We Americans do panic really well.

We could use a few pointers on prudence.

Do me a favor. Turn away from the ceaseless media coverage of Ebola in Texas — the interviews with the Dallas nurse’s neighbors, the hand-wringing over her pooch, the instructions on protective medical gear — and answer this: Have you had your flu shot? Are you planning on one?

During the 2013-2014 flu season, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, only 46 percent of Americans received vaccinations against influenza, even though it kills about 3,000 people in this country in a good year, nearly 50,000 in a bad one.

These are deaths by a familiar assassin. Many of them could have been prevented. So why aren’t we in a lather over that? Why fixate on remote threats that we feel we can’t control when there are immediate ones that we simply don’t bother to?

On matters exotic, we’re rapt. On matters quotidian, which are nonetheless matters of life and death, we’re cavalier. Tens of thousands of Americans die in car crashes annually, and according to a federal analysis from 2012, more than half of them weren’t wearing seatbelts.

Perhaps that didn’t make a difference in many cases. In some, it probably did. But on this front, as on others, we have clear answers about how to minimize risk and we simply proceed to forget or ignore them.

There’s no way to square skin-cancer statistics in the United States — more than 3.5 million cases diagnosed yearly and almost 10,000 deaths — with the number of Americans showing off their tans. They aren’t all getting body paint.
They’ve been lectured about sunscreen and shade and hats. But vanity trumps sanity, and melanoma rides its coattails.

I’m not dismissing the horror of Ebola, a full-blown crisis in Africa that should command the whole world’s assistance. And Ebola in the United States certainly warrants concern. We’re still searching for definitive answers about transmission and prevention.

But Americans already have such answers about a host of other, greater perils to our health, and we’d be wiser to reacquaint ourselves with those, and recommit to heeding them, than to worry about our imminent exposure to Ebola.

“People get very fearful and stressed out and have a lot of anxiety about things like Ebola that aren’t a general health risk,” said Jeffrey Duchin, who is the chairman of the public health committee of the Infectious Diseases Society of America. “Just look at causes of death in the United States. Everything is higher than Ebola, and there are things that we can do about many of them.”

Duchin, a physician, moderated a panel of experts who discussed Ebola at the society’s conference last week. These doctors sought to refocus attention on influenza, which lacks novelty but not potency.

In my conversation with him, Duchin also pointed out that between 2.7 and 5.2 million Americans are believed to be infected with the hepatitis C virus. Deaths related to it can range widely, from 17,000 to 80,000 annually, he said. There’s a test for it. There’s effective treatment. But the C.D.C. says that up to 75 percent of the people with the virus don’t know they have it.

Stephen Morse, a professor of epidemiology at Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health, told me: “We have a lot of vaccine-preventable diseases and we see more and more people refusing to have their children take vaccines.”

He was referring to outbreaks of measles and pertussis (or whooping cough) in states and cities where parents have hallucinated a connection between immunizations and autism. They cling to this fiction in the face of scientific information to the contrary.

Both The Hollywood Reporter and Time magazine recently published accounts of anti-vaccine madness among supposedly educated, affluent Americans in particular. According to the story in The Hollywood Reporter, by Gary Baum, the parents of 57 percent of the children at a Beverly Hills preschool and of 68 percent at one in Santa Monica had filed personal-belief exemptions
from having their kids vaccinated.

Such numbers, Baum wrote, “are in line with immunization rates in developing countries like Chad and South Sudan.”

On CNN on Monday night, a Dallas pediatrician was asked about what she had advised the families she sees. She said that she urged them to have their children “vaccinated against diseases that we can prevent,” and that she also stressed frequent hand-washing. Ebola or no Ebola, it’s a responsible — and frequently disregarded — way to lessen health risks.

So are these: fewer potato chips. Less sugary soda. Safer sex. Tighter restrictions on firearms. More than 30,000 Americans die from gunshots every year. Anyone looking for an epidemic to freak out about can find one right there.

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