

Maintaining My Physical Health

By Lucy Hornstein, M.D.

Healthy living is something you should be addressing throughout your life, regardless of your employment status. If eating right, getting enough sleep and exercise, and not letting stress get to you haven't been your first priorities in the past, NOW is an excellent time to turn things around. Your life literally depends on it.

On the other hand, be careful about trying to make abrupt changes. Losing a job is a traumatic event, and big changes are not a good idea in the wake of a trauma. Just be aware that taking care of your physical health by improving your lifestyle is important in the long run.

It may sound silly, but physical health depends on surprisingly simple things. I like to break healthy living down to the basics: Eat; Sleep; Move.

1. Eat

The best diet is a balanced diet; one that consists of a wide variety of foods, preferably fresh as opposed to processed, with plenty of vegetables and fruits. As I said above, though, now is not the time for abrupt changes. Food is so much more than just physical nourishment, and there's nothing wrong with comfort food. In moderation, that is. There's no such thing as a "forbidden food." When practicing true moderation, you can eat anything you want.

That said, consider taking this opportunity to improve your diet. You don't have to start eating fish every day, especially if you hate it, but in this part of your journey, perhaps you have a little more time than you may have previously to think about your food. Explore recipes, improve your culinary skills, clip some coupons and shop with more awareness. You do not have to spend a lot of money to eat well. On the flip side, don't go stocking up on pasta and canned goods for fear of running out of money for food. A diet high in carbs and processed foods isn't going to help at all.

A quick word about food pantries and other charitable food sources: These are important resources that you should not discount due to shame or embarrassment. The people who do this work are kind, discreet, and non-judgmental. Most of their clients have only short-term need for their services. Think of charity as a wheel: sometimes you're at the top, giving. But then the wheel can turn, and you may find yourself in need. Don't hold yourself back from accepting charity from others; with time, the wheel will turn, and you will once again be in a position to give.

2. Sleep

Rest and renewal are a gift from God that we receive every day. Poor sleep, both quantity and quality, is associated with depression, high blood pressure, weight gain, and anxiety, among many other physical and mental ailments. Adults should ideally get a minimum of 7-9 hours of sleep every night. (6 hours is the absolute minimum.) It's difficult to keep that critically important positive outlook when you're not well rested. That said, many of the basics of a good night's sleep are frequently overlooked. Together, these things are called "sleep hygiene."

- Go to bed at the same time every night, and get up at the same time every morning, including weekends, holidays, and vacations.
- Don't nap during the day.
- The bedroom should be cool, dark, and quiet. Dark means no TV and no electronics in the bedroom. Quiet means no fans or white noise machines. Ear plugs and sleep masks can help.
- Avoid all electronic screens for at least an hour before bed, including phones, tablets, and back-lit e-readers. (Screens emit blue light, which works like the daylight sky to your brain, telling it to be awake.)
- No reading, eating, watching TV, or anything else in bed (except intimacy, of course.) The bed is only for sleep.
- If you can't sleep: get up and leave the bedroom. Read a book or do something non-stimulating until you feel sleepy. Then go back to bed.
- Avoid vigorous exercise, heavy meals, and alcohol within four hours of bedtime

An important note about a surprisingly common medical condition called Obstructive Sleep Apnea (OSA): If you suffer from daytime sleepiness, never awake refreshed regardless of how long you slept, and if you snore or stop breathing at night (you may wake yourself gasping, though not always) it is vitally important to see a doctor. OSA can be effectively treated with weight loss and/or a machine that keeps your airway open with positive pressures (PAP). Without treatment, it can lead to high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke, among other things. Please don't ignore possible OSA symptoms.

3. Move

It's been said that a sedentary lifestyle is worse than smoking. I'm not sure if I'd go that far, but lack of exercise is definitely not good for you. You do not need an expensive gym membership, or thousands of dollars worth of equipment to exercise. From the perspective of health, all you need to do is walk. Thirty minutes a day. Every day. (Well, they say "most days," but aiming for every day takes that into account.) How fast? A little too fast to comfortably have a conversation, if you're walking with someone. If you can talk, bump up your speed a little.

Again, sudden changes are not good. If you haven't been active at all, take it slow. Start with five minutes the first week. Then move it up to ten. Work your way up gradually. You can

do more than thirty minutes if you want, but anything past that is optional from the standpoint of health.

If you have arthritis or another condition that interferes with walking, biking and swimming work too. Yoga is helpful for stretching and overall well-being. Whatever you choose, your body was meant to move.

OTHER USEFUL TIPS:

1. If you have a relationship with a primary doctor, TELL them what you are going through. They can help with streamlining medication regimens to make them more economical, along with other important ways to maintain your physical health.
2. DON'T go overboard on "preventive care." This may sound counterintuitive, but the vast majority of preventive medicine doesn't save money, and doesn't make you live longer. About the only exception to this rule would be to take care of your blood pressure and any other chronic diseases like diabetes. But don't worry about your colonoscopy or mammogram. Unless you have blood in your stools or a lump in your breast, it can wait.
3. Don't bother with vitamins and supplements. All they do is give you very expensive urine.
4. The best cash drug prices are at Costco, where BY LAW you do NOT need to be a member to use the pharmacy. There are also several other drug discount cards like GoodRx. Be a savvy medication shopper. Many medications are cheaper without using insurance.