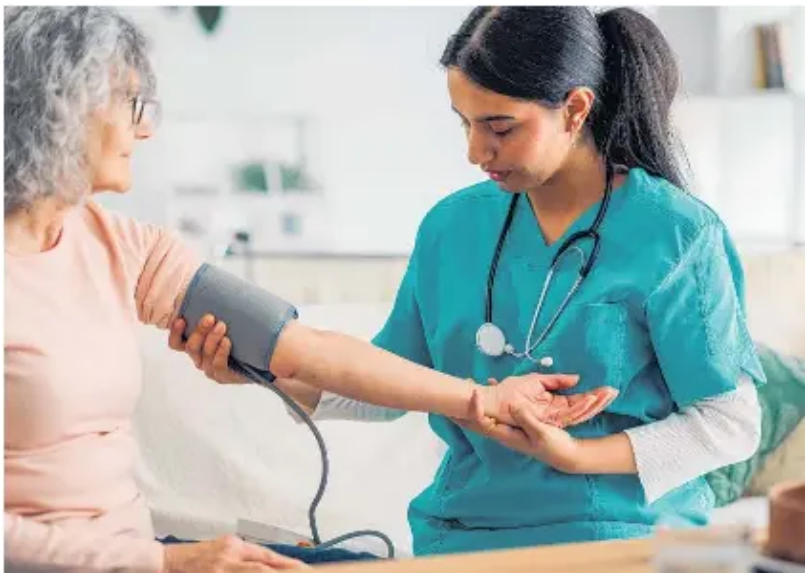
Healthy habits, hidden markers

In the latest column in our weekly series, Hannah McQueen examines the seductive pull of some healthy habits, and what you should be tracking. McQueen is the founder and director of Age Brightly. She is also host of The Next Bit podcast on iHeart Radio.

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Being proactive with your health and wellness is a good thing but are you looking at the whole picture? I'm a fan of gummies for everything from collagen to multivitamins to probiotics.



It's not just that they taste like a guilt-free lolly; it's that they allow me to believe I'll soon have more energy or plumper skin — while doing almost nothing else differently.

It asks very little of me, but it promises so much, which is exactly what makes it so seductive. Take this, sip that, sweat profusely, shiver violently, wear a ring that tells you your sleep was terrible . . . none of these things are bad. Good sleep, nutrition, stress management and healthy joints all matter.

And if your ice bath, sauna, vitamins or collagen gummies make you feel better, excellent. Just don't confuse feeling proactive with actually knowing what is going on.

"You could have the best skin in the world and still have a heart attack," says Dr Manoj Patel. He believes we should be paying more attention to what can be measured and tracked over time, otherwise known as our biomarkers.

A biomarker is simply a measurable clue about what is happening in your body, or "under the hood", as Patel puts it. It's not a verdict, but it gives a signal.

I initially thought biomarkers were solely things you measure with a blood test — like your cholesterol, blood sugars and white blood cell count — but they are much more varied.

We have thousands of biomarkers, from blood pressure, weight, and waist circumference to balance, grip strength, and bone density.

They're influenced by almost everything that shapes a life, including sleep, diet, stress, exercise, medications, health conditions, injuries, environment, age and genetics.

They can be measured with a scan, a blood test, a tape measure or a sphygmomanometer (which is just the official name for one of those blood pressure machines with the arm cuff device).

But biomarkers are not just random numbers in a spreadsheet.

While a single result can sometimes identify risk or support a diagnosis, no one marker tells the full story.

Often, the greatest insight comes from how these markers change over time.

Let's look at some examples. Imagine a former executive who is experiencing a new lease on life since retiring from a stressful and high-pressure career.

He's playing lots of golf, drinks a green juice in the morning, and his smartwatch congratulates him on all the walking he's now doing.

Then he has a heart attack, seemingly out of nowhere.

His blood pressure, cholesterol, blood sugar and kidney markers, fasting glucose, weight and waist circumference — especially combined — could have given a clue as to what was to come, and a chance to change that trajectory.

Or perhaps he slips getting out of the shower after golf and breaks a hip.

A FRAX score — which measures bone density, body measurements, medical history, medications and lifestyle risk factors — would have estimated his risk of fractures over the next 10 years.

Knowing that could have helped change the outcome.

There's a danger of focusing on tiny wellness wins while ignoring the clinical risks looming underneath.

Patel gives the example of a patient who was taking a range of supplements, trying to improve their health, but was ultimately taking far more magnesium than their body needed — prompting a cascade of effects.

All the supplements were causing them to wake several times overnight to go to the toilet.

Waking at night raises "a big risk of falls" for an older person, Patel says.

The knock-on effects include broken sleep, grogginess, afternoon naps, pulling back socially, moving less and becoming more isolated.

"So, this one well-meaning, wellintentioned wellness activity has led to risks in sleep, falls, social connection and purpose," Patel says.

Biomarkers do have limitations however, which is worth calling out.

They're currently all the rage because enterprising companies have devised tests that draw together a range of biomarkers to give you a "biological age" to compare against your numerical age.

That appeals to me. If I were told I was biologically 10 years younger than I really am, I would absolutely dine out on that information. If it showed the reverse and I was ageing faster, that feels worth knowing, too.

But there's a risk in simplifying your health into one (hopefully flattering) number.

"Different organisations and different research have a different 'secret recipe' of how they aggregate different data points to come up with this biological age," Patel says.

"By its definition, it's a single data point, and a single data point has limited utility."

If you average out to “doing well”, you can gloat that you’ve found the fountain of youth.
But if that results in missing key changes that should set off alarm bells, then it’s just an exercise in vanity.
Genetic tests measure biomarkers, too, but they are fundamentally different from biomarkers like cholesterol, blood pressure or grip strength.
Your genes are largely fixed from birth, whereas many other biomarkers constantly respond to how you live, age, recover, stress, eat, sleep and move.
So genetic tests can show you what you’re at risk of, but “as you age, that risk is probably less relevant to you than actually what your body is showing through your biomarkers”, Patel says.
Genetic testing tells you what might happen, while other biomarkers tell you what is happening.
What should you do with this information?
Think of biomarkers like the body’s version of a car’s dashboard lights, giving us an insight into what’s happening under the hood.
Most of us wait until something feels wrong — when we’re inexplicably breathless, dizzy, forgetful, or in pain (and even then, we tend to ignore or explain away our symptoms for a while longer).
Instead, if you have a baseline of your biomarkers to measure change over time, you have a much better chance of identifying meaningful changes early and focusing on what will really make a difference to your health.
So, keep taking the collagen gummies if you want to — I know I will be.
But don’t confuse that with knowing what is going on under the surface.