

Action Plan for Healthy Living

Fact Sheet

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Introduction

A long and healthy life doesn't just happen. Everyday choices influence the quality of life you experience. Decisions start before your feet hit the floor in the morning. For instance, you made a decision whether or not to set an alarm or what time to set the alarm. Many decisions during the day are food-centered. Perhaps you think you just make three food decisions daily: Breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Well, think again. You choose how much or what kind of milk to pour on cereal, whether to have a second helping of lasagna, if you will eat that pastry or drink soda or coffee at the office, and on and on.

Other important decisions revolve around physical activity. Take the stairs or elevator? Exercise before or after work? Watch TV or go for a walk? Since all of these decisions affect how your day goes, it is important to consider making a few common-sense changes. Many serious health problems are directly related to personal habits or behavior. Having a written plan is an important step in regaining or maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Improve Eating Habits

Over time, poor eating habits affect overall health status. Problems related to obesity or chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, or arthritis didn't happen overnight. Making poor nutrition and exercise choices can even contribute to a generally poor emotional or mental outlook. Consider these simple guidelines for improving your eating habits:

Start your day with breakfast

Studies show that people who include breakfast eat 100 fewer calories a day than people who don't. Food consumed first thing in the morning jump-starts metabolism and helps the body function better physically and mentally.

Include a fruit or vegetable with every meal or snack

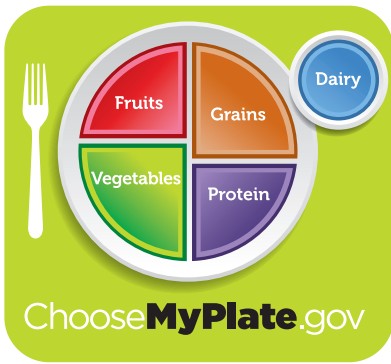
Fruits and vegetables are naturally high in fiber and low in calories. They also provide a wide range of disease-fighting vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants. Some vegetables and many fruits are naturally sweet, so consuming more of these can actually tame a sweet tooth.

Reduce portion sizes

With the Choose MyPlate recommendations adopted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in June 2011, consumers are encouraged to eat from a plate that is 9 inches in diameter. Making a conscious effort to reduce food portion size will do much to reduce the number of calories, as well as the amount of fat and added sugar consumed.

Eat slowly and eat only until you are no longer hungry

Learn to enjoy feeling satisfied and light on your feet instead of stuffing yourself. Try laying your eating utensil down between bites or engage in conversation around the dinner table to help everyone slow down. When you routinely stop eating just as you begin to feel full and don't take even one more bite, you can save as many as 500 calories a day, which means losing up to 50 pounds in a year.



Visit www.choosemyplate.gov to learn more about a balanced diet.



Choose to eat more nutrient-dense foods

Foods that have low nutrient density supply calories but little or no amounts of vitamins and minerals; therefore, they are given the label “empty calories.” On the other hand, nutrient-rich or dense foods have lots of vitamins and minerals compared to the number of calories they provide. A practical example of this is to compare the nutritional value of a whole raw apple (52 calories) to a slice of dutch apple pie (350 calories). Not only is there a dramatic difference in calories in these two food choices, but the amount of sugar and fat found in a slice of pie is more than an average person needs in a meal.

Eat whole foods instead of highly processed foods

This recommendation goes hand in hand with the last one. Highly processed foods have added colorings, chemical flavor enhancers, and preservatives you cannot pronounce. Whole foods mean less sugar, fat, sodium, and chemicals, and they provide more fiber and natural nutrients.

Get Moving

Along with choosing to consume healthier food, many people can achieve a healthy lifestyle by increasing physical activity. Start by investing in a good pair of walking shoes and walking around your neighborhood or indoor exercise facility. Another habit that will increase success is scheduling time for physical activity during your day. Here are four simple guidelines to get your heart rate up and your muscles stretched:

Start slow

If you have been inactive for a period of time, make sure you do not overdo your first workout. Sore muscles or shortness of breath translate to not wanting to continue. As with any exercise program, check with your health-care provider first.

