

## Sidetrack Your Stress

IF YOU'RE LIKE MOST AMERICANS, you deal with stress on a daily basis.

Stress can come from good things—perhaps an upcoming wedding or a promotion—or bad things, like out-of-control debt or legal problems. Either way, it can cause physical ailments—such as headaches, sleep disorders, backaches, fatigue, irritability, upset stomach, and high blood pressure—along with mental and emotional symptoms such as depression and anxiety.

### Stress Checkers

Nobody can avoid stress altogether, and a certain amount actually is good for you. It helps you react quickly and can be an effective motivator. But it's best to keep unhealthy levels in check.

These strategies can help you reduce and manage your stressors:

- **Make a list of things in your life that cause you stress.** Becoming aware of your stressors can give you an idea of what causes you to tense up. Then try to avoid those situations or handle them differently in the future.
- **Put fitness first.** Exercise at least five days a week, but make it enjoyable. Aerobic

Continued on page 4

## Are You a Chronic Procrastinator?

IF YOU'RE LIKE MOST PEOPLE, you've probably put off more than one task that feels daunting.

The problem with delaying action is that it often adds to your stress level. Procrastination can become a habit, and the longer you put something off the harder it becomes to get started.

Here are a few ideas that may help.

### Say "Good-bye" to Excuses

Make a commitment to giving up the excuses that give you permission to put things off. But never beat yourself up if you don't move ahead.

Catch yourself in the "act" of procrastination, and when you do, ask yourself, "Does this get me closer to my goal?"



### Plan Early and Often

Break big goals into smaller, easily attainable goals. And put it in writing. That will help you feel like you've started and you're on your way.

### Develop a Tool Kit

Write a daily "to-do" list. Use concrete reminders to build confidence. Take advantage of time management and goal setting tools such as electronic scheduling programs or even sticky notes.

The simplest way to overcome procrastination is to take action. Take your first step today.

## Federal Occupational Health (FOH)

The Occupational Health Provider of Choice for the Federal Government

The mission of FOH is to improve the health, safety, and productivity of the federal workforce. Created by Congress in 1946, FOH is a non-appropriated service agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). FOH offers a full range of occupational health services—including Clinical, Wellness/Fitness, Employee Assistance Program (EAP), Work/Life, Organizational Development, and Environmental Health and Safety programs—exclusively to federal employees.

Visit FOH on the Web at [www.foh.dhhs.gov](http://www.foh.dhhs.gov), or call 800-457-9808.

# Late-Breaking Health News

>> **Taking three or four short, brisk walks throughout the day can lower blood pressure** for people with prehypertension the same amount as does taking one 40-minute walk.

Prehypertension is an elevated blood pressure level that typically progresses to high blood pressure. A person has prehypertension when the systolic blood pressure ranges from 120 to 139 millimeters of mercury (mm Hg) or the diastolic pressure ranges from 80 to 89 mm Hg.

A study, published in the *Journal of Hypertension*, found people with prehypertension who walked on a treadmill continuously for 40 minutes, and those who walked four times for 10 minutes over the course of 3.5 hours, both experienced a drop of systolic blood pressure of 5.4 to 5.6 mm Hg and diastolic blood pressure of 3.2 mm Hg. A reduction of 5 mm Hg in systolic blood pressure has been reported to substantially reduce mortality and reduce the incidence of stroke and coronary heart disease.

Source: *Journal of Hypertension*, September 2006

>> **People who live past 100 keep up with the latest trends and lead healthy lifestyles.** Evercare, a health insurance plan that specializes in older people, polled 100 people 100 years of age or older about their secrets of successful aging. Their responses included keeping up with current events, having healthy habits, and holding spirituality in high regard. Eighty-two percent of respondents said their dietary habits had improved or stayed the same, compared with 50 years ago. They avoided smoking, exercised regularly, kept active, and ate a balanced diet.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates there are now more than 80,000 Americans 100 years of age or older. That number is expected to rise to more than 580,000 by 2040.



