



Healthy Habits

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As medical knowledge has grown, doctors suggest that patients develop habits to decrease, delay and even prevent disease. Thus, health promotion not only involves education on how to detect disease, but also increasingly stresses the importance of **healthy habits** in improving or maintaining health.

Nine very important health factors are: diet, exercise, rest, tobacco use, alcohol use, stress management, periodic examinations, vaccinations and safety. Each of these topics will be discussed here. Your personal physician or public library can provide or refer you to sources for more complete information.

DIET

The typical American diet contains too much fat, sugar and salt – and not enough roughage. Fat is bad for us because it contains many calories and, therefore, tends to make us overweight. Fat, particularly from animal sources, also plays an important role in arteriosclerosis (hardening of the arteries). A high fat intake also has been associated with colon cancer.

Sugar is bad for our teeth but also contains many calories. Many of us develop a habit of eating sweets, resulting in lifelong dental problems and obesity. Excessive salt intake causes our bodies to hold onto water. This causes swelling and elevates blood pressure in some people.

Roughage is good for us because it promotes regularity by softening the stool, decreasing the risk for hemorrhoids and other anal problems like fissures and abscesses. Chronic constipation can also lead to diverticulosis, a disease characterized by formation of multiple pouches in the wall of the colon. These diverticuli or pouches can cause pain, bleeding or infection.

Another plus for roughage is its ability to absorb fat and offer some protection against colon cancer.

Achieve a more healthful diet by taking the following steps:

1. **Eat less animal fat.** That means eggs, meat and dairy products. Consider meats with low fat content like chicken, turkey and fish. Try not to fry foods because this adds to the fat in the meat. Baked or broiled meat is better than fried. Drink low-fat milk and dairy products. Especially after menopause, women should maintain an adequate intake of calcium by drinking a quart of low-fat milk each day or by taking up to 1,200 milligrams a day of a calcium with vitamin D supplement. Consider using oils with fat from vegetables, which is more easily used by the body and less likely to cause arteriosclerosis.
2. **Avoid excessive intake of sugar.** Labels on produces allow you to assess your sugar intake.
3. **Limit intake of salt.** This means not only taking it easy on the salt shaker, but also checking nutritional information on snack or processed food labels.
4. **Maintain a generous intake of high roughage foods.** Those include raw vegetables and fruits, whole grain products, bran, etc.
5. **Avoid a high intake of caffeine.** Limit your consumption to no more than five caffeine-containing beverages a day to avoid the risk of arteriosclerosis and intestinal cancer.
6. **Taking a multivitamin with minerals once a day** would benefit most adults.

EXERCISE

Exercise has both physical and psychological benefits. It improves breathing, circulation, digestion and general muscle tone and condition, while decreasing feelings of anxiety and depression. Exercise offers a way to rid the body of tension and excess stress.

The best exercise is aerobic. You don't need to join a gym or buy special equipment to get aerobic exercise. Walking is one of the best forms of exercise and it can be done anywhere, anytime.

Vital factors for exercise are consistency and duration. Try to exercise several times a week; daily exercise is best. To realize the maximum benefit, exercise for at least 20 minutes without interruption. You will increase your heart rate and breathing. Even persons who cannot walk or are weak can perform some sort of light aerobic exercise.

REST

Adequate rest is critical to good health. Many of us do not get enough sleep. In fact, the average American gets one hour less sleep per night than a body needs. Poor sleep habits contribute to failing school and job performance, accidents, memory loss, mental health problems, physical diseases and weight gain. Go to bed and get up about the same time each day. Relax for 30 to 60 minutes before going to bed. Avoid alcohol and caffeine within several hours of bedtime. To help you awaken in the morning, get up, get moving and get some sunlight exposure. If you can't sleep, get out of bed and do something relaxing. Remember, your bed should be a place to sleep, not a place to read or watch television.

TOBACCO

No safe form of tobacco appears to exist. Tobacco use causes most lung cancer in the U.S. and is also a cause of mouth, throat, esophagus, stomach, pancreas and urinary bladder cancers.

Emphysema, stroke, heart attacks, circulation problems and arteriosclerosis also are caused by tobacco use.

Unfortunately, nicotine appears to be addictive, explaining why stopping its use is so difficult. Nicotine gum can be effective when combined with a stop smoking program. These programs are sponsored periodically by doctors, hospitals, the cancer society, mental health centers and other agencies.

ALCOHOL

Alcohol is the most abused drug in our nation and significant incidences of alcoholism exist. Because of the risk of addiction, do not use alcohol on a daily basis or to excess. Studies show that two drinks (two beers, 8-12 ozs. of wine or two shots of hard liquor) per day do not cause liver disease in a majority of people. However, diseases of the liver, like cirrhosis (scarring with impaired function), pneumonia, infections, malnutrition, intestinal diseases like peptic ulcers and many other diseases present risks for people who abuse alcohol. Moderation is the key to alcohol consumption.

The two most important factors in handling an alcohol problem are for the user to admit the problem and then to obtain professional help.

