

NIH News in Health

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Creating Healthy Habits Make Better Choices Easier

We know that making healthy choices can help us feel better and live longer. Maybe you've already tried to eat better, get more exercise or sleep, quit smoking, or reduce stress. It's not easy. But research shows how you can boost your ability to create and sustain a healthy lifestyle.

"It's frustrating to experience setbacks when you're trying to make healthy changes and reach a goal," says NIH behavior change expert Dr. Susan Czajkowski. "The good news is that decades of research show that change is possible, and there are proven strategies you can use to set yourself up for success."

Lots of things you do impact your health and quality of life, now and in the future. You can reduce your risk for the most common, costly, and preventable health problems—such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, type 2 diabetes, and obesity—by making healthy choices.

Know Your Habits • Regular things you do—from brushing your teeth to having a few drinks every night—can become habits. Repetitive behaviors that make you feel good can affect your brain in ways that create habits that may be hard to change. Habits often become automatic—they happen without much thought.

"The first step to changing your behavior is to create an awareness around what you do regularly,"



explains Dr. Lisa Marsch, an expert in behavior change at Dartmouth College. "Look for patterns in your behavior and what triggers the unhealthy habits you want to change."

Maybe you eat too much while watching TV or join a friend on smoke breaks even when you don't want a cigarette. "You can develop ways to disrupt those patterns and create new ones," Marsch says. For instance, eat meals with the TV off or join friends for healthy activities, like walk breaks.

Make a Plan • Make a plan that includes small, reasonable goals and specific actions you'll take to move toward them.

"If you walk by the vending machine at work and buy junk food

every afternoon, try walking a different way to eliminate that decision and bring healthy snacks from home," Czajkowski says. "Whenever possible, make the healthy choice the easy choice."

Consider what you think you'll need to be successful. How can you change things around you to support your goals? You might need to stock up on healthy foods, remove temptations, or find a special spot to relax.

Get friends and loved ones involved. Research shows that people's health behaviors tend to mirror those of their family and friends. Invite them to join you, support you, and help

you stay on track.

It's also important to plan for obstacles. Think about what might derail your best efforts to live healthier. How can you still make healthy choices during unexpected situations, in stressful times, or when tempted by old habits?

Stay on Track • Doing positive things for yourself can feel exciting and rewarding. But there will also be times when you wonder if you can stick with it.

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“Identify negative thoughts and turn them into realistic, productive ones,” Marsch advises.

Keeping a record can help. You can use a paper journal, computer program, or mobile app to note things like your diet, exercise, stress levels, or sleep patterns. A study of people who lost at least 30 pounds and kept the weight off for at least a year found that they often tracked their progress closely.

“Even when you think you’re about to ‘fall off the wagon,’ hold on,” Czajkowski says. “Continue to track your behavior. Sometimes when you feel like you’re failing, you can learn the most.”

Marsch and others are working on digital technologies, like mobile apps, that could support you in a moment of weakness. Her team is also using technology to learn more about how to measure and increase the ability to monitor and control our behavior.

“The more you practice self-control, the better you become at it,” says Dr. Leonard Epstein, who studies behavior change and decision-making at the University at

Buffalo. “You develop the capacity to act and react another way.”

Think About the Future • Epstein has found that some people have a harder time than others resisting their impulses. He calls this “delay discounting,” where you discount, or undervalue, the larger benefits of waiting in favor of smaller immediate rewards. This can lead to things like overeating, substance abuse, drinking or shopping too much, or risky sexual behavior.

“You can learn to postpone immediate gratification through episodic future thinking, or vividly imagining future positive experiences or rewards,” he explains. “It’s a great way to strengthen your ability to make decisions that are better for you in the long run.”

Epstein is now studying how to use this technique to help people who are at risk for type 2 diabetes prevent the disease.

Focusing on how a change might heal your body and enhance your life can help. When you stop smoking, your risk of a heart attack drops within 24 hours. Reducing stress can lead to better relationships. Even small improvements in your nutrition and physical activity can reduce your health risks and lengthen your life.

