

Here's to a Healthy New Year!

Story by Lisa Hanchey
Photos by Barbara McConnell

When New Year's rolls around, popular resolutions include, "I'm going to get in shape," or "I'm going to lose weight." While these are formidable goals, people over 50 have special concerns that need to be addressed before taking on these new objectives. In order to really be healthy, you must commit to making a lifestyle change, not just a quick-fix scheme.

After indulging on heavy meals and special sweets during the holidays, many individuals find themselves with a few extra pounds under their belt. But, charging into a full-blown, high-impact routine and a trendy starvation-type of diet is not the answer. Instead, the answer is to incorporate gradual changes to ensure that proper nutrition and fitness is the ultimate goal.

Nutrition Basics

One consideration as you age is getting proper hydration. As you become older, your body becomes less sensitive to detecting dehydration and does not send signals to the brain as quickly as when you were younger. "You want to always stay hydrated when you are a little older, just because sometimes your body doesn't recognize the dehydration," confirms Amber



Faul, clinical dietitian and registered dietitian at Lafayette General Medical Center. "So, you have a little bit greater of a risk of becoming dehydrated and possibly having a hospitalization."

How much is enough? "It's really depends on how active you are," Faul says. "A good indication is to look at your urine. You want to make sure that you are producing enough urine, and you also want to make sure that it's a clearer color, and that it's not real concentrated."

Another important nutrition basic is calcium. Once individuals progress beyond the adolescent stage, they really do not put that much focus on calcium. As women become post-menopausal, they need a little bit more calcium, such as milk and yogurt. "So, therefore, they don't get their intake of calcium that they need on a regular basis, and it puts them at higher risk for brittle bones and osteoporosis," says Rosalind Allen, Nutrition Services Supervisor at LGMC.

Many people are also lacking in Vitamin D. Most get their Vitamin D through sunlight exposure, rather than food sources. But, this vitamin is necessary, because it helps the body process and absorb calcium. The problem is that more people are staying

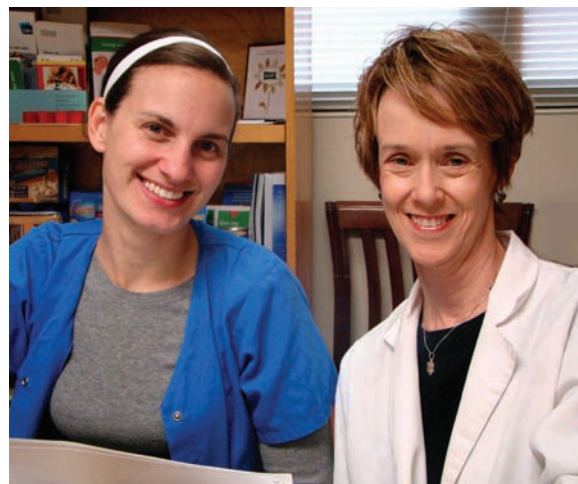
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Dr. Sisson from Pennington Center



Manuel Fuentes, exercise physiologist at Lafayette General Medical Center



Rosalind Allen and Amber Faul, registered dietitians at Lafayette General Medical Center

out of the sun to avert skin cancer, which leads to decreased Vitamin D. “Vitamin D is also a fat soluble vitamin, so it’s not one you want to take as a supplement form, unless you are under doctor’s supervision,” Allen cautions. The answer is to concentrate on eating calcium-rich foods or taking in calcium supplements with a Vitamin D component, as well as incorporating strength-training exercise to help boost your bones.

Diet for Weight Control and Loss

Before starting a weight-loss program, you first must accept that as you get older, your metabolism decreases. So, you have to be realistic and not expect to eat like when you were 20 years old and had a higher calorie-burning capacity. According to Allen, your metabolism slows down by about 10 percent for every decade of life. “As you get older, your metabolism gets slower and slower,” she confirms. “So, from that standpoint, you need to have your calories adjusted.”

