Physical activity is key to women’s health

A number of recent studies from well-respected researchers have a common message that’s important for women: moderate physical activity is key to managing weight, reducing the risk of breast cancer and heart disease, and living a longer life.

Breast cancer. Researchers at a number of universities around the country followed a group of 74,000 women ages 50-79 for almost five years. They found that women who walked briskly for just an hour and fifteen minutes to 2-1/2 hours a week – or biked, swam, or danced for a similar amount of time – were 18% less likely to develop breast cancer during the period of the study than women who were less active.

That amount of activity works out to be 30 minutes 3-5 times per week. Women who were more active decreased their risk even further, but the greatest benefit was for women who went from being sedentary to being moderately active. This is the first study to show that becoming active later in life can still have a protective effect on cancer risk. **In other words, it’s never too late to increase your activity.**

Weight management. It’s not news that physical activity helps with weight management. In a different study, researchers looked at the role exercise intensity plays in losing weight. They followed 184 obese women for 12 months while they participated in a weight loss program that included both reduced calories and physical activity of varying intensities. They found that the number of minutes the women exercised made more difference in the amount of weight they lost than the intensity of their physical activity. This fits with what the National Weight Control Registry has observed, which is that the people who are able to lose at least 30 pounds and keep it off for a least a year are those who walk every day. **Daily walking helps keep weight off.**

Life expectancy. Heart disease is the number one killer of women. Two new studies show that physical fitness is an even more important predictor of death for women than it is for men. In one study, physical fitness was so strongly correlated with the risk of death that even a sedentary woman who didn’t smoke, had good cholesterol levels, and didn’t have high blood pressure still had 13 times the risk of dying of heart disease as a very active woman with the same desirable cholesterol and blood pressure. They also found that fitness can be improved significantly with just several months of moderate physical activity. **So even people who have been inactive for most of their lives can decrease their chances of dying prematurely of heart disease by walking for at least 30 minutes most days of the week.**
Implications for educators: Knowledge of health benefits alone is usually not enough to motivate people to be more active. But when someone is contemplating behavior change, short term health benefits, such as weight control, may get them to take action. Educators can use the three take-home messages (in bold) to encourage people, particularly women, that physical activity is worth the effort.


New Possible Links Between Diet and Cancer


New research suggests that diet may influence the development of certain cancers more than previously thought. The newest finding is a surprisingly strong link between excessive calorie intake and increased cancer risk.

Many of the findings are still preliminary and experts agree that they are a long way from making recommendations for humans based on these results of research conducted in animals.

Folate. Some of the newest and most promising research is on folate. Folate is needed to manufacture and repair the body’s DNA. Without it, broken or abnormal DNA increases the risk of cells becoming cancerous. Several studies have linked low levels of dietary folate with increased risk of colon cancer. On the other hand, oversupplementing (10 times the RDA) in animals can actually promote the growth of tumors already present.

Alcohol. Data from the Nurses’ Health Study suggest that even one drink per day, when combined with low folate intake, increases women’s risk of breast cancer.

Skin cancer. Several studies have linked high-fat diets with increased risk of skin cancer, and now excessive calories also appear to be related. Research so far has been conducted with rats and scientists are unsure of the mechanism. Genistein, a phytonutrient found in soy foods, appears to be protective against skin cancer.

Excess weight. Previous studies have shown that body weight is strongly linked to several different cancers, including uterine, colorectal and post-menopausal breast cancer. The American Cancer Society estimates that excess weight accounts for 14% of all cancer deaths in men and 20% in women.

Nutrition Tips for Cancer Prevention

Experts estimate that cancer risk could be cut 30-40% by eating a plant-based diet, keeping physically active and maintaining a healthy weight. Add not smoking, and cancer risk may drop even further, 60-70%.

