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What you don't know about fitness and nutrition CAN hurt you. Here are the keys to health, happiness, and a long life... above and beyond your Chiropractic care.

What's your motivation to live healthy? What "drives" your actions? What is going to get you off the couch when it's -20 outside to be disciplined?

For me, it's as simple as looking at my kids. I want to live to 102 (or more), so I can be here for them and *their* kids.

I know I have to start now, rather than waiting till I'm in my 50s and faced with something like heart disease or cancer. My health is my responsibility.

Your motivation may be quite different. Perhaps there's been a health scare with a friend or family member or you're just tired of not being able to tie your shoes without sitting down.

It doesn't matter. What's important is that you've made the decision to do something about it.

Why am I, as a Chiropractor, writing about fitness and nutrition?

Over the years, I've read many articles and books on nutrition and exercise science, and have worked with personal trainers. I know what to do to live a healthier life and what's working for me.

This has inspired me to share what I have learned on my journey, to help you along on yours. Taking care of your spinal health is extremely important (over and above anything else), but it's only one piece of the puzzle.

The following will give you a point of reference to get started and ask the right questions to find out what is best for you.

***DISCLAIMER:** As always, don't engage in any rigorous routine of exercise, or dramatic changes in your nutrition, without consulting your family doctor. This is

particularly important if you have a chronic condition, risk factors for heart disease and the like, or a family medical history that you know puts you at risk.

What you do

The truth is, many of us really don't understand what constitutes effective exercise and healthy nutrition.

This isn't surprising, given that we're bombarded with so many conflicting messages about nutrition, weight loss products, and exercise gizmos that make big promises, but usually fail to deliver.

Based on my personal experience, here are the three keys to success:

1) The most effective exercise routine is a combination of high-intensity cardio and weights.

Cardio is important. It's good for your heart and lungs and helps condition your body for more intense forms of exercise, such as weight training, to reduce risk of injury.

But cardio alone does not build lean muscle mass. Weight training does.

Why does this matter? Muscles need energy. If you have more lean muscle mass, you burn more fat. Weight training also strengthens your bones, which is important for anyone at risk for conditions such as osteoporosis.

Men and women both begin to lose muscle mass and function as they approach 40. This is a natural process that affects even active people. Sufficient protein and caloric intake, as well as weight training, are your best defenses.

2) What you eat is even more important than exercise.

There is no short cut for this. No "Get out of jail" free card. And no magic pill will help – in fact, most products promising weight loss without changes in your diet are more likely to do more harm than good.

You have to change how you eat. Period. Any amount of exercise can be undone by poor nutrition. This doesn't mean you starve yourself. Depending on your habits to date, it may in fact mean you have to *increase* your food intake, but with different choices.

3) You have to be consistent.

This isn't a short-term effort. It has to be a sustainable lifestyle change in how you live. Otherwise, you will just go back to your old habits, and the old you will return. You need to find someone who can serve as your coach or fitness buddy, to keep you on track and accountable, until this change of habit becomes your new normal.

When you do it

Although research in this area indicates that mid-afternoon to early evening training might be better for performance, sprint training, and fat loss, it will depend on your own preferences and schedule.

Each one of us is governed by our own circadian rhythm, or body clock. Your body clock is what determines if you are a night owl or an early bird. If you try to fight it, you are fighting nature. It influences your blood pressure, body temperature, hormone levels, and heart rate, all of which play a role in your body's readiness for exercise.

Some people prefer to start the day with exercise. (If you do, please wait until you have spent at least 30 minutes in an upright posture in order to minimize the risk of injury). Others aim for lunchtime, while some of us can't bear the thought till late afternoon. It all depends on finding a groove that works for you.

Common wisdom, however, holds that, if you have trouble keeping a consistent schedule, go for the morning workout, before the demands of the day take over and give you an excuse to skip the gym.

But how often?

Obviously, the more often you go to the gym, the faster you will see results, but few of us have the time or the inclination to go every day. Three times a week is fair, but four is better. It's what I do.

And for how long?

