

ISSUE BRIEF



Seven Ways to Maximize Good Health

Susan Dudley, PhD

September 2006

Modern medicine offers amazing treatments against a wide range of diseases. Today, people can overcome and survive health conditions that would have proven fatal only a few decades ago. Nevertheless, most of us would agree that preventing disease - and not getting sick in the first place - is still far better than having to undergo those treatments.

Disease is more likely to develop under certain circumstances. To the extent that we can control those circumstances, we have a better chance of staying healthy. And it turns out that this isn't always as complicated as most people assume.

Following just seven simple principles can make a big difference in helping us maintain our overall good health and lowering the probability of developing or dying from many of the diseases that are most debilitating and dreaded, like cancer, heart and lung diseases, stroke and diabetes.

1. Avoid tobacco and tobacco smoke

Diseases related to cigarette smoking alone account for almost 1 of every 5 deaths in the United States each year. The greater the total lifetime exposure to tobacco smoke, the greater the risk of developing smoking-related diseases such as lung cancer and emphysema.

The message is clear: don't smoke, and keep away from the second-hand smoke produced when people

near you are smoking cigarettes, cigars, or pipes. Also avoid other tobacco products, such as snuff or chewing tobacco.

Quitting tobacco has major and immediate health benefits. Even if you've tried and failed before, keep trying until you succeed. For help, call the National Cancer Institute's smoking cessation quitline at 1-877-44U-QUIT or visit NCI's smoking cessation Web site at <http://www.smokefree.gov>. The CDC provides a list of other resources to help you quit at <http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/how2quit.htm>.

2. Limit alcohol consumption

Alcohol is the third leading cause of death in the U.S. About half of those deaths result from drunken driving and other risky behaviors, and the other half from dis-

eases that are caused or made worse by alcohol. This includes liver diseases and cancers of the breast, mouth, throat, esophagus, prostate, and liver. For example, compared to non-drinkers, women who consume an average of only 1 alcoholic drink per day increase their risk of breast cancer by approximately 7%.

The Department of Agriculture Dietary Guidelines for Americans defines moderate drinking as having no more than 1 drink per day for women, and no more than 2 drinks

per day for men. This definition refers to the amount consumed on any single day, not an average over several days. A standard drink is equal to 13.7 grams of

Seven Things Everyone Can Do

- Avoid tobacco and tobacco smoke
- Limit alcohol consumption
- Eat a healthy diet
- Control your weight
- Exercise every day
- Limit your sun exposure
- Take advantage of effective disease screening

pure alcohol, which is the equivalent of 12-ounces of beer, or 8-ounces of malt liquor, or 5-ounces of wine, or 1.5-ounces - or one measured "shot" - of 80-proof distilled spirits or liquor (gin, rum, vodka, whiskey, etc).

For more information on alcohol and health, visit <http://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/faqs.htm>.

3. Eat a healthy diet

Surveys confirm that most Americans believe that they have healthy eating habits, in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. For example, a recent survey of more than 11,000 obese Americans found that more than 3 out of every 4 reported that they have healthy eating habits. The health consequences of unhealthy eating range from diseases like osteoporosis and anemia that are related to the lack of specific nutrients, to life-threatening conditions and diseases related to unhealthy foods, such as high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, and more.

While the ideal diet depends on a person's age, sex, and activity level, in general the US Department of Agriculture recommends diets that are low in fats (especially in saturated and trans fats), cholesterol, and added sugars; high in fruits and vegetables (at least 5 servings per day), and high in grains and fiber. Consumption of low- or no-fat dairy products, smaller amounts of protein from meat, fish, and beans, and less salt are also recommended to avoid many medical problems.

Eating a healthier diet usually requires some effort because it isn't always obvious when what we're eating isn't healthy. For example, instead of the recommended maximum of 2400 mg of sodium (salt) per day, the average American diet contains almost twice as much! Much of the excess is hidden in the canned and processed foods we eat - even in "sweet" tasting foods. To avoid this, it is important to monitor the nutrient labels on the foods we buy at the supermarket.

More information about how to construct a healthy diet that is right for your sex, age, and activity level can be found at <http://www.mypyramid.gov/> and at <http://www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/dga2005/document/>.

4. Control your weight

Roughly two-thirds of Americans are overweight, and nearly one-third qualify as obese, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Surveys confirm that while most of us can recognize severe overweight problems in other people, we are less accurate about our own weight problems or the weight problems of our children. Being overweight makes us more vulnerable to many medical problems, including high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, stroke, gallbladder disease, osteoarthritis, severe lung and breathing problems, and endometrial, breast, and colon cancers.

