

# Ditch your Diet and Get Healthy!

There are a couple key items which I talk about with my patients at every annual visit: seeing a dentist, getting a yearly mole check, taking your Calcium and Vitamin D; but the two most important pieces of advice I can offer to improve the quality and quantity of your life are to help quit or avoid smoking and to promote exercise combined with a healthy diet. For most Americans, the struggle with weight and self-image is a lifelong journey. In a society bombarded by commercial marketing which promotes food supplements and junk-food, it's not surprising that we have such a difficult time choosing a nutritional and balanced diet needed to keep us healthy. The great contradiction to this is that we are living in a time of the infinite plenty and variety. Access to quality products and knowledge of food science has never been greater, yet it seems that this overwhelming supply, like in so many other areas of our lives, has in some way made things even more difficult. I find more and more of my patients talking with me about poor eating habits and excess.

The goal then has to be in finding the middle ground. The first distinction we have to make is between your everyday diet (i.e. the foods

which you regularly eat to provide sustenance) and marketed “diets” which are designed to help an individual lose weight (i.e. “The Atkins Diet”). The “dieting” industry is estimated to consume 33 Billion dollars a year in America alone. Thousands of businesses’ survivals are dependent on getting us to buy into these attractive weight loss plans. The truth of the matter is, however, that these changes are, by definition, temporary. Because there is no money in it, you are rarely going to hear the obvious and easy truth: if you eat better, forever, you will lose weight, live longer, and feel better. If you “diet,” you’re not really fixing the problem. You’re just masking it, but not for long.

Here are some basic principles to get started toward a productive change:

- 1. Find a diet you can live with. Forever.** No more fad “diets” that you are guaranteed to rebound from. Let’s find some healthy foods that you enjoy eating to make up the majority of your meals. Focus on shopping the parameter of the grocery store as opposed to the isles down the center – that’s where you will find most of the natural nutrients. Commit

to making this change for 3-4 weeks; you'll find it's difficult to go back. With this, any specific indulgence taken in moderation (that means once or twice a month!) won't knock you off your plan.

- 2. Weight gain or loss is as simple as calories in vs. calories out.** You need to decide whether you work best with 3 meals a day or 5-6 small, healthy snacks, but you can't do both! I recommend everyone keep a strict food diary for a week. I expect you will be surprised by how the calories add up from snacks and nibbles made through the day. This is especially true for beverages. Soft-drinks, alcohol, juice, and energy drinks are an indulgence; they are empty calories not necessary for your sustenance. Keep them in check, and focus on the majority of your fluid intake being water.

- 3. Exercise! Three reasons:**

- More calories out!

- You will be healthier from a cardiovascular standpoint regardless of your weight.

- Exercise is the best appetite suppressant. If you get home from work and are hungry and bored, it's no surprise that you snack on something. If you go walking instead, you not only get a

release of endorphins that replace your cravings with a sense of well-being, but your body is now ramped up in a primitive "fight or flight" response which takes its focus away from less immediate things like hunger and gives you more energy to get stuff done.

You should make a goal of getting out for 30 minutes a day, 5 days a week, doing anything that elevates your heart-rate. Find something you enjoy (power-walking, running, biking, swimming, yoga, weight lifting, sports, etc.); just make sure you are breaking a sweat! And remember, you will never get out as much as you plan. If you say five days a week, you will likely accomplish three, so make it a daily activity and you can skip days when you need to. Activity is a part of our evolution. You'll find that after a few weeks, you feel worse on the days you miss!

**4. Prepare foods yourself:** Perhaps, this is the key to it all. Not only are you avoiding all of the junk that goes into fast foods and pre-packaged meals, but you are dealing with real products with real nutrients in a healthy and engaging way. Almost no home cook has the courage to put the amount of heavy cream in a soup that

the take-out place down the street does. By preparing your own foods, you can focus on the balance and appreciation which connect us with the earth that provides our nutrition.

The key to these changes is a slow incorporation of realistic goals. Identify the lifestyle you would like to have and select one thing a week that you can do to get closer to that goal. Weight loss rarely is maintained if it is not gradual. Experts emphasize that one to two pounds a week is an appropriate target. It took most people a few years to get to a point that they are unhappy with. It is reasonable to expect that it will take a few years to get back, and if these changes make you feel better, that time won't feel like a sacrifice. Rather, it should just be an adjustment. Regular exercise that you enjoy and that energizes you, healthy foods that taste great and help you drop pounds, avoiding high-fat and high-sugar processed "foods" that decrease your energy and leave you feeling fatigued and still hungry, these are easy changes you can make if you have clear goals and realistic timelines. Become the person you want to be. It's in your reach!

If you are looking for more information about healthy diets and meal-plans, check out: [www.mypyramid.gov](http://www.mypyramid.gov). It's an excellent resource

for nutritional information and provides useful programs which will keep you on track.