Now this is where more is not necessarily better. Aside from warm up and cool down stretches and the like, a full workout shouldn't run more than 45 minutes.

Studies have shown that regularly engaging in intense physical training for longer than 45 minutes at a time can elevate your body's cortisol levels, causing breakdown of muscle mass and increasing fat gain.

So remember, work hard, but don't go overboard. Shorter workouts more often are far more effective than marathon workouts once in a while.

This is why I love high-intensity interval training for cardio and well-designed weight lifting programs. If you are not tired after 45 minutes, you need to raise the level of intensity at which you are training.

How you do it

So we've talked about when to exercise, but how do you exercise?

The options can be overwhelming. Just like everything else, what is best for someone else may not be for you. Not everyone is at the same level. Start where you feel comfortable, but set goals to increase the intensity.

Cardio, of course, can be enjoyed in any number of ways, from stationary equipment like ellipticals and treadmills, to skipping, jogging and group classes. I prefer to do high-intensity interval training rather than steady cardio (I could write a whole report just on this subject alone). But again, your physical activity level will determine if you can try that now or if you have to wait.

For many people, however, resistance, or weight, training can be more daunting and mysterious. Here are the options.

Free weights

The classic tools for "pumping iron." Free weights are simple to use. (I should know, I use them.)

The benefit is that they simulate the kind of lifting you have to do in real life and encourage stabilization of your whole body – when you lift, other muscles beyond the ones that are the focus of a given exercise are also activated. I'm a big fan of these "compound" exercises that involve multiple joints – squats, deadlifts, presses, pulls, etc.

But it's important to lift weights safely, especially big weights. Using the right posture and technique for a given exercise is key to reduce risk of injury. It may also be best to train with a buddy who can spot you and lend a hand if muscle fatigue gets the best of you.

I recommend seeking the services of a personal trainer. They can determine if you have any muscle imbalances, provide you with a proper program based on your goals (i.e. how many days a week you should work out, how many reps and sets you should do, what should be your tempo, etc.). They can also modify your programs on an ongoing basis to prevent adaptation. Most importantly, they can teach you proper technique.

Machines

Weight/resistance machines have the benefit of providing that margin of safety that free weights may lack. They can also allow you to carry out very specific exercises to isolate and target specific muscles.

The trade off is that you do not get the same benefits that you do from having to stabilize your whole body during an exercise that recruits secondary muscles, like free weights do.

And, you must still practice proper posture and technique to avoid injury. This includes adjusting each machine to fit your height and reach.

Resistance bands

These are basically just giant rubber bands, available in different sizes to provide different levels of resistance. Bands have the advantage of being easy to store and transport, so you can take your gym on the road. When used properly, there is also less risk of injury from fatigued muscles that fail, compared to free weights.

The trade off is that resistance bands only work for you up to a certain point. Depending on how strong you are, or which muscle group you are exercising, even the heaviest band may not provide enough resistance for an effective workout.

Body weight exercises

Now we are back to basics. These include pull-ups, pushups, dips, crunches, squats, and lunges.

The obvious advantage is that no equipment is needed. These are exercises you can do just about anywhere, at any time. Like free weights, they have the advantage of mimicking natural movements and natural ranges of motion, while also recruiting secondary muscles.

The main disadvantage is that, depending on your fitness level, it may be too hard to start with an exercise like a pull-up. You can be assisted, on the other hand, with a resistance band, or with the pull-up machine at the gym.

So what works best?

The short answer? All of the above.

A well-rounded fitness routine may be a combination of free weights, machines, bands, and body weight exercises. Different muscles may respond differently to different exercises. Smaller muscles in your arms, for example, require far less weight to work out than the big muscles in your legs.

And changing it up with different exercises and equipment keeps your workouts from getting stale and boring. It also helps you to progress faster. Your body will adapt to doing the same exercises week after week and become less responsive. I recommend changing your exercise routine every 4-6 weeks.

On the same note, don't fall into the same tired routine of three sets of 10 repetitions for each exercise. Change this up, too. Try a lower weight with more repetitions, and vice versa. Again, this is where a personal trainer can really help you out!