A first step in getting control of your weight is switching to a healthier diet (see resources above). That includes choosing lower calorie foods, eating smaller portion sizes, cooking foods that are lower in fat, and selecting restaurant menu items carefully. Some restaurants list "heart healthy" choices, and many large chain restaurants will provide information about the calorie and fat of many of their menu items upon request or on their websites. That information is very helpful because salads and other meals that sound healthy may contain more fat or salt than you'd guess.

One surprising consequence of consistently choosing lower-calorie foods is that you may be able to eat more over the course of a day, while ending up consuming fewer calories and getting more of the important nutrients such as calcium, iron, potassium and vitamins.

Overweight and obesity are determined by calculating body-mass index (BMI), which is based on height and weight. To find your BMI and learn more about your ideal weight range, visit

http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/bmi/adult_BMI/english_bmi_calculator/bmi_calculator.htm.

A daily calorie needs calculator can be found at http://www.cancer.org/docroot/PED/content/PED_6_1x_Calorie_Calculator.asp?sitearea=&level=.

5. Exercise every day

Adding 30 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise to your daily routine can reduce the risk of dying of heart disease, stroke, colon cancer, diabetes, and high blood pressure. Research indicates that it also helps to con-

control weight; contributes to healthy bones, muscles, and joints; reduces falls among older adults; helps to relieve the pain of arthritis; reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression; and is associated with better sleep as well as fewer hospitalizations, physician visits, and medications.

Everyone can benefit from regular physical exercise, and regardless of age or fitness level, it's never too late to start exercising. You don't need to be an athlete, and the activity you choose doesn't need to be strenuous, to involve a gym membership, or to be competitive. The point is simply to get moving, to modestly elevate your heart-rate, and to keep it elevated during the course of the activity period.

Most people believe that they are getting more exercise in the course of their daily lives than they actually are. Experts advise adults to engage in moderate-intensity physical activities - like walking, biking, swimming, mowing the lawn, or dancing - for at least 30 minutes on 5 or more days of the week or in vigorous-intensity physical activity - like high-impact aerobics, jogging or running, uphill biking, or continuous lap swimming - for at least 20 minutes on 3 or more days per week. But if you can't do that, remember that any exercise is better than none at all. Start slow, and build up to longer exercise sessions as you gain more fitness.

Learn more about the health benefits of physical activity and how to get started at: <http://www.cdc.gov/nccd-php/dnpa/physical/recommendations/adults.htm>.

6. Limit your sun exposure

There is evidence that 10-15 minutes of sun exposure each day is good for you because it helps your body make vitamin D. But, too much exposure to the sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays, whether or not they produce sunburn or tan, can cause skin cancer.

Skin cancer is by far the most common cancer type in the US, with more than 1 million cases of basal and squamous cell cancer diagnosed annually. In addition, about 60,000 new cases of malignant melanoma - the most serious form of skin cancer - are diagnosed each year, along with more than 7,700 deaths from the disease.

Melanoma is the most common cancer among people 25 to 29 years old. But skin cancer can be prevented

through the consistent use of sun protection (even on cloudy days) and the avoidance of artificial sources of UV radiation such as tanning beds and sun lamps. For more information on sun safety, visit http://www.cancer.org/docroot/PED/PED_7.asp?sitearea=PED.

7. Take advantage of effective disease screening

In spite of our best efforts to stay healthy, diseases may develop. But early detection can make a tremendous difference in our health and our lives. There are several screening tests - such as mammograms, Pap smears, colonoscopy, and cholesterol and blood pressure checks - that the US Preventive Services Task Force recommends because the health conditions they can detect can be more easily and more successfully treated if they are detected early.

While most Americans know something about these tests, the majority do not know the recommended age to start them. To get this information and learn more about the recommendations for women, visit: <http://www.ahrq.gov/ppip/healthywom.htm>; and for men: <http://www.ahrq.gov/ppip/healthymen.htm>.

Making it happen

A first step to successful lifestyle change is to make an honest assessment of how your habits match the steps toward healthy living recommended here. Figuring out where you realistically need to concentrate your efforts is essential to improving your health.

Turning good intentions into action isn't always as easy as we'd like it to be - but it can be done. Start small if you need to, and take it one step at a time. In the beginning, following any of these "simple" suggestions is likely to require a good deal of effort, some willpower, and a real commitment to make some long-term changes in priorities. Remember that you don't have to do it all at once, and that an occasional lapse doesn't mean you can't start again. Every change gets easier as it becomes more firmly incorporated into your familiar routine.

The resources listed in each of the sections above, along with the information you can find about the US government's *Healthy People 2010* initiative at <http://www.healthypeople.gov/default.htm>, can provide you with some valuable assistance to get started and keep moving toward a healthier lifestyle and longer life. The payoff will certainly be worth the effort.