Preventive medicine

הויאל והיות הגוף בריא ושלם , מדרכי ה ’ הוא , שהרי אי אפשר שיבין
או יידע והוא חולה צריך אדם להרחיק עצמו מדברים המאבדין את הגוף ,
ולהנהיג עצמו בדברים המברים המחלימים

Besides being one of the greatest rabbis in Jewish History, Moses Maimonides (known in Hebrew as haRambam) was also a world-renowned medieval physician.

He was born in Cordoba, Spain in 1135.

Not much is known about his medical education, but it is thought that he read a great deal and was familiar with classic and contemporary works on medicine. He grew up in times of poor healthcare, with infant and child mortality leading to half the population dying before they were 10 years old.

Soon after he arrived in Egypt (ca. 1165) he was appointed as the court physician to the Regent of Egypt while the Sultan (Saladin the Great) was fighting the crusades. According to a letter written to his student Yosef ben ‘aqnin, his daily duties to the Sultan would last from first light until well into the afternoon. He would then come back home where a long line of patients were waiting for him, “both Jews and Gentiles, nobles and common people… friends and enemies”. Maimonides would treat them, many times without expecting any retribution, until well into the night,.

Maimonides was a pioneer in one very important field: preventive medicine. Preventive medicine is all about keeping good habits. What and how to eat; the duty to working-out and maintaining a good hygiene; etc.

Maimonides says that if a genetically healthy person follows his advices he would live a long life and most probably will never need a doctor.

Most of his recommendations for a healthy life are found in the fourth chapter of Hilkhot De’ot of his Mishne Tora.

He wrote this chapter as a physician and as a Rabbi. In the first Halakha Maimonides explains that the duty of taking care of our bodies is a religious obligation. A requisite to properly serve HaShem.

Hilkhot De’ot, 4:1

Since maintaining a healthy and sound body is among the ways of [serving] God – for one cannot understand or have any knowledge of the Creator, if he is ill – therefore, he must avoid that which harms the body and accustom himself to that which is healthful and helps the body become stronger.