# Virginia Cooperative Extension

# Families Taking Charge
# Maintaining Health

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## Introduction

When times get tough you can't afford to let your health decline! A sound body and mind are the most important resources you have to help you make hard decisions and seek solutions to difficult problems. The formula for good health is really pretty simple - exercise, eat a healthy diet, and get enough rest and sleep. Let's take these one at a time.

## Exercise for the Fun of It

The word "exercise" may bring to mind slender joggers running through a park or men and women with beautifully toned bodies doing aerobic exercises at the local health spa. If you are like a lot of people, you don't fit into either of these categories. In fact, you may feel very intimidated by the thought of participating in these activities. More acceptable types of exercise for you might include walking, swimming, or bicycling. Mall walking in particular is gaining in popularity across the country and offers a safe, pleasant environment for walking. Current research is finding that, when done on a regular basis for about 30 minutes a day, even light physical activity can be beneficial, and fun too!

Even if you aren't willing to commit to a regular exercise program, at least think about basic changes in your daily routine that will keep you active. For example, turn off the television and get moving. What needs to be done around the house? When was the last time you washed your car? Do you have any space to plant a garden? Are there any long-term projects you have been thinking about doing? Do you enjoy dancing?

Here are a few ideas from the life and health insurance industry that most people can incorporate into their everyday lifestyles:

• Try taking the stairs instead of always riding an elevator or escalator.

• Park your car at the far end of parking lots and walk to your destination.

• Get dressed while standing up instead of sitting down for better balance and muscle tone

## A Healthy Diet

Your body needs specific types of nutrients in order to function optimally. Over the short-term, poor nutrition can rob you of energy, endurance, and strength. In the long-term, the Surgeon General has stated that diet plays a major role in five of the ten leading causes of death in the United States.

Under stress, some people may develop poor eating behaviors. Two of these, overeating and eating between meals resulting in weight gain, are common fixed responses to stress. If these responses sound familiar, you need to take control of your behavior and take steps toward changing these responses. You are the only person who puts food in your mouth and you are the only person who can change your dietary intake.

Try some of these suggestions:

• Eat in one room all the time, and make food off limits in other rooms. Do not eat in front of the television.

• Reduce the amount of food you eat. In fact, teach yourself to do everything in moderation. This is called self control!

• Eat slowly and put your fork down between mouthfuls.

• Take small bites of food and chew them well.

• Drink fluids between meals. If you must snack, eat only fresh fruits and vegetables.

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- Eat a variety of foods so you don't get bored with your meals.

- If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation.

Remember, unwanted weight gain is a good sign that you are eating more food than your body requires. If you can pinch more than an inch of fat on your waist or arm, you need to do something about your weight and your eating habits.

## Rest and Sleep Are Important Too

Even though most of us have always heard that we "need eight hours of sleep a night," it is now known that the amount of sleep a person actually requires for maximal health, well being, and energy varies widely from person to person. Some people develop a pattern of only two to four hours of sleep per day and function very efficiently throughout their lifetimes. If you feel refreshed and relaxed with a total of six hours of sleep per day, then that may be all of the sleep you require.

Unfortunately, stress and worry frequently tend to rob many people of both the quality and quantity of their sleeping hours. Even two days of inadequate sleep can severely alter a person's judgment, coping behaviors, and physical reaction times. Therefore, you owe it to yourself to be sure you are getting the rest and sleep you need.

Research has shown that the following actions may help you overcome sleepless nights:

- Go to bed only when you are sleepy. Stick to a regular routine by getting up at the same time each morning.

- Do not take naps.

- Maintain a regular exercise schedule

- Do not take alcohol or caffeine before bedtime.

- Practice muscle and mental relaxation at bedtime with techniques such as yoga, or deep breathing. Many individuals find that prayer is also beneficial.

- To prevent daytime hangover and improve the quality of sleep, avoid the regular use of nonprescription sleeping pills.

- If you wake up during the night, get up and do something relaxing until you get sleepy. It will probably make you more tense if you stay in bed and worry about your inability to get to sleep.

## Conclusion

Take a close look at the way you spend your days, decide what parts of your lifestyle need to be changed, and change them. Your decisions will have a direct effect on whether or not you are ready and able to function at optimal levels of performance. Take charge of your health today.

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