

- A. Flossing
- B. Rain closet
- C. My peeps
- D. Smackdown

# Small change

A handful of new habits can yield a multitude of health benefits

By Marya Smith  
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**W**e all know we should eat more healthfully, exercise more, reduce stress and generally take better care of ourselves. But not this week, please. You've got two projects due at work, appointments to keep at the vet and the orthodontist, plus you've been meaning to schedule a checkup for yourself, and maybe the car, too, but not until you ice those two dozen cupcakes for your favorite charity's bake sale.

Who has time to go wall climbing, pause for tai chi classes, whip up an herb-enhanced meal or whatever else the Martha Stewarts of the health and fitness world are telling us to do this week? Life simply seems too full to take the time to revamp our daily routines.

The good news is that even one small change can make a difference. Though good health is in many ways a blessing unearned, aspects of it are also the result of cumulative effort. A handful of day-in, day-out good habits can add up to a healthier you over time.

A habit is something you do routinely, almost without thinking, like brushing your teeth. If you've created old habits, you can create new ones.

"There are some fundamental steps to changing behavior," said Edwin Fisher, director of health behavior research at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis. "The first step is to spend some time thinking about why you want to make a specific change: What are the pros and cons of this new behavior, what are your motivations and what are the things that get in your way?"

The next step is to record what you're already doing. "If you write down what and where you eat, for instance, you might discover that you're great with your diet except when you dine out," Fisher said. "This helps with the next step: making concrete plans for coping with your personal barriers. For example, you might plan to meet friends for a walk in the park instead of for dinner out."

Small changes make a difference. "People should think in terms of moderate results," Fisher said. "Even if you lose only a few pounds or add just a little more exercise to your day, you're better off health-wise."

To incorporate new health-minded behaviors, focus on how you move, what you eat, and how you deal with stress. Adding just one positive habit in these three areas can improve your overall well-being.



## HOW YOU MOVE

Move more, health professionals advise, because even small amounts of exercise yield big health results.

Increased physical activity protects against the risk of many diseases, including coronary heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, colon cancer, osteoporosis, high cholesterol levels and depression.

Luckily, an exercise habit doesn't have to be time consuming or difficult to score health gains. The American College of Sports Medicine and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend short bouts of

## Three health-boosting habits

### HABIT NO. 1

Add three 10-minute activity breaks to your day.

Choose activities you enjoy, from dancing to playing with the kids, or those that blend seamlessly into your life, like trading the escalator for the stairs or the leaf blower for a rake.

### HABIT NO. 2

Add some vegetables or fruit to each meal and snack.

This isn't supposed to be a punishment, so make a list of your favorites and keep them on hand to help you reach the recommended five servings a day. (We already asked: Ketchup and candy orange slices don't count.)

### HABIT NO. 3

Make time for other people and take time for yourself.

A balance of regular social interaction and time alone can make your life happier and healthier. Silence is golden, and so are friendships and community activities when it comes to your well-being.

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# Changes: Small adjustments can reap big benefits.

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activity — from gardening to walking the dog — throughout the day to accumulate 30 minutes of moderate intensity exercise.

“You can reap health benefits simply by integrating three 10-minute walks into your day if you’re too busy for a half-hour block of exercise,” said John Duncan, professor of clinical research at the Institute for Women’s Health, Texas Woman’s University and author of a study at the Cooper Institute of Aerobics Research on the effects of moderate exercise on fitness.

“With exercise, a little ends up being a lot,” he said.

“Plug activity breaks into your routine by turning a sedentary or passive habit into an active one.

“Add steps to your day,” said Ken Turley, assistant professor of kinesiology and director of the Human Performance Laboratory at Harding University in Arkansas. “I make a habit of parking a few spaces farther away so I can walk an extra distance. The more calories we expend the better, and it doesn’t matter when or how.

“It all counts because it all adds up,” Turley said. “For example, if a 165-pound man put down his remote and changed the TV channel manually four times a day, 300 days a year, he’d burn 11.6 calories a day walking up and back to the television, and mathematically would lose a pound a year. Walking two memos a day to the office down the hall instead of sending them by e-mail produces similar results.”

“Trading the elevator for the stairs is another relatively simple change that can make a difference.

