

Better Choices for a Healthier Lifestyle

Have you hesitated to break your bad health habits because you thought the task would be too difficult? Then get ready for some good news.

"Every day, new research indicates that Americans can take control of their health by making simple and realistic lifestyle changes," says Lawrence Stifler, Ph.D., a behavioral psychologist and president of Health Management Resources in Boston. "By modifying a few of their unhealthy behaviors, people can lengthen and improve the quality of their lives. A small commitment of a few hours a week could add eight to ten quality years to a person's life."



How healthy you'll be in coming years can be predicted by your number of risk factors for disease. Having one risk factor doesn't necessarily doom you to poor health, but your odds increase dramatically when several risks are combined. For example, high cholesterol increases the likelihood of developing heart disease. People who smoke, have high cholesterol and high blood pressure dramatically increase their risk for heart attack.

Your disease risk is determined by factors that fall into these three categories:

- Medical indicators: high cholesterol, elevated blood pressure, high blood sugar, a previous or ongoing major medical problem, and a family history of genetic or biological problems.
- Lifestyle behaviors: obesity and being overweight, smoking, a high-fat, high-cholesterol diet low in fiber, fruit, and vegetables, excessive alcohol consumption, drug use, and a sedentary lifestyle.
- Environmental conditions: exposure to secondhand smoke, failure to use seat belts, and prolonged exposure to sun and radon.

No matter how many years you've practiced bad habits and no matter your age, you can make a fresh start and improve your health.

Get out and walk

Exercise is probably the single most important thing you can do for your health. Regular physical activity — 30 minutes of moderate exercise most days of the week — can reduce your risk for heart disease, hypertension, obesity, stress, and osteoporosis. If you don't like walking or running, consider bicycling, swimming, or aerobic dancing.

Eat your veggies

Eating 2-1/2 cups of vegetables and 2 cups of fruit every day displaces some of the fat in your diet and may lower your risk for heart disease, cancer, high blood pressure, and diabetes. Avoid smothering the fruits and vegetables in high-fat, high-sugar creams and sauces, cheese, butter, or chocolate.

Use seat belts

Wearing a seat belt reduces your risk of dying in an automobile accident by almost 60 percent. To be effective, seat belts must be worn 100 percent of the time.

Wear sunscreen

Protect your skin from the sun by wearing sunscreen or sun block, protective clothing, and a hat. In order to get enough vitamin D, however, expose your face, arms, hands, or back (without sunscreen) to the sun for 10 to 15 minutes at least two times per week. More exposure than this to the sun is a primary cause of skin cancer. Limit your time in the sun, even if you take these measures.

Quit smoking

Even if you can't kick the habit completely, you still can lower your health risk by reducing the number of cigarettes you smoke.

Avoid secondhand smoke

Government figures estimate smoke accounts for 25,000 to 50,000 deaths in this country every year. It clearly affects lung function, and probably contributes to deaths from heart attack and lung cancer. Try eliminating it from your home and workplace — the two places you probably spend the most time.

Reduce the fat in your diet

Avoid fried foods and reduce the amount of saturated and trans fats that you consume.

Eat fish twice a week

People who regularly eat baked, grilled, or broiled fish have significantly lower levels of heart disease. If you are pregnant or breast-feeding, limit your fish intake to no more than 12 ounces of fish per week, according to the Food and Drug Administration.

Be radon aware

Test your house for radon if this carcinogen is known to pose a threat in your area.

Be a role model

Your children and other family members are likely to develop lifestyle habits based on what they see you do.



This Month's Webinar

Staying Healthy as You Age

Preparing to age healthy starts at a young age. The recent view on aging has become "it's a matter of mind" and it's all about how you feel! With longevity, we are seeing more chronic disease and conditions. Naturally, genetic makeup plays a part in the aging process too. However, adopting healthy habits and behaviors will contribute to a productive and meaningful life as you age. Learn how perception, nutrition and lifestyle play key roles in healthy aging. The goal is to enjoy the golden years, start here when you participate in this session.

Log-in any time this month to watch the webinar and ask the expert questions!