Step one for weight loss is to keep track of your caloric intake. If your calorie consumption is greater than what you burn off, then you will gain weight. “And, I think that’s where a lot of our population starts to kind of get to that cloudy area, because they continue to eat the same portions, but they decrease their activity level,” she says. “Therefore, they start getting into that middle-age spread, because their bodies just can’t handle as many calories as they once did.”

A caveat – eating too few calories can backfire on you. “You want to make sure you have just enough calories to burn for your daily living and your activities,” Faul cautions. “You don’t want to go too low, because as you get older, your metabolism slows. And, if you get too little, your body starts to hoard food and store it as fat. If you are eating too little, then your body is saying, ‘He/she is not going to feed me.’ But then, if you eat too much, then there is fat, because there is too much. So, you want to get that good, adequate balance.”

One of the things that Faul teaches her patients is to incorporate variety into their diets. She suggests eating smaller portions, limiting meat to about three to four ounces of low-fat servings daily. Then, keep your plate colorful by adding non-starchy vegetables (not corn and potatoes), such as green beans, carrots, cauliflower, broccoli and asparagus. Complete your meal with a small serving of milk and fruit. “That variety helps, number one, to keep your portions down,” she says. “Your fruits and vegetables are low in calories, but great with vitamins and minerals. And, it tends to help keep a variety in your life. Each different color provides you with different nutrients. So, you want to make sure that you have lots of color on your plate.”

For safe weight loss goal, one to two pounds a week is healthy start. You can accomplish this by eliminating 500 calories a day, which equals 3,500 calories a week or one pound.

With any new diet program, the key is to be healthy. “We

recommend you first weigh a choice of changing your eating style to a healthier way of eating,” Allen suggests. “Make sure you are incorporating your sources of calcium and Omega 3 fatty acids, and adequate amounts of fruits and vegetables. Then, lose weight gradually and add in your exercise component. Because, you want those two to partner with another, so one counterbalances the other.”

But, healthy eating does not necessarily mean giving up your favorite foods. “Moderation is the key,” Faul says. “You can have your cake and eat it, too – you just don’t want to eat the whole cake.”



Exercising for Health and Wellness

For older adults, the key to staying healthy is to avoid inactivity, like watching television for hours on end. The 2008 Federal Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans recommends that mature individuals seeking more substantial health benefits do about two and a half hours a week of moderate activity, or one hour and 15 minutes of vigorous physical activity, or some combination of both. Those wanting to lose weight should step that up a bit. “Two and a half hours works out to about 30 minutes a day for most days of the week, five days a week,” explains Susan Sisson, post-doctoral fellow at Pennington Biomedical Research Center’s Population Science division and member of the Louisiana Council for Obesity Prevention and Management. “If you are really interested in weight loss, that amount probably should be up to one hour or even more of moderate activity per day. If you are going to do something more vigorous, that could be down to 30 minutes a day.”

To tell the difference between moderate and vigorous activity, try the “talk test.” Examples of moderate exercise include brisk walking, golfing, gardening or certain types of dancing where you can still carry on a conversation while you are doing the activity. If you cannot converse while you exercise, it is considered to be vigorous. “A general rule of thumb is that one minute of vigorous physical activity is equal to 10 minutes of moderate activity,” Sisson says. “If you wanted to get a bit more intense, the minimum requirement for substantial health benefits is like a two-to-one ratio. Of course, if you want to do more, you certainly can.”

But, a key component is to exercise safely. To prevent injury, consult a physician before beginning any type of vigorous

exercise program. “Anybody who has not been a regular exerciser, especially if they have any known or suspected disease conditions, really ought to get a doctor’s clearance before they start an exercise program and tell their doctor what they are trying to do,” cautions Manny Fuentes, clinical exercise physiologist at LGMC and T’ai Chi instructor with Potpourri at the University of Louisiana, Lafayette.

