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Four Cornerstones of Good Health – Exercise

In my last few columns I've been writing about the Four Cornerstones of Good Health – those key components of a healthy lifestyle will help you live longer and improve the quality of your life. This week I'll continue by writing about exercise and in my next article I'll address the issue of cigarette smoke and practicing good sleep habits.

We know that exercise is vital to good health but sometimes we forget that we're animals and need to move our bodies. Dog owners are often more aware of their pet's need for exercise than their own need. With regular exercise the body adapts to change, it becomes stronger, functions more effectively, and has greater endurance.

Exercise increases the blood circulation, thus transporting more oxygen to the cells and moving waste matter out of the body more efficiently. Regular exercise increases stamina and energy levels.

Exercise has immense physical benefits. It increases muscle tone and strength, strengthens heart function, enlarges the arteries to the heart, lowers blood pressure, helps to lower cholesterol, aids digestion, improves the immune system, improves the ability to handle stress, induces relaxation, and improves sleep. And those are just some of the benefits!

Unfortunately in our culture more and more people are overweight. Obesity is becoming a major concern among 11 and 12-year-olds and this phenomenon is due more to inactivity than overeating. If you are on a weight loss program exercise helps suppress the appetite, improves body composition, and increases the metabolic rate thus burning calories more rapidly.

Exercise also helps elevate your mood. Studies have shown it to be an effective treatment for depression. One study compared the endorphin (the great substances the body produces that lifts your mood) levels of joggers against those of sedentary people. The sedentary ones were more depressed, perceived greater stress, and had more stress circulating hormones, and lower levels of endorphins.

The better shape you're in physically the greater your odds of enjoying a healthier and longer life. Many studies show that an unfit individual has an eight times greater risk of suffering a heart attack or stroke than a physically fit person. One study comparing an active and inactive group showed that the active group had a 23 per cent lower risk of dying.

Listen up Baby Boomers! Researchers have estimated that for every hour of exercise there is a two-hour increase in longevity. In my practice I have observed that all of my 70 and 80-year-old patients who are healthy and who have lots of energy exercise regularly.

Getting enough exercise is easy and it doesn't have to be fancy. Any movement of the body can be exercise. Work in your garden for 30 minutes with enough energy to raise your heartbeat. Jive to the oldies in your living room. Bicycle. Walk. Brisk walking for approximately 30 minutes every day may be one of the easiest and best forms of exercise for weight loss. Include walking in your schedule before going to work, on your lunch hour or after work. Many people don't have the impetus for physical activity after their evening meal so do it before.

Any form of movement that increases your heart rate for at least 20 minutes and moves your body is fine. And do it at least three times a week. If you have knee problems, try swimming or chair aerobics.

Remember that the time you spend exercising is a valuable investment in your good health.

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