't feel right, when you notice a change in your body. It may be subtle, not even identifiable, but you know it's there. As Rosa learned, when that internal system offers up an alert, it's a good idea to pay attention.

Of course, there are times when that signal is off—when you are convinced



GETTY IMAGES.

you have COVID only to get three negative test results in a row, or when what you are sure is appendicitis turns out to be just gas. Such errors often arise from a potent mix of anxiety about the fragility of life (especially in a post-pandemic world) combined with information overload, with every Google

search of a symptom taking you down a rabbit hole leading to potential diseases.

But there are times when that internal alert system can be a crucial tool: A pair of studies—one published in *BMC Primary Care* in 2022 and the other in the *British Journal of General Practice* in 2023—reported that primary care

physicians found patients' instincts about their health to be a valuable part of clinical care. In an earlier study, researchers reported that patients' gut feelings about having cancer could be reason enough to pursue more testing. Such instincts, the studies say, are often what initially lead patients to contact their doctors, voicing their internal knowing with statements like "Something isn't right," "This just feels wrong," and "I feel different from normal."

Listening to Your Body



Such a sense may have saved Carolyn Williams Francis's life: In 2009, when Williams Francis was 49, the interior designer in Columbus, OH, had surgery on her Achilles tendon following an injury. A few weeks after she returned to working out, she felt short of breath on the treadmill. "One day, in addition to shortness of breath, I noticed odd sensations in my neck, arm, and shoulder," she says. "At first

I thought I was just recuperating from surgery, but on my way out of the gym, I saw the defibrillator on the wall and thought to myself, *I hope I don't need that!*"

In such circumstances, many people would have assumed they were simply a little out of shape after having been injured—and indeed when Williams Francis got to her car, she was considering whether to go home and lie down. But she had watched her sister battle heart disease for years, and that knowledge melded with the pain she was feeling to trigger a warning signal, which she calls "the Holy Spirit." "I knew I had to go straight to the ER," she says. There, tests showed that her arteries were severely blocked and she





needed immediate stent surgery.

And consider the strange case of actor Mark Ruffalo, who has told interviewers how he had an intense dream one night that he had a brain tumor and woke up with the sense that he needed immediate medical care, though the only discernible symptom he had at the time was an ear infection. His doctor sent him for a CT scan, which uncovered a golf-ball-size mass

behind his left ear. The tumor, thankfully, was benign and could be surgically removed, but had he not found it early, it could have grown and caused further problems.

Mystery or Instinct?

 The concept of sensing what is wrong with your body goes back to ancient times, long before doctors had blood tests and scans: Healers and patients alike relied on an “internal knowing” to uncover imbalances in the body. Some call it a gut instinct (because of a pit-of-the-stomach feeling of foreboding), others say it involves sensing energy, and still others view it

as a sixth sense or divine guidance.

But intuition may have to do with the subconscious workings of the human brain: “Intuition is a cognitive process based primarily on pattern recognition,” says Dustin Ballard, M.D., an emergency medicine physician at Kaiser Permanente in Northern California. The “pattern” in cases like these may be your familiarity with what your body typically does, allowing you to notice when things feel different.

Dr. Ballard points out that this kind of informed instinct can work for doctors diagnosing patients as well. He remembers his mother, a neonatologist, discussing how she made real-time decisions about difficult cases based on instinct. “Growing up, I didn’t understand her process,” Dr. Ballard says. “It wasn’t until I’d been practicing medicine for a while that I realized her gut feelings had been informed by years of practice. It’s really about repetition.”

Women may be especially primed to recognize a change in their bodily patterns because of reproductive biology. “From a very young age, girls learn to notice when their breasts are tender, when they’re craving certain foods, and when they’re low on energy, so they can sense when their periods are coming,” says Martha Gulati, M.D., a cardiologist at Cedars-Sinai Heart Institute in Los Angeles. “We’ve seen in a number of studies showing that when women have chest pain they often report three or more additional symptoms,” says Dr. Gulati, because they’re so attuned

to what is going on in their bodies. Still, despite women's detailed reports, "doctors tend to minimize their symptoms even when they're experiencing something as serious as chest pains," Dr. Gulati says.