Eating right and sleeping enough

Last and certainly not least is proper nutrition and getting enough rest.

Many books have been written on what constitutes proper nutrition (not all good), but I break it down to the following:

- Take time to meal plan, shop, prep, and cook. The key to my success with nutrition is having a weekly meal plan that pre-determines all my breakfasts, lunches and dinners, as well as my snacks. If you have time to prep in advance for your meals and snacks (i.e. cutting up all your vegetables on a Sunday morning), it will really simplify your life when it comes to making a healthy snack choice or just getting your meals ready during the busy workweek. If you find that you also have the time, pre-cooking some of your meals will also help from a convenience standpoint, especially when you are going to try to consume more protein – I especially find this very useful in the morning for breakfast.
- Eat lean protein (at every meal if possible), like you find in turkey and chicken breast, and fresh eggs. Protein is critical to maintain and build lean muscle. The more lean muscle you have, the more energy your body needs, and the faster it burns calories (and fat).
- Eat fresh veggies and greens (at every meal if possible). This is where you should turn for your main sources of key vitamins, minerals, and nutrients.
- Eat *unsalted* seeds and nuts. Nuts have fat, but it's a "good" fat. Just eat them in moderation.
- Minimize grains. If possible, buy organic, sprouted, whole grains.
- Eat more berries, but less of other fruits. Unlike most fruits, berries do not contain high levels of fructose that can spike your blood sugar. By the same token, cut back on the fruit juices.

- Minimize dairy products. At the very least, buy organic.
- Cut out sugar, salt, and unhealthy fats. Minimizing sugar is probably one of the best health tips to diminish your chances of getting heart disease and/or cancer.
- Cut out packaged, processed, and fast foods, from breakfast cereals and frozen entrees, to crackers, potato chips, and candy bars. These are prime sources of that unwanted sugar, salt, and bad fat, and they have poorer nutritional value than whole foods.
- Cut back on the starchy foods—*anything* made with flour (including breads, baked goods and pasta), rice, and potatoes.
- Eat smaller amounts, more often. Instead of three large meals a day and a couple of unhealthy snacks, instead try to eat smaller healthy meals four to six times a day and include protein in every one.

In short... eat real food, and “earn your carbs” (meaning on the days you exercise, you can have more carbohydrates in your diet). If you don’t exercise, but consume extra carbohydrates/calories, they will be stored as fat. As a side note, eating carbohydrates later in the day has been shown to help with sleep.

And go to bed

This is the scourge of our busy modern lives. We just don’t go to bed early enough, and stress keeps us from getting a good sleep when we do.

But lack of sleep is another form of stress, and elevated stress levels contribute to weight gain and hanging on to those unwanted pounds.

Studies have also shown that sleep-deprivation deepens our cravings for high-carb, high-fat foods, and people who are chronically short of sleep are 30 per cent more likely to be obese.

So if you want to live a healthier life, start with getting enough sleep. Go to bed in the same day as you woke up, turn off all the lights (even the one on your alarm clock if possible), use a white-noise machine if necessary, and turn off your cell phone or Wi-Fi device if you keep it on your night stand.

And if stress is a problem, regular exercise is a great outlet for it.

Final Thoughts

As I said earlier, I believe this information to be a “complement” to your Chiropractic care. Exercise and nutrition are important, though smaller, pieces of the puzzle.

I just don't say this because I'm a Chiropractor. Your Chiropractic care is designed to maximize the health of your nervous system. Your nervous system controls everything in your body (i.e. how your muscles work, how you digest food, your hormone levels, etc.) You can do all the other things “right,” but if your nervous system is not functioning properly, you will never reach your true potential, or, you will not get the desired outcome.

I hope you found this information useful. Please share it with your friends. You can also follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, where we regularly post on other health-related topics. Our website also has great information about Chiropractic care and other health-related topics, such as choosing the right pillow or selecting the proper backpack for you or your child.

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Yours in health,
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