Another recommendation is to start slowly, not just jump into a program at full speed. For living well, you should commit to working out for an hour a day as many times a week as possible, allowing for 45 minutes of cardiovascular exercise, then filling the remainder with resistance training, such as push-ups, chair squats, and stretching. “Three days a week is great; five or six is excellent,” Fuentes says.

But, whatever you do, don’t overdo it. “I get a lot of guys in their late 50s and early 60s who come into cardiac rehab and say, ‘I used to be an athlete,’ and they have this whole ‘no pain, no gain’ mentality,” Fuentes observes. “And my personal philosophy is, ‘No pain, no gain equals no brain.’ We have to be at a stage in our lives where we accept the fact that to be fit means that you have enough muscle fitness and endurance to do your regular activities of daily living, with a little bit in reserve.”

Even with a busy schedule, you can fit in cardiovascular activity by accumulating exercise throughout the day. “You don’t have to do it all at once,” Sisson says. “You can do a 10-minute walk in the morning, and do a 10-minute walk at lunch, and do the rest after dinner, and have 30 minutes for your minimum requirement.”

For strength training, do at least two to three weight lifting sessions a week, starting with light hand weights or Nautilus machines. Not belonging to a gym is no excuse – Sisson says that you can even use soup cans for those biceps curls. The American College of Sports Medicine suggests that older people perform about 10 to 15 repetitions covering the major muscle groups – hips, chest, abdominal area, legs, shoulders and arms. “Start light, and if it’s too easy, then you can do more repetitions,” Sisson recommends. “If, at the end of 10 to 15 repetitions, you feel like you can do more, it might be time to increase the weight. You want it to be a challenge, but you don’t want it to be too hard.”

Weight training not only helps with weight loss, but also with developing lean muscle mass. Increased muscle strength helps to prevent falls and injury, which is certainly a concern in the older population. “So, if they did trip over the curb, they could catch themselves, rather than falling all the way down into the crack,” Sisson says.

Along with cardio and strength training, people should add some flexibility training, like stretching or yoga, two to three days a week. “We have seen so many people who have neglected that all of their lives, and they just sort of shuffle along, because

their muscles are rigid and tight, and they start to hunch over,” Fuentes observes. “So, we want to maintain our flexibility as well.”



Exercise for Weight Loss

It’s time to get real. You can’t just say, “I’m going to lose 20 pounds,” and expect to do it safely in one month. The key is to have a plan for success. Sisson uses an acronym for goal-setting called SMART – that is, make your goals specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time-limited.

A safe goal for weight loss is one to two pounds per week. “The general New Year’s resolution that ‘I’m going to lose weight’ is just so vague that it’s hard to wrap your mind around it and really set the day-to-day details and a strategy,” Sisson cautions.

Start off by increasing your cardiovascular activity. The more you spend time burning calories, the more weight you can lose – provided you don’t blow it all by stuffing your face with cookies afterwards. “For normal heart health, the recommendation is 30 minutes of cardiovascular exercise three days a week,” Fuentes says. “For weight loss, the first thing is to step up the number of days and build your cardiovascular to 45 to 60 minutes whenever possible. It’s simply a matter of calorie balance – if you ingest more calories in your diet than you burn in physical activity, then you are going to gain; if you burn more than you eat, you will lose.”

You can increase your cardiovascular activity by taking a few extra steps each day. Fuentes recommends walking the aisles in the grocery store before you ever pick up the basket; climbing a couple of flights of stairs whenever possible, and exercising during station breaks while watching television. Household chores also count – vacuuming, cleaning bathrooms, raking leaves – anything that makes you breathe harder. “Throw in a couple of extra minutes of movement whenever you can,” he suggests, “because every calorie you burn is a calorie that doesn’t go into storage.”

If you do slip up one day, don’t give up – there is always tomorrow. “What we’re interested in is lifestyle behavior for your health, weight and quality of life,” Sisson says. “And, the key with that is to not sweat it if you mess up today. You can always do it tomorrow.”

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