
The Wellness Factor

You have more control over keeping yourself healthy than anyone else. How well you take care of yourself every day affects your health. Checkups are important and you should be sure to schedule a physical annually.

Wellness is the integration of body, mind, and spirit, the appreciation that everything you do, think, feel, and believe every day has an impact on your health.

Health Risks

During the past several years, medical researchers have identified a number of health risk factors. A risk factor is anything that can impair health and lead to disease.

There are two categories of risk factors: non-controllable (such as age, sex, and heredity) and controllable. The seven controllable risks include:

1. Improper nutrition
2. Obesity
3. Lack of exercise
4. Hypertension
5. Stress
6. Smoking
7. Alcohol and drug abuse

Let's look at some things you can do to control these risk factors.

A Good Diet

The body needs energy and nutrients periodically and functions best when these are supplied regularly. Nutritionists suggest only fresh fruits and vegetables for snacks. Also, to cut the risk of clogging your arteries, try to reduce the fats in your diet. That means substituting lean meats, chicken, and fish for fatty meats, and skimmed milk for whole milk products. Cut down on your consumption of sugar and salt. No matter how little you think you consume, the experts tell us it is probably more than necessary.

Weight Control

If you can grab more than an inch of fat when you pinch your waist or arm, then you need to do something about your weight. For most people overeating is a fixed response to a situation: anger, stress, boredom, or the stimulus created by the sight or smell of food. Recognizing the situations to which you respond by eating is necessary to break the cycle. For example, if you realize your greatest weakness for food occurs when you are angry, you can take the first important step towards changing that fixed response. Let the anger out in an active way, by exercising or by avoiding food. To reduce overeating, try some of these ideas:

- ▶ Reduce portions of food.
- ▶ Eat slowly and put your fork down between mouthfuls.
- ▶ Eat with a cocktail fork, so you'll take small bites.
- ▶ Drink as much water as you can before you eat to reduce food capacity.
- ▶ Eat in one room all the time and make food off limits in other rooms.

Proper Exercise

Make time on a regular basis for exercise, such as brisk walks, swimming, jumping rope, bicycling, or calisthenics. There are even ways to exercise in your daily routine. You might try these:

- ▶ Take the stairs instead of the elevator.
- ▶ Park your car a couple of blocks from your destination and walk.
- ▶ Clothe yourself while standing up instead of sitting down.
- ▶ Wash your car or work in your garden.
- ▶ Dance to music on the stereo or radio instead of watching television.

Hypertension (High Blood Pressure)

Hypertension is one of the most important risk factors for heart attacks and strokes. Heart disease is also the leading cause of death in the U.S. Excessive salt in the diet and stress are factors that contribute to hypertension. Ways to cut salt (sodium) in the diet include:

- ▶ Avoid processed foods B particularly canned and convenience foods.
- ▶ Read labels. Watch for sodium, brine, salt, soda B all mean some type of sodium.
- ▶ Use fresh fruits, vegetables, and meats as much as possible.
- ▶ Do not salt foods when cooking, salt only at the table and only after tasting the food.
- ▶ Use more herbs and spices for flavoring rather than salt.

Hypertension cannot be cured but it can be controlled through diet, exercise, relaxation therapy, and medication.

Stress

Stress is normal and inevitable. People under stress experience measurable changes in body functions, a rise in blood pressure, the secretion of adrenalin and other hormones into the bloodstream, and a quickening of breathing. When stress or the reaction to stress is excessive, it may lead to a variety of physical and/or emotional problems. Stress cannot be eliminated, but in some instances, it can be reduced and stress-coping skills can be improved. Exercise, proper nutrition, and a variety of relaxation techniques are some ways to cope with stress.

About Smoking and Drinking

Finally, cut out or at least cut down on your smoking and drinking. All evidence strongly suggests these two items will do you in more quickly and thoroughly than most activities with the exception of hard drugs and poison. To manage your drinking more effectively, the experts recommend drinking in moderation. Other suggestions include:

- ▶ Always sip slowly.
- ▶ Eat before you drink.
- ▶ Alcohol is better not taken when you are physically or emotionally upset or alone.

Conclusion

Many of our serious health ailments can be avoided, or at least minimized and controlled, if an individual really wants to do something about it. This concept of self-responsibility for one's health seems to be an idea whose time has finally come.