

# Balanced Living

January 2024



## Better Choices for a Healthier Lifestyle

Have you been hesitant to try 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 own 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 actually 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 on-going 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.

### **Be a role model**

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

### **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.



# Less Is More: How to Simplify Your Life

Life today is complicated. Most Americans are pulled in multiple directions every day by commitments to their families, workplaces and communities.

Many people have responded to the pressures of modern life by seeking ways to consciously simplify their routines and attitudes at home and work.

"The goal of living a more simple life isn't to arrive at a static point in your life but to become skilled at balancing your personal relationships, workplace issues, finances and other demands," says Heather G. Mitchener, coauthor of *The 50 Best Ways to Simplify Your Life*.

## Being in the moment

One way to simplify your life is to practice mindfulness -- to slow down and recognize and appreciate the simple things in life. To be mindful instead of mindless, stay in the moment and be conscious of what you're doing. Don't think ahead or look back.

"When we look ahead constantly, we not only rush through the less pleasant tasks, we also tend to hurry through the things we love to do, because we're always thinking or worrying about what we have to do next," says Ms. Mitchener.

A good way to practice being in the moment is to follow your breath, a technique that doesn't require any special training or self-consciousness. To breathe mindfully, take notice of your breaths and try to make them as calm and even as possible. Your breaths should be long and slow and should come from your diaphragm rather than your upper chest. Pay attention to each breath, letting thoughts fall away.

"You can do this exercise any time you think of it," says Ms. Mitchener. "Make it a goal to be mindful, in general, but also set aside short periods to practice. This will improve your ability to make mindfulness a habit. As you learn to live this way, you'll feel more centered."

## Slow down

If you feel like you have too much information in your life, stop subscriptions to magazines, newspapers or e-mail newsletters you rarely have time to read. Leave the radio and TV off unless you're really listening to something that matters to you. Turn off your cell phone unless you're making a call or waiting for one that's important.

To reduce the amount of "stuff" in your home, ask yourself these questions before you buy something: Do I really need it? How often will I wear or use it? Where will I store it? Is there a reason why I must buy it?

## Get organized

Begin by sizing up the problem areas in your home or workplace and making a plan of attack. If you're easily discouraged, start with a small, confined area, such as a single drawer. Otherwise, target an area that gives you the most grief. Your goal should be to clear out clutter that causes you to waste time -- a hall closet that has become a catchall for everything from clothes to sports equipment.

## Learn to focus at work

Multitasking can be an asset, but often the lack of focus it requires means you actually get less done in a day, or less done well. To increase your focus and break free from distractions:

- Begin each day by setting priorities on what you want to accomplish.
- Check e-mail at set times, rather than letting each new message interrupt you.
- Set aside a time to retrieve voice mail and return calls.
- Keep a calendar of your deadlines and obligations.

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## Being Mindful of Your Physical Health

As the new year begins, make a plan to put thought into your physical health. Use these strategies to help you become more mindful of your physical health.

### Schedule your yearly wellness visit.

Make sure you have a primary care physician and schedule a wellness evaluation. Your doctor can check your bloodwork, which provides insight into your overall health and can help detect various conditions. You can also find out if you're deficient in any vitamins or minerals, such as vitamin D or iron.

### Don't skimp on your dental health.

It's also important to keep up with dental cleanings at least once per year. Some colleges with dental programs also offer cleanings for a reduced rate. Your dental health can affect the rest of your body and lead to other diseases, so make sure you're doing your part at home too by brushing twice per day and flossing daily.

### Take advantage of campus resources.

Check out any wellness events on your college campus, which could connect you to various resources. Some resources offer free biometric screenings, which check things like blood pressure, glucose, and cholesterol.

### Make exercise a habit.

Though it can be hard to find time, make sure that exercise is a part of your routine on most days. There are numerous benefits to physical activity, including improved brain health, reduced risk of diseases and cancers, weight management and bone and muscle strengthening. Plus, exercise can improve your mood and make you feel good.

### Prioritize sleep.

Don't deprive yourself of sleep, which is vital for your body and mind. The National Sleep Foundation recommends 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night for most adults.

### Focus on nutrition.

Try to eat more whole foods and fewer processed foods. Make sure you're getting enough protein, vegetables, and fruits in your diet. Also, carry a water bottle with you to stay hydrated throughout the day.

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## Webinar Now Available:

### 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.

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