>> **Owning a pet can ward off depression, lower blood pressure, boost immunity and reduce the risk for allergies.** According to a study published in *The Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology*, if a dog lived in the home, 19 percent of infants had pet allergies, compared with 33 percent among those who didn't have pets. Children with dogs also had higher levels of some immune chemicals—a sign of stronger immune system activation.

In another study, stockbrokers with high blood pressure who adopted a cat or dog had lower blood pressure readings in stressful situations than did brokers without pets. Finally, according to several other studies, heart attack patients who have pets also survive longer than those with no pets.

Sources: *The Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology*, September 2006; February 2007; *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, December 2006

## CMS, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services

Are you planning your retirement or caring for a loved one who receives Medicare benefits?

You should know that Medicare offers many preventive services. Some of these benefits include:

- Cardiovascular screening
- Smoking cessation (counseling to quit smoking)
- Cancer screenings
- Flu shots

Please check with your physician to determine your risks and if the beneficiary will be responsible for any out-of-pocket costs.

To learn more about what Medicare offers and get other important information, visit [www.medicare.gov](http://www.medicare.gov), register for [MyMedicare.gov](http://MyMedicare.gov), or call 800-MEDICARE (800-633-4227).

## National Health Observances



NOVEMBER 27 to DECEMBER 3  
National Influenza Vaccination Week,  
[www.cdc.gov/flu](http://www.cdc.gov/flu)

JANUARY  
National Glaucoma Awareness Month,  
[www.preventblindness.org](http://www.preventblindness.org)

FEBRUARY 14  
National Donor Day,  
[www.organdonor.gov](http://www.organdonor.gov)

## Federal Information Links

- > The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, [www.fitness.gov](http://www.fitness.gov)
- > Healthier US, [www.healthierus.gov](http://www.healthierus.gov)
- > MyPyramid.gov (USDA), [www.mypyramid.gov](http://www.mypyramid.gov)
- > National Diabetes Education Program, <http://ndep.nih.gov>
- > National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, [www.nhlbi.nih.gov](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov)
- > Small Step (HHS), [www.smallstep.gov](http://www.smallstep.gov)
- > U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, [www.hhs.gov](http://www.hhs.gov)
- > National Institutes of Health, [www.nih.gov](http://www.nih.gov)

# Birds of a Feather

## Obesity Spreads Through Social Networks

NOBODY WILL ARGUE THAT A COLD IS CONTAGIOUS. BUT OBESITY?

Forget pandemic paranoia, there is a new kind of germ to watch out for: the social contagion.

New research reported in *The New England Journal of Medicine*'s July 2007 issue traced obesity (measured by body mass index [BMI] over 30) through social networks.

Here's what they found. The probability of becoming obese increased by:

- 37 percent if your spouse is obese
- 40 percent if your sibling is obese
- 57 percent if your friend is obese
- 71 percent if your friend of the same sex is obese

### It Takes a Village

Don't trash your "black book"—you need friends. In fact, this new research highlights how important the support of family and friends is. And it validates what most of us already know: You can't lose weight ALONE.

How do friends influence weight gain? There are a number of pos-

sibilities. If someone you care about gains weight, you might become more accepting of weight gain not only in him or her but also in yourself.

Also, friends share beliefs, philosophies, and habits. If those shared beliefs include overindulgence in unhealthy foods and under-involvement in physical activity, the shared pounds can accumulate quickly.

### Social Antidote

What kind of inoculation could possibly work for an epidemic spread by friendship? The social antidote.

Here are some tips.

- Take an honest look at your health, habits, and weight. Then discuss them with friends and family. But keep it about YOU.
- Keep the topic visible. Obesity is not a handicap (though it's the root of some disabilities); it is an important health issue. Talk about it. But, be sensitive to those already disabled

due to obesity and do not criticize or judge.

