Strive for better health

APRIL

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For many of us, taking care of ourselves takes a backseat to us taking care of others. Our day-to-day responsibilities often keep us away from the gym. Changes in our culture and the way we do things have caused added stress, and financial challenges have limited (or eliminated) what we could spend on health and fitness.

Now is the time to put self-care in the driver's seat by building habits that will keep your body, mind, and finances healthy. After all, when you take care of yourself, you're also taking care of your family, friends, and community.

Feeling Stressed Out? Try Self-Compassion

If you are feeling stressed out – and who isn't in our fast-paced world – self-compassion can be an effective strategy for not just getting through, but thriving during these challenging times.

Harvard psychologist Christopher Germer, in his book *The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion*, suggests ways to bring self-compassion into your life. Here are a few:

- **Comfort your body.** Eat something healthy. Lie down and rest. Massage your own neck, feet, or hands. Take a walk. Anything you can do to improve how you feel physically gives you a dose of self-compassion.
- **Write a letter to yourself.** Describe a situation that caused you to feel pain (a breakup, a job loss, a loved one's illness). Write a letter to yourself describing the situation without blaming anyone. Acknowledge your feelings.
- **Give yourself encouragement.** If something bad or painful happens to you, think of what you would say to a good friend if the same thing happened to him or her. Direct these compassionate responses toward yourself.
- **Practice mindfulness.** This is the nonjudgmental observation of your own thoughts, feelings, and actions, without trying to suppress or deny them. When you look in the mirror and don't like what you see, accept the bad with the good with a compassionate attitude.

Ways to Prevent Cancer – and Boost Your Overall Fitness

As Americans fought in World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt noticed that cancer too was a deadly enemy. This led to him to declare the first Cancer Control Month in April 1943. Since then, we observe the **National Cancer Control Month** each April by focusing on raising awareness for cancer prevention and treatment throughout the US.

Over the years, research has shown that the best defense against cancer is a good offense: developing healthy lifestyle habits. Consider these six cancer-prevention tips.

Eat a healthy diet

Base your diet on fruits, vegetables, and other foods from plant sources — such as whole grains and beans. Eat lighter and leaner by choosing fewer high-calorie foods such as refined sugars and fat from animal sources. See more diet tips in "Eat More Plants!" on page 3.

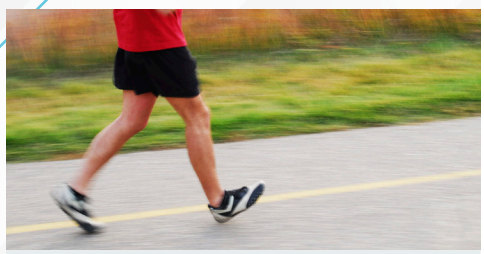
Control your weight

Getting to and staying at a healthy weight is important to reduce the risk of cancer and other chronic diseases, such as heart disease and diabetes. Being overweight can cause the body to make and circulate more estrogen and insulin, hormones that can increase the risk of several cancers, including those of the breast, colon and rectum, endometrium, esophagus, pancreas, liver, and kidney.

If you use tobacco – QUIT

Using any type of tobacco puts you on a collision course with cancer. Smoking has been linked to various types of cancer — including cancer of the lung, mouth, throat, larynx, pancreas, bladder, cervix, and kidney. Chewing tobacco has been linked to cancer of the oral cavity and pancreas. Even if you don't use tobacco, exposure to secondhand smoke might increase your risk of lung cancer.

For tools and resources to help you quit, visit **www.cdc.gov/quit**.



Get moving

Being active can help reduce your cancer risk by helping with weight control. It can also help improve your hormone levels, boost your immune system, and reduce your risk of heart disease and diabetes. Aim for at least 150 minutes a week of moderate aerobic activity or 75 minutes a week of vigorous aerobic activity. As a general goal, include at least 30 minutes of physical activity in your daily routine — and if you can do more, even better.

Get routine medical care

Regular exams and screenings for various types of cancers — such as cancer of the skin, colon, cervix, and breast — can increase your chances of discovering cancer early, when treatment is most likely to be successful. Ask your doctor about the best cancer screening schedule for you.

Limit alcohol consumption

Alcohol is associated with an increased risk of liver, head and neck, esophageal, breast, and colon cancers. To reduce your cancer risk, limit the amount of alcohol you drink. It is recommended that men should consume no more than one alcoholic drink per day, and that women should have no more than three alcoholic drinks per week.

Visit **www.cdc.gov/alcohol** for helpful tools and resources.

Eat More Plants!

Almost every week, a new diet trend is hitting the health food headlines: keto, vegan, Mediterranean, DASH, and so on. It can make it almost impossible to figure out what to eat and not eat. But there is one diet that is consistently proven, over more than two decades, to reduce your risk for cancer, heart disease, diabetes, stroke, and some mental illnesses. It is a plant-based diet.

Eating plant-based does not mean you can't eat meat. It means your meals are mostly plants: vegetables, whole grains and fruits, beans, seeds, and nuts. To keep it simple, fill two-thirds of your plate with these plant-based foods. The remaining one-third can be a lean protein like chicken or fish, or a plant protein like tofu or beans.

Harvard Health offers these tips for eating plant-based in its article, "**What is a plant-based diet and why should you try it?**"

- **Eat lots of vegetables.** Fill half your plate with vegetables at lunch and dinner. Make sure you include plenty of colors in choosing your vegetables. Enjoy vegetables as a snack with hummus, salsa, or guacamole.
- **Change the way you think about meat.** Have smaller amounts. Use it as a garnish instead of a centerpiece.
- **Choose good fats.** Fats in olive oil, olives, nuts and nut butters, seeds, and avocados are particularly healthy choices.
- **Cook a vegetarian meal at least one night a week.** Build these meals around beans, whole grains, and vegetables.
- **Include whole grains for breakfast.** Start with oatmeal, quinoa, buckwheat, or barley. Then add some nuts or seeds along with fresh fruit.
- **Go for greens.** Try a variety of green leafy vegetables such as kale, collards, Swiss chard, spinach, and other greens each day. Steam, grill, braise, or stir-fry to preserve their flavor and nutrients.
- **Build a meal around a salad.** Fill a bowl with salad greens such as romaine, spinach, Bibb, or red leafy greens. Add an assortment of other vegetables along with fresh herbs, beans, peas, or tofu.
- **Eat fruit for dessert.** A ripe, juicy peach, a refreshing slice of watermelon, or a crisp apple will satisfy your craving for a sweet bite after a meal.

Source: Harvard Medical School, Harvard Health Publishing, **health.harvard.edu**

A Few Resources for Eating Plant-Based

You can find a plethora of plant-based resources available online, in print and even in films. Here are just a few reputable sources to get you started.

- MD Anderson Cancer Center provides an overview of what eating plant-based can do for your health in "**5 Benefits of a Plant-based Diet.**"
- **Nutritionfacts.org:** This website is a science-based public service provided by Dr. Michael Greger, providing free updates on the latest in nutrition research via bite-sized videos. There are more than a thousand videos on nearly every aspect of healthy eating, with new videos and articles uploaded every day.
- **Whole Food Plant-based Resources:** This website provides a list of books, films, podcasts, and other resources to help you learn about plant-based eating and how to incorporate more plants in your diet every day.
- **The Beginner's Guide to a Plant-based Life:** The Forks Over Knives organization offers a simple beginner's guide to a plant-based lifestyle.