

Live Healthy and Be Well!

“Make health and wellness a year-round resolution”

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As I write this, we are entering that time of the year when we like to make “New Year’s Resolutions” and really set some good goals to help us do better. Maybe we want to stop smoking, lose weight, be kinder, be on time more often, or finally take the trip we’ve always wanted. The bottom line is that we pick the New Year as a start date and resolve to do better or accomplish a worthy goal. We all need to do this with our health, and the start date needs to be the first day of every month of every year.

One of the best ways to improve overall health, wellness, optimize your body for a longer life, and improve the quality of that life is to maintain a healthy weight. There are no “magic pills” for this, unfortunately. “Fad diets” are just that – and rarely give you a lasting result. Ultimately, it comes down to math – you have to subtract more calories than you add over time. This means that we need to “burn” more calories than we consume. However, we find that harder and harder to accomplish as we get older, right? It can be so easy to put on five pounds and so hard to take off two or three.

There may be some tricks to help us do this a bit better, and at the same time reduce our risk of a cardiovascular event – such as heart attack or stroke. Many of us have been taught over the years that fat and cholesterol in our diets are bad and this is the “enemy” with regards to heart health. Well, no doubt it is a factor, and how to deal with that will be the subject of a future column. But, remember there are two kinds of cholesterol – “bad” (LDL) and “good” (HDL). An elevated HDL can actually help mitigate LDL, so if your total cholesterol is high because of HDL – this is not such a bad thing.

Triglycerides are another type of fat in the blood that should be kept under control. While there are prescription medicines that can help reduce these numbers, we should always try more natural remedies first – such as a high fiber diet and Omega-3 (fish oil) supplements. Both help to lower bad cholesterol and triglycerides, and can elevate good cholesterol.

Not all fat is “bad fat,” and you need some fat in your diet. “Good fats” are unsaturated, and come from such foods as nuts, avocados, olive oil, and fish. “Bad fats,” unfortunately, come from many of the foods we love and taste so good - bacon, French fries, fatty meats, and cheese. These fats are saturated, and if consumed consistently, will elevate your lipids (cholesterol and triglycerides). This does not mean you can never have bacon and such, but just have the knowledge that these fats are not the best for you.

There are other factors that have much to do with our cardiovascular risk – inflammation in our bodies, effects of sugar, and genetics. Inflammation in your system can damage the walls of

blood vessels, which will be repaired with scar tissue and change the “flexibility” of the vessels and also provide a focus for cholesterol plaques to form. Sources of inflammation can come from acute events such as a sinus infection or bronchitis. These are usually short term and limited – and can be more easily treated and controlled. Chronic sources of inflammation come from conditions like arthritis, colitis or inflammatory bowel disease, and gastritis. These are harder to manage but you should talk to your doctor about limiting the effects of these conditions. Consuming more foods high in “anti-oxidants,” and Omega-3 supplements, can serve to limit the effects of and repair the damage of inflammation in your body.

If there is a single “enemy” in our diet that works against our maintaining a healthy weight, it is sugar. If you are diabetic (elevated blood sugar), you know this well and may avoid sugar and take medicines to help keep your sugar under control. But even if not diabetic, you may be “pre-diabetic,” and need to be careful.

Sugar is rampant in the American diet – and all the producers of food know that we like the taste of it and they use it in almost everything. Southern sweet iced tea is delicious on a hot day, those sauces you love at a restaurant really make the food taste so much better, and there is probably even sugar in the batter of your favorite drive thru fried chicken! Sugar is good for quick energy. But, it also seems to send signals to the body to “store this as fat,” instead of “burn these calories.” If you are having trouble losing weight, avoid sugar and you will see a difference. But beware, sugar is in almost everything we buy.

We are all a product of our genetics, and cannot do too much about what we inherited from our family line. But, one thing you can do is know about these risk factors and try to manage that risk. If there is significant heart disease or diabetes in your family, try to do all you can to limit the effects or avoid developing these conditions yourself. Talk to your doctor about checking for these things. Check out a customized lifestyle type program offered by someone like *bostonheartdiagnostics.com* – many are covered by your insurance.

Just a couple of last things to mention if you are having trouble getting where you want to be, but feel like you are really trying. First of all, hang in there and keep trying! Talk to your doctor about checking some basic bloodwork. Check on your thyroid – if it is not functioning well, it could be a factor. Also, drinking alcohol frequently can also put weight on you, and limiting or stopping this habit can also help you get to and stay at your goals.

Make your health and wellness a real priority all year ‘round. Learn about it and work at it constantly and you will reap the benefits in quality of life, and lower your risk of adverse events. This month and year, and every one to follow – live healthy and be well!

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