CHRONIC DISEASE: CUTTING YOUR RISK

According to a recent article in the Archives of Internal Medicine, four factors can have a big impact on your health: never smoking; a body mass index of less than 30; regular exercise of at least 3.5 hours/week; and following a diet low in meat consumption and rich in fruits, vegetables and whole grains. In this study of nearly 25,000 middle-aged adults, those who scored well in these four areas reduced their risk of diabetes by 93%, heart attack by 81%, stroke by 50% and cancer by 36%, compared to participants who scored poorly. That's as powerful a reason to change your lifestyle as you can get.

BELLY FAT BASICS

Science shows a strong connection between excess stomach fat and some of our most serious diseases. People with wide girths often have large amounts of “hidden” visceral fat around their internal organs, which raises the risk of diabetes, heart disease, stroke and some cancers. This type of fat may be particularly dangerous because it produces more inflammatory substances, which are linked to these diseases.

Though overweight people often have too much belly fat, even normal-weight adults are at risk if they carry excess fat around the middle. So what is “excess” fat? It’s a waist measurement of:
- 40 inches or more for men
- 35 inches or more for women

CERVICAL CHANGES: WHAT DO THEY MEAN?

“Your Pap smear test results were abnormal.” When a woman hears these words, it can mean that cell changes, precancerous cells or cancer were found, or that the test results were simply unclear. Look at the facts and take heart:

1. Most women with positive Pap smear results do not have cancer and will not contract it in the future. Some common causes for cell changes include inflammation, infections, growths (such as benign polyps or cysts) or hormonal changes.

2. Follow up on test results for early detection. Cell changes due to a human papillomavirus (HPV) infection are more concerning, as certain types of this virus can cause cervical cancer. Follow up on your health care provider’s advice. If cancerous cells are found, survival rates are good when the cancer is detected early.

3. Regular exams can detect and monitor abnormal findings. Regular Pap smears are recommended throughout a woman’s life (except for those who’ve had a hysterectomy). Exams should start annually at age 21. Ask your health care provider about your personal needs. FYI: Pap smears are more accurate if you don’t have your period and don’t use a douche, vaginal creams, medications or tampons (and refrain from sexual intercourse) for 48 hours before the test.
BEGINNER’S GUIDE TO HERBS AND SPICES

Herbs and spices can add great flavor to any cuisine and can help you reduce the amount of added fat, salt and sugar in your diet.

What's the difference? Herbs are fragrant leaves from plants and can be fresh or dried. Some common herbs are oregano, thyme, parsley, mint, basil and rosemary. Spices are usually dried and ground and come from the bark, fruit, roots and seeds of tropical plants and trees. Common spices are cinnamon, nutmeg, allspice, cloves, curry and pepper.

What's the key? A little goes a long way. You can always add more to your dish, but you can’t take it away.

Basic combinations:
• Basil on tomatoes
• Oregano on zucchini
• Rosemary on peas, cauliflower or squash
• Dill on green beans

Cooking Quick Tips
• For soups, try out new seasoning combinations by first adding one-eighth tsp. to one-half cup of liquid, let stand for 10 minutes and taste.
• Choose fresh herbs that look bright and aren’t wilted. Add them toward the end of cooking. Add dried herbs in the earlier stages of cooking. When substituting dried for fresh, use about one-third the amount.
• You can replace salt with flavors that have “bite,” such as pepper, basil, onion or garlic powder, cumin, or curry.
• Reduce sugar by using spices with a hint of “sweet” such as cinnamon, ginger, clove, nutmeg or cardamom.

Bonus: Researchers are studying whether certain seasonings could have medicinal properties.

BELLY FAT BASICS (continued)

How do you measure up? If you have a spare tire around your middle, studies show that 30 to 45 minutes of brisk exercise five times a week is an effective remedy. Exercise should be intense enough that you feel your heart rate increase (and you may sweat) but can still converse.

Wrap up: Your waist measurement is a vital statistic to consider when assessing your health. Losing a little around the middle could gain you a lot.

Birth Defect Dos & Don’ts

Worries about birth defects are common in women who are pregnant or trying to conceive. Though some defects are genetic, many are preventable. Learn what you can do to protect your baby before you conceive. Be sure to ask about whether any prescription drugs, over-the-counter drugs or vaccines should be avoided.

What else can you do?
✓ Do take a daily vitamin with 400 micrograms of folic acid before and during pregnancy to prevent neural tube defects.
   Tip: Some fortified cereals may supply 100% of your daily folate need.
✗ Don’t drink alcohol. No amount has been found to be safe during pregnancy.
✓ Do delegate pet care. Pet rodents (hamsters, guinea pigs) can contract lymphocytic choriomeningitis virus (LCMV) from wild mice, and cat feces can transmit toxoplasmosis. Both of these can harm a developing fetus. If you’re pregnant, have mice problems handled professionally, avoid contact with pet rodents and have someone else clean the litter box.
✗ Don’t smoke. Smoking raises the risk of premature births, cleft palate, and limb and heart defects.
✗ Don’t use street drugs — cocaine, marijuana and Ecstasy can all cause serious birth defects.
✓ Do avoid harmful substances at home and work, including lead, solvents and arsenic.


“Our bodies are our gardens, our wills are our gardeners.” ~ Shakespeare

FROZEN DINNER FACTS. Frozen dinners are convenient but may not always satisfy your nutritional or weight control needs. Look for:
• Fat Content - 10% or fewer calories from saturated fat and no more than 30% from total fat.
• Salt - No more than 200 milligrams of sodium for every 100 calories of food.
• Calories - Some low-calorie meals are too skimpy to satisfy hunger. Look for entrees with at least 300 calories.

Last bite: Few frozen meals provide enough vegetables, so add a salad or a side of vegetables to round out your meal.

NEXT MONTH: EATING WELL ON A BUDGET