“I walk up and down three flights of steps to my office several times a day and only take the elevator in the morning when I’m carrying books,” said Barb Hoogenboom, professor of physical therapy and athletic trainer at Grand Valley State University in Michigan. “Stair climbing is a weight-bearing, anaerobic exercise that’s beneficial, especially to women, as long as there are no known health problems like heart or knee pathologies.”

“Garry Miller, assistant professor and program director for athletic training at Baldwin-Wallace College in Ohio, changed his activity level a little at a time. Two years ago the 48-year-old parked his riding mower and began using a push mower on his 2-acre lawn. A year later, he had lost 50 pounds and was competing in triathlons for the first time in his life.

“I progressed from cutting grass to running two miles, then three and gradually began biking and swimming,” Miller said. “I began to realize how much is possible as



Photo for the Tribune by Scott Norris

Phyllis Stumbo, University of Iowa research dietitian, prepares several salads at once so she has “fast food” in her refrigerator.

long as you ease into an activity.”

## What you eat

If most of us substituted an apple for every Big Mac we scarfed down, we’d soon be poster children for good health.

“The most significant change most people can make in their food intake is to include five servings of fruits and vegetables every day,” said Melanie Polk, director of nutrition education for the American Institute for Cancer Research. “In fact, this one change could decrease cancer incidents by 20 percent.”

Fruits and vegetables can also protect against other conditions such as high blood pressure, heart disease and obesity. And recent research on phytochemicals (protective substances in plant-based foods) indicates that fruits and vegetables have health benefits beyond their long-known nutritional value.

How to make a habit of these do-good, taste-good foods? One serving is only half a cup of veggies or one piece of fruit. Not so much. But not so convenient as an order of fries or a candy bar.

To turn healthy foods into fast foods, routinely pick up pre-

washed, precut ingredients at your supermarket, Polk said. Or follow the example of Phyllis Stumbo, research dietitian in the Clinical Research Center of the University of Iowa’s College of Medicine, who makes a habit of washing and chopping all her salad ingredients once a week during the evening news.

“The easiest way to reach the recommended five servings of fruits and vegetables is to habitually incorporate one or two to every meal and afternoon snack,” said Joan Salge Blake, professor of nutrition at Boston University and nutrition expert at Thriveonline, a health information Web site for Oxygen.com. For example, adding extra tomatoes and lettuce to a sandwich equals one serving, she said. Other habit-forming serving suggestions from Blake include topping breakfast cereal with blueberries and tossing mandarin oranges and raisins into rice at dinner.

It also helps to make a list of your favorites and keep a supply of them on hand. It’s a lot easier to reach for a pear or handful of carrot sticks if they are foods that tickle your taste buds and if they’re ready and waiting in your fridge or desk.

Sidney Schneider, associate professor of health sciences at Salisbu-

## Another helping of health-minded habits

Ask for support from friends and family members, including the kids, when you're trying to create a new healthy habit, said Steve DeBoer, clinical dietitian at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota. "The goal of any behavior change is not to prove you can do it by yourself, but to add something positive to your life, so make it easier by enlisting the help of people around you," he said.

"Some of us feel supported by a modest comment like 'you did a good job,' and some of us like singing telegrams and balloons," said Edwin Fisher, director of health behavior research at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis. "But people can't read our minds, so we have to tell them what kind of encouragement we like."

Take a 10-minute walk during your lunch break, said Nancy DiMarco, research professor at the Institute for Women's Health at Texas Woman's University. "When people begin to incorporate physical activity into their daily routine, it spills over into other parts of their lives," she said. "Exercise can be the doorway into a whole realm of living well and wanting to make other health-related changes."

Schedule a regular snow date with a friend who enjoys winter activities, suggests Rhonda Barr, a University of Iowa Health Care physical therapist. "I work with people in the hospital who worry

they'll get sick if they go outside, but they're more likely to catch the flu if they stay cooped up in the house," she said. "Winter sports like hiking, cross-country skiing and snow shoeing are all low-impact activities that require no special technique."

Schedule your exercise routine as if it were a business meeting, is the advice of Shannon Entin, editor of FitnessLink, a fitness information Web site. "For people like me with type A personalities and rigidly scheduled lives, it often works to treat your personal life like a corporation, too, and block out time for a workout right on your calendar," she said.