As for the diagnostic tests doctors rely on, these can help pinpoint what's happening, but they have limits. In some cases they provide only one piece of a larger puzzle (such as with some autoimmune diseases, many of which can't be detected with a standard test and for which patients require an average of 4.5 years and four doctors to get a diagnosis). That's where gut instinct—the knowledge that something is off despite tests that say otherwise—can be especially helpful.

Resist Second-Guessing

 For every Rosa or Ruffalo, there is someone who is blowing off a gut feeling that something is wrong. One reason that happens, experts say, is that we are taught to second-guess ourselves, focusing on numbers at the expense of feelings. "The first thing many patients see when they wake up in a hospital is a whiteboard filled with data," says Dawn Gross, M.D., Ph.D., a palliative care physician at the University of California in San Francisco. "So they learn that the most important thing to think about is numbers—their white cell count, hemoglobin, blood pressure" to the exclusion of all else, including how they're feeling inside.

"Our health, and therefore our life, is best served when we value and attend to both forms of expertise and interweave them into the delivery of care for our health," Dr. Gross says.

And then there is the fact that doctors often fail to listen to women, perhaps making us hesitant to share these "irrational" feelings. Dr. Gulati says many women with chronic illnesses are told by their physicians that they're suffering from stress or anxiety or, worse, "It's all in your head." The data bear this out: A 2022 Women's Health Survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation reported that nearly a third of women felt that their doctors dismissed their concerns, with 15% convinced that their providers didn't believe they were telling the truth. Doctors can be prone to downplaying the severity of women's symptoms, particularly pain and cardiovascular problems. That can reinforce the idea that "feelings" are a feminine emotional weakness and not worthy of attention from the medical establishment.

When it comes to your health, it's critical to use every tool in your toolbox, including seemingly irrational feelings. It makes sense to practice honing your intuition, and—perhaps just as important—speak about it in a way that forces your health care team to pay attention. "When women are in tune with their bodies and feel empowered to share their insights with their physicians, that's when they should receive the best medical care," Dr. Gulati says.



HOW TO HONE YOUR GUT INSTINCT

Medical intuition is a muscle we can all strengthen. This requires acknowledging sometimes irrational emotional hunches and then synthesizing them with focused, rational, and discriminating cognitive analysis, says Helen Marlo, Ph.D., dean of the School of Psychology at Notre Dame de Namur University in Belmont, CA. **Keep these tips in mind:**

1 **SEPARATE ANXIETY FROM ILLNESS**

It's tempting to let Dr. Google fuel concerns, Marlo says. If your mind spins after you read up on symptoms online, it could be anxiety talking, not intuition. If you consistently think you have conditions it turns out you don't have, consider meeting with a qualified counselor to explore these thoughts and help you distinguish between anxiety and genuine bodily signals.

2 **CHECK IN WITH YOUR BODY**

Get to know what "normal" feels like.

Carolyn Williams Francis has started checking in with her body as part of her exercise routine, asking herself, *How are my feet doing? How are my ankles doing? How are my knees? My heart?* When you tune in to your body regularly, you're better equipped to detect it when something feels "off," says Marlo.

3 **KEEP TRACK OF CHANGES**

If you sense that something is different, pay attention: Track changes in a journal or the notes app on your phone. That way, when you present a doctor with concerns, you'll have solid info to back up what you're feeling.

4 **DON'T DISCOUNT DATA**

Hard facts—things like family history, inconclusive lab studies, and even erratic smartwatch data—can help you assess a seemingly irrational hunch. Sometimes the data provide the push you need to support getting further testing or a second opinion even when your constellation of symptoms don't fit a particular algorithm.

5 **BE BOLD**

It's important to advocate for yourself, especially if you're a woman. Speak up, ask questions, and don't be scared to offend your doctor, says Dr. Gulati. You deserve a clear explanation of why something isn't a concern or why follow-up testing isn't necessary. Your health is worth having an uncomfortable conversation.