STRESS

High levels of stress increase the risk of both physical and psychological disease, including heart attacks, strokes, cancer, depression, anxiety, drug abuse and more. In stressful situations, determine whether the issue can be modified or avoided. For unavoidable stress, three basic coping strategies exist.

1. **Exercise** decreases anxiety and depression while reducing stress.
2. **Diversión** involves diverting attention from the stressful matter by reading, watching television, participating in hobbies, etc.
3. **Relaxation** helps reduce stress and can be as simple as taking a bath or shower.

Some people master a technique that allows them to fill their minds with pleasant thoughts, relax their muscles and take slow, deep breaths. Unhealthy stress reducers include smoking, drinking alcohol abuse and overeating.

EXAMINATIONS

Periodic examinations benefit people by preventing disease, detecting illness in an early stage and promoting health through education. About 50 percent of patients who undergo a regular check-up are unknowingly afflicted with one or more medical problems.

The recommendations offered here are general guidelines and vary according to age, overall health and your physician recommendations.

- **Medical history and physical examination** should probably be done every 5 to 10 years for people between the ages of 20 and 40 and annually after age 40.

- **Blood pressure check** should be done every five years between ages 20 and 40, and annually thereafter.
- **Breast exam** to screen for cancer should be done by a physician at least every three years between ages 20 and 35, and annually thereafter. Women should perform monthly self exams beginning at age 30.
- **Pelvic exam** to screen for ovarian and other gynecological cancers should be done at least every one to two years between ages 20 and 65.
- **Rectal exam** to screen for rectal cancer and for prostate cancer in males should be done every one to two years after age 40, and annually after age 50.
- **Testicle exam** to screen for cancer should be done monthly by men followed by a physician exam if any abnormalities are detected.
- **PAP smear** to screen for cancer of the cervix should be done annually on high-risk women (based on factors like intercourse at an early age, multiple sexual partners, genital herpes, genital warts and prior abnormal PAP smear) between ages 20 and 65, at least every two years for women at low risk who are between ages 20 and 65, and at a physician's discretion thereafter.
- **Stool screening for occult blood** (invisible blood) to detect colon cancer should be done annually after age 40.
- **Mammography** or X-ray of the breast usually should be done annually after age 40.
- **Cholesterol level check** should be done at age 20 and every five to 10 years thereafter.
- **Thyroid function test** should be done at age 20 and every five to 10 years thereafter.
- **Electrocardiogram (EKG)** should be done once between ages 20 and 40, every five to 10 years after age 40, and more often in some patients with heart disease.
- **Tuberculosis skin test** should be done at age 20 if not sooner and repeated at the physician's discretion.
- **Syphilis screen** should be done at age 20 and repeated at the physician's discretion.
- **Rubella titer** should be measured at age 20 in women if not done sooner. Vaccine is recommended for women who have not had rubella and plan future pregnancies.
- **Dental exam** should be obtained every year or two to detect gum disease or tooth decay. Brush daily and floss regularly to decrease your risk for dental problems.
- **Eye exams** should be done every year or two after age 40.
- **Other test** commonly performed periodically by physicians include survey of blood chemicals, complete blood counts, urinalysis and chest X-rays.

VACCINES

Vaccines to induce immunity and protect us from serious infections are most important in children; however, several are valuable in adults. See the discussion below.

- **Tetanus-diphtheria booster** should be given every 10 years and more often if injury warrants.
- **Influenza vaccination** should be administered annually to people who have serious underlying medical conditions, health care workers and other critical services personnel, and any one who is interested in protection from this infection.
- **Pneumonia vaccination** is recommended for people with serious lung disease and those over age 60. This vaccine should be boosted every five years in most people.

- **Rubella vaccination** was discussed in the “Examinations” section.
 - Hepatitis B vaccination should be given to health care workers.
 - Hepatitis A vaccination should be given to people who travel frequently to areas where it is endemic.

SAFETY

Attention to safety should be continuous. Drive defensively and wear a seat belt. Keep your home safe with proper lighting, railings on stairways, working smoke alarms and adequate security. Use tools and appliances only while wearing protection for eyes, ears and hands. Avoid use of tools when alertness is decreased by fatigue or drugs. Most workplace accidents involve fatigue, carelessness and use of drugs or alcohol; therefore, accidents can be avoided by giving more attention to safety.

Protect children from injury or death by securing dangerous items, teaching them what to do in case of fire, encouraging them to wear helmets and using caution when riding a bicycle or skateboard. Women should avoid locations that might put them at risk for mugging or rape.

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) present a risk to anyone who is sexually active or exposed to blood or body secretions. Each year, one in four sexually active teenagers contracts a STD. Some can be cured with antibiotics; other, like herpes, cannot. AIDS can be treated but will likely cause premature death.

Avoiding exposure is the best way to decrease risk of AIDS or STD. Limiting sexual partners and avoiding people who have had numerous sexual encounters can decrease risk. Use of condoms or spermicides may help, but intercourse or exposure to blood or bodily secretions always will carry risk.