Be Patient • Sometimes when you’re trying to adopt healthier habits, other health issues can get in the way.

“When you’re really struggling with these behaviors, ask yourself if more is going on,” Czajkowski says. “For example, mental health conditions like depression and anxiety can be tied to unhealthy behaviors.”

A health professional can work



Wise Choices Build Healthy Habits

- **Plan.** Identify unhealthy patterns and triggers. Set realistic goals. Write down steps to help you achieve them.
- **Change your surroundings.** Find ways to make healthier choices easy choices. Remove temptations. Work for changes in your community, like safe places to walk.
- **Ask for support.** Find friends, family, co-workers, neighbors, or groups for support or ask people to join you.
- **Fill your time with healthy activities.** Try exercise, a favorite hobby, or spending time with family and friends.
- **Track your progress.** Record how things are going to help you stay focused and catch slip-ups.
- **Imagine the future.** Think about future benefits to stay on track.
- **Reward yourself.** Give yourself a healthy reward when you’ve achieved a small goal or milestone, like a massage or personal time.
- **Be patient.** Improvement takes time, and setbacks happen. Focus on progress, not perfection.

with you to address any underlying issues to make change feel easier and to help you be more successful.

You’re never too out of shape, too overweight, or too old to make healthy changes. Try different strategies until you find what works best for you.

“Things may not go as planned, and that’s okay,” Czajkowski says. “Change is a process. What’s most important is to keep moving forward.” ■

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**Web
Links**

For more about healthy habits, see “Links” in the online article: newsinhealth.nih.gov/2018/03/creating-healthy-habits

Power to the Pelvis

Strengthening Your Pelvic Floor Muscles

Some conditions may feel too embarrassing to discuss with your doctor. Weak pelvic floor muscles can cause such conditions.

You may have trouble with bladder or bowel control. Urine can leak out when you cough, sneeze, laugh, or exert yourself in any way. You might need to urinate often or urgently.

Weak muscles can also affect the vagina and uterus. You may feel discomfort inside your vagina. Telling your doctor about these conditions can help you get the right treatment.

Your bladder, bowel, vagina, and uterus are held in place by a hammock of muscles called the pelvic floor. Weak muscles can't hold up these organs. That can cause your bladder to leak and other embarrassing conditions called pelvic floor disorders.

Pelvic floor disorders affect women of all ages. Experts estimate that 1 of every 3 women in the United States has a pelvic floor condition. But because so many women don't tell their doctor, they're probably much more common.

Many factors—including family history, pregnancy, menopause, weight, and smoking history—can affect your risk for developing a

pelvic floor disorder. Dr. Donna Mazloomdoost, a pelvic floor specialist at NIH, says, "Some women are just going to be very prone to these sort of conditions, and others are not."

Depending on the condition, treatment options may include dietary changes, physical therapy, medications, medical devices, or surgery. NIH is funding studies to develop new and improved treatments.

"Most of the game-changing recommendations have come from studies that the Pelvic Floor Disorders Network has done," says Mazloomdoost, who is the director of this NIH program. It funds some of the largest, multicenter pelvic health studies across the country.

A recent study from the network showed that women who urinate too often or leak urine may be treated successfully with Botox (botulinum toxin) injections. Another treatment that helps with bladder control uses a surgical implant to electrically stimulate the pelvic muscle nerves. Stimulating the nerves appears to help the bladder relax more.

"My first advice to all women with symptoms would be to see a pelvic floor specialist," Mazloomdoost says. "Often times, physical therapy is the first treatment recommended because just about every pelvic floor condition will benefit from it. Some conditions, however, may need more than just physical therapy to get better."

Pelvic floor physical therapy often begins with simple pelvic floor exercises. Some of these are known



as Kegel exercises. They make the pelvic muscles stronger. Any woman can benefit from these exercises. Ask your health care provider how to do them correctly.