- Learn your BMI. Tell others. Volunteer to help a friend learn his or her BMI.
- Make a plan. If your goal is to maintain or reduce weight, talk about it with friends, even if they are overweight.
- Commit to increasing activity and healthy eating, and ask your social group to support and join you.

As your health improves and habits change, your improved habits will have a positive influence on your friends and family.

Your workplace Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is available. Your EAP can help you and your family tackle these and other difficult issues. See the contact information on the back page.

Source: *The New England Journal of Medicine*, July 2007







## Muscle Up with Mind Games

MOST FITNESS CLASSES EXPECT YOU TO show up in sweats, shorts, or sneakers. But some new workout programs just want you to put on your thinking cap.

Across the country, adults are doing exercises designed to firm up their mental muscles in the same way push-ups or jumping jacks result in better physical condition.

What prompted this surge in cerebral calisthenics? It's the discovery that people's brains don't necessarily deteriorate with age, as scientists once believed. In fact, new research is showing the more mentally active people are, the better their brains seem to work.

In the new mental workouts, people may challenge themselves with brainteasers, board games, or three-dimensional puzzles, such as estimating the number of jelly beans in a jar. They may try to do some-

thing familiar in a different way, like writing with the opposite hand. Or they may do something they've never done, such as listen to a new kind of music, learn a new language, or take up a new hobby.

### A Game Plan

Here are some suggestions to help you get into the new "game":

- Take up chess, cribbage, backgammon, or bridge.
- Enroll in a course in Greek, Chinese, or Portuguese.
- Learn to play the piano or write a short story.
- Sign up for ballroom dancing or tai chi.
- Study oil painting or metal sculpting.
- Volunteer to teach English to immigrants.
- Prepare a dish you've never made before.

**FOH** **FEDERAL OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH**  
 a component of the U.S. Public Health Service  
 Program Support Center  
 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

The EAP is part of the U.S. Coast Guard Work Life Program. Each Integrated Support Command (ISC) has a Work Life office and EAP coordinator. To contact a U.S. Coast Guard EAP coordinator, call your ISC Work Life office. For administrative details about the program, contact Doug Mahy **214-767-3030** or email at **dmahy@psc.gov**. To visit us on the Web, go to **www.FOH4You.com**.

Help is available all day, all week, all year.  
**800-222-0364, TTY: 888-262-7848**

This newsletter is brought to you by **Federal Occupational Health (FOH)**, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

To request an electronic copy of this newsletter or change your newsletter delivery options, contact Haydee Gelpi at **954-776-6500** or email **hgelpi@psc.gov**.

Information published in *Let's Talk* is the opinion of the sourced authors. Personal decisions regarding health, finance, exercise, and other matters should be made after consultation with the reader's professional advisors.

All models used for illustrative purposes only. © 2007. All editorial rights reserved.

(407 V2 6249)

*Continued from page 1*

workouts—walking, cycling, swimming, or running—can help relax those too-tight muscles and produce endorphins, which are chemicals in the brain that can help counteract stress.

#### ■ Learn how to relax.

Deep-breathing exercises, meditation, yoga, visualization, or listening to relaxation tapes can help you decompress.

- **Get enough sleep.** Lack of sleep can add to stress levels by increasing fatigue and reducing your ability to cope.

#### ■ Avoid alcohol and drugs.

Using them to unwind only masks symptoms and can worsen stress.

#### ■ Build loving relationships and supportive networks.

The warmth of human connection to friends, neighbors, and coworkers is a great buffer for stress.

### Seek Support

You may not always be able to handle stress on your own. If you're often depressed or you drink more alcohol than you should, you could be at the point where you need outside support—especially if your family life is affected by your behavior.

At the workplace, your FOH Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can help you find ways to deal with stress in your life. Even if you don't feel stressed, the EAP can help you develop stress-reduction strategies so you're better able to cope when life throws a curve ball.

**Want to learn more?** Visit The American Institute of Stress Web site at **www.stress.org**.