Have a salad after your entree, suggested Phyllis Stumbo, dietitian in the Clinical Research Center of the University of Iowa's College of Medicine. "A salad not only helps fulfill the daily requirements for fruits and vegetables, but it can often satisfy the desire to eat more, and to eat something sweet," she said. "It takes time to eat a salad, and you often need time to experience a sense of fullness after a meal."

Add one tasty, heart-healthy food to your diet, said Ruth Carey, a registered dietitian who works with the Portland Trailblazers in Oregon. "Heart disease is the No. 1 killer of American men and women, so it makes sense to add a food to your diet that may reduce your risk, such as oatmeal, soy protein or a cholesterol-lowering margarine," she said.

Start the day with affirmations, said Laverne Bieling, manager of employee health for the National Jewish Medical and Research Center in Denver. "Stress levels can be reduced if we take 15 minutes to give ourselves positive messages, such as 'you will do well today,'" she said. "Where your mind goes, your energy follows."

Visualize yourself having success, said Brad Schoenfeld, certified personal trainer and author of "Look Good Naked" (Prentice Hall Press, \$18). "Sit in a comfortable position, close your eyes and visualize a movie of yourself going through the exercises you're going to do that day, and having the best workout you've ever had," he said. "Visualization gets you into the realm of the positive, and takes your mind away from outside stresses by focusing on a goal."

Write a positive, uplifting note to someone on a regular basis, said Richard Ray, athletic trainer at Hope College in Michigan. "Not only does a nice note help the person you're writing to, but the investment of time gives you a sense of caring and compassion too," he said. "When we notice and acknowledge the accomplishments of others, it lifts up our own mental state and improves our outlook on life. Gratitude is good for the soul."

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ry State University in Maryland, requires his students to eat a healthy daily snack they prepare themselves.

"This is something I do routinely myself, whether it's making a simple fruit shake or baking my own whole grain muffins," he said. "The assignment makes my students aware of what ingredients are nutritious and, by putting energy into preparing the snack, they validate their self-worth. You nourish the soul as well as the body when you take time to invest in your own health."

### How you deal with stress

A little stress can keep us alert and energized, but prolonged stress takes a toll. Health professionals estimate that at least 60 percent of disease, including high blood pressure, stroke, cancer and asthma, is stress-related.

"Although no one is free of it, the less stress, the healthier you will be and the longer you will live," said Leonard Pearlin, director of the University of Maryland's Stress and Health Program.

One way to reduce stress is to make a habit of balancing time with others and time alone.

According to Pearlin, social support can be an effective way to deal with chronic stressors.

"The sheer ability to talk about the stressful situation is very helpful and gives people strategies for coping," he said. "It doesn't have to be a formal group, but a trusted friend or family member who listens, understands and provides positive emotional support."

A growing body of research shows that social relationships are a key ingredient to good health and longevity.

"Social bonds are critical at every age, and the ones we develop in adulthood will help prevent poor health as we age," said Carlos Mendes de Leon, associate professor of preventive medicine at Rush Presbyterian-St. Luke's Medical Center and director of a recent study revealing how social contacts decrease risk for disease in older adults. "It's important to take social relationships seriously when planning leisure time, and to pay attention to developing social ties."

In addition, creating a regular time out for yourself, even for 15 minutes a day is another part of the stress-reducing equation. Meditation, deep breathing and other relaxation techniques are often rec-

ommended by health professionals.

"I urge patients to keep a journal of the positive things they do each day, because those with a good self-image do better with lifestyle changes," said Nicole Obradovich, registered dietitian at Central DuPage Hospital in Winfield. "One woman in our weight-loss program felt like a failure in caring for her grandchildren because her husband complained about the noise. After less than two months of keeping a journal, she had built up her own self-esteem and stopped over-eating as much."

Roberta Nutt, professor of psychology at Texas Woman's University, encourages her clients to add a positive daily ritual that focuses on beauty and calm. "One woman starts the day by drinking a special coffee brew from an elegant cup," Nutt said. "This kind of ritual slows you down, creates a break from external pressures, builds beauty into your life, and says 'I am special.'"

"Research overwhelmingly indicates that people need to incorporate some form of stress management along with proper diet and exercise," Schneider said. "I take an afternoon nap to release tension, which I recommend because everyone knows how to lie down."