Find a buddy

Since it takes approximately six weeks of repetition to turn something into a habit, you will want to find a friend who is as committed to exercise as you are. Agree to hold each other accountable for increasing your level of physical activity. Then you just need to hold up your end of the bargain.

Do regular physical exercise

This is the first step to help offset the declining metabolic rate that occurs as we age. This decline is 2 percent per decade after age 30, or about 100 fewer calories burned each day by age 50. If a person does not eat less or exercise more, this could cause a yearly weight gain of 10 pounds. Another part of aging is a change in body composition — more fat and less muscle. People who exercise regularly have a more favorable body composition, with a lower proportion of body fat. People who exercise regularly have greater bone density than those who do not. To be most helpful, regular exercise should be started early in life to help maintain bone density.

When Eating and Exercising Aren't Enough

When healthy food choices and the addition of regular physical activity do not bring about the healthy lifestyle you were hoping for, perhaps it is time to consider other factors that influence health. According to the University



of Florida IFAS Extension publication, *Healthstyle: A Self-Test*, it is estimated that 7 of the 10 leading causes of death could be reduced through common-sense changes in lifestyle. Consider these six “S” strategies for achieving a healthy life:

Stress management

Stress is a normal part of living, and the causes of it can be good or bad. When stress becomes distress people often show unhealthy responses, such as driving too fast, prolonged anger, worry or fear, or drinking too much. Learn to find ways that reduce stress in your life. Things like deep breathing, physical activity, and positive self-talk may be effective.

Simplify

Hectic schedules may not allow for adequate down time, but it is important to find some quiet time each day with no demands. Another way to simplify your life is to de-clutter your living space. Refer to the K-State Research and Extension publication MF2879 *Cut the Clutter and Get Organized* for some tips.

Safety first

Whether you are walking, riding a bicycle, or driving in a car there are choices that can improve safety. Wearing a seat belt when in a vehicle, a helmet when cycling, and leaving electronic devices turned off while driving to keep distractions to a minimum would be good decisions.

Stop smoking and limit alcohol consumption

Both smoking and excessive drinking are real issues that pose great health risks. There are community-based programs that can help people who are serious about eliminating these unhealthy habits.

Sleep well

Making simple changes in routine, environment, diet, and other factors can help you achieve adequate sleep. Sleep disorders are common, and some are serious, but most can be treated. An excellent resource to learn more about sleep is the K-State Research and Extension publication MF2830, *Sleep: Want It, Need It, Get It*.

Surround yourself with positive people

When someone is feeling down, one of the best strategies is to spend time with positive, upbeat people. Laughter, encouragement, and positive thoughts can effectively help reverse negative thoughts.

Develop an Action Plan

You have 15 strategies at your fingertips to help you achieve a healthy life. In order to be successful, consider putting your plans in writing by developing an action plan. The most important part of an action plan is to choose something you want to do. Next it needs to be something reasonable, such as something you can expect to be able to accomplish in a week or a month. A true action plan is behavior specific. Losing weight is not a behavior; not eating after dinner is. An action plan answers these questions: What? How much? When? How often?

The final piece of a successful action plan is to assess the confidence level that you will fulfill the contract. On a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 represents



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little confidence and 10 represents total confidence, your plan should rank at least a 7. The following form is easy to complete and post where you will see it daily.

Conclusion

Many serious health problems are directly related to personal habits or behavior. The risk factors that can lead to these problems are of little concern to many people. They have the attitude, “I feel fine – why worry about a healthier lifestyle?” The medical system was built around caring for the sick instead of keeping people well. Achieving a healthy lifestyle takes knowledge, effort, and determination. No one can do it for you. You have tools at your fingertips to help you achieve a healthier life. Now is the time to build healthy habits into your daily life. Soon they will come naturally. Good luck with that endeavor.

My Action Plan

This week I will _____ (what)
_____ (how much)
_____ (when)
_____ (how many)

How confident are you? _____
(0 = not at all confident; 10 = total confident)

My Progress

	Check off	Comments
Monday	_____	_____
Tuesday	_____	_____
Wednesday	_____	_____
Thursday	_____	_____
Friday	_____	_____
Saturday	_____	_____
Sunday	_____	_____

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