A plant-based diet doesn’t mean vegetarian. It means making vegetables, fruits, whole grains and beans the focus of your meals. Plant foods contain phytonutrients, compounds that may help destroy carcinogens before they have a chance to cause cancer, or they may slow or stop the cancer cells that have already started growing. A plant-based diet also protects against other conditions like heart disease, diabetes and high blood pressure.

Tips:
- Use plant foods as the foundation of your meals.
- Enjoy meals that have rice, pasta, tortillas, or whole grain bread at the center of the plate, accompanied by plenty of fruits and vegetables and a moderate amount of low-fat foods from the milk group and the meat and beans group.
- Keep an eye on serving size.
- Check out vegetarian cookbooks for new recipes with plant foods.
Eat a rainbow of colorful fruits and vegetables daily to get the benefit of many different phytoneutrients. Eat at least five servings a day.

Experiment! Try new grains like bulghur or quinoa, legumes like lentils or chickpeas, vegetables like bok choi and fruits like mangoes.

For more information:
UWExtension publication “Eating for your health: preventing cancer” B3712-4
http://cecommerce.uwex.edu/pdfs/B3712_4.PDF

Good websites with information about diet and cancer:
National Cancer Institute (NCI) (800)4-Cancer; http://cis.nci.nih.gov
Dietary Supplement and Food Labeling Update

Below are some highlights from FDA’s Dietary Supplement & Food Labeling Electronic Newsletter, October 2003. Full text of the newsletter, and back issues, are available at: http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/fda-dsfl.html

Qualified Health Claims

In 2003, FDA created something called a “qualified health claim” that may be used when there is some evidence of a relationship between a food, food component, or dietary supplement, and a reduced risk of a disease or health condition. A qualified health claim would be used when there is not enough evidence for FDA to allow a full health claim. Manufacturers must state that the evidence for the claim is limited. Both foods and dietary supplements can use qualified health claims.

You may start seeing these claims on food or supplement labels, and you may get questions about them from consumers. For more information, see:

Qualified Health Claims Questions and Answers- New
http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/labqhcqa.html

Summary of Qualified Health Claims Permitted - New
http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/qhc-sum.html

Qualified Health Claim Petitions Open for Comment
http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/lab-qhc.html#petition

Trans Fat Labeling

Food manufacturers have until Jan. 1, 2006, to list trans fat on the nutrition facts label of foods and dietary supplements. This information would be found on a separate line directly below the line for saturated fatty acids. This rule is intended to help consumers make food choices that are low in saturated fat, trans fat, and cholesterol, all of which raise LDL (“bad”) cholesterol that is associated with an increased risk of heart disease.

FDA is currently soliciting comments on how they can include information on the nutrition facts label to help consumers understand trans fat information and use it to make food choices.

From the October, 2003 Nutrition for Family Living newsletter:
(http://www.uwex.edu/ces/wnep/p3/mmpdfs/0210.pdf#page=4)

Keeping it in perspective. According to food surveys, trans fats provide an estimated 2 to 3% of total calories in the American diet, compared with 12% from saturated fat and 34% from total fat. Following the Food Guide Pyramid, with its emphasis on whole grains, fruits, and vegetables, and helping people manage their food dollar by purchasing less processed foods are educational strategies that can help people reduce their intake of saturated and hydrogenated
Below are some recently released articles on trans fat:

FDA Consumer article, "Revealing Trans Fats," September/October 2003

Questions and Answers About Trans Fat Nutrition Labeling, July 9, 2003
http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/qatrans2.html

Coming Soon - Web-based consumer education on trans fat labeling, check www.fda.gov often for this article and other news.

Guidance on How to Use the Nutrition Facts Label - Revised

FDA has revised "Guidance on How to Understand and Use the Nutrition Facts Panel on Food Labels" to include information on trans fatty acids. This shows consumers how to use the nutrition facts label to make healthy food choices.

- Spanish - http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/sfoodlab.html

Other useful FDA Web Pages:

* Dietary Supplements http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/supplmnt.html
* Food Labeling and Nutrition http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/label.html
* Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/list.html