Mazloomdoost explains that Kegels performed at home may not work for some women with a pelvic floor condition. This may be because women don't hold the exercises long enough, and they don't do enough of them during the day.

"Physical therapy involves monitoring and measuring the amount of strength that the muscles are using and making sure that the correct muscles are being used—and for often enough and long enough," she says.

Women who have a pelvic floor condition don't have to suffer. Treatments are available. "If you have any problem with your bladder function or what your vagina feels like, then I think it's absolutely important to speak with your doctor about it," Mazloomdoost advises. ■



Wise Choices

Lower Your Risk of Pelvic Floor Issues

- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Avoid constipation and straining by getting enough fiber and fluids in your diet.
- Avoid tobacco smoke and triggers of a long-term cough, which weaken the pelvic floor.
- Do Kegel exercises regularly to keep pelvic floor muscles toned. Ask your health care provider how to do them correctly.



Web Links

For more about pelvic floor disorders, see "Links" in the online article: newsinhealth.nih.gov/2018/03/power-pelvis



Health Capsules

For links to more information, please visit our website and see these stories online.

Infant Formula Not Linked to Diabetes

For decades, researchers have puzzled over why type 1 diabetes is becoming more common. Type 1 diabetes is a serious disease. People who have it can't produce insulin. Insulin tells your cells to take up sugar from your blood. People with type 1 diabetes need to take insulin every day to stay alive.

Researchers have wondered whether infant formula made from cow's milk might cause children to develop type 1 diabetes. Cow's milk is similar to human milk, but it does have different proteins. Some

studies suggest that early exposure to the complex proteins in cow's milk might lead the body's defense system to mistakenly attack the cells that make insulin.

To test whether the proteins in cow's milk could cause this reaction, researchers tested two formulas. One group of infants received a formula made from cow's milk. The other received a formula made from cow's milk that was processed to break complex proteins into small pieces. All the infants selected for the study had a genetic makeup that

put them at higher risk of developing type 1 diabetes.

Some children in both groups developed type 1 diabetes by the time they were 10 years old. The results showed that the chance of developing the disease was the same for children in both groups.

"This study puts to rest the controversy regarding the potential role of cow's milk formula in the development of type 1 diabetes," says Dr. Dorothy Becker at the University of Pittsburgh, who led the study in the United States. ■

How to Find Alcohol Treatment

Experts estimate that millions of Americans could benefit from treatment for an alcohol problem, but most don't get it. To make it easier to find help, NIH's National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism developed the *NIAAA Alcohol Treatment Navigator*. You can use it to find help for yourself or a family member or friend.

Alcohol use disorder is a health condition that can improve with treatment. But the same treatment path doesn't work for everyone. Searching for the right treatment can be complicated.

The navigator makes this complicated process easier by explaining what you need to know to recognize and choose quality care.

It describes how to find addiction therapists, treatment programs, and board-certified doctors.

The navigator also offers tips for spotting the signs of quality treatment. It can help you become an informed consumer when considering which alcohol treatment services are right for you. Visit alcoholtreatment.niaaa.nih.gov. ■



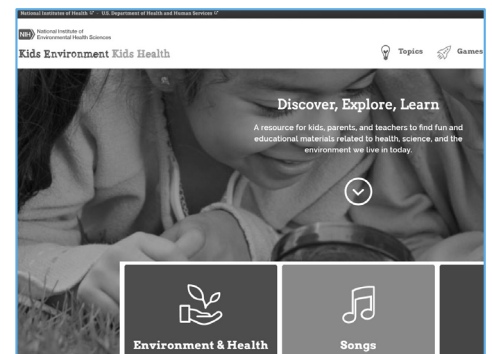
Featured Website

Environment and Health Kids Pages

kids.niehs.nih.gov

Having fun is a great way to learn about how the world works. Visit the *Kids Environment Kids Health* website to find fun and educational resources for kids, parents, and teachers.

Solve puzzles and play other games to learn about science, animals, and the world we all share. You can also find science experiments for kids or explore topics about nature, pollution, recycling, and more.



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