

Changing Your Habits: Steps to Better Health

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
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DIABETES AND DIGESTIVE
AND KIDNEY DISEASES

WIN Weight-control Information Network

Do you want to eat healthier or become more active?

Most Americans have tried to eat healthier or be more physically active at some point in their lives. Why, then, do many of us eat high-fat and high-calorie foods and have such a hard time fitting in exercise? You may be wondering: is it even possible to change your habits?

The answer is *yes!* Change is always possible, and a person is never too out-of-shape, overweight, or old to make healthy changes.

This fact sheet offers strategies to help you improve your eating and physical activity habits. Whether you feel like change is a world away or just around the corner, the information here can help you get started.

One Step at a Time

Old habits die hard. If you want to change your habits, you may find it helpful to make realistic and gradual changes one step at a time and at your own pace. It is important to think about what motivates *you*, what trips *you* up, and what *you* enjoy when it comes to eating and activity habits. There is no such thing as a “one-size-fits-all” approach.

The first step in developing your personal plan for change is to figure out where you stand. Many people who are interested in becoming more active or eating healthier foods fall into one of four “stages” of change. Read on to find the stage that applies to you now.

Change is always possible, and a person is never too out-of-shape, overweight, or old to make healthy changes.

Find your Stage of Change.

“It has crossed my mind.”

The **contemplation** stage of change is the time when people are thinking about change and trying to become more motivated to get started.

You might be in this stage if:

- You have been considering change but you are not ready to start.
- You believe that your health, energy level, or overall well-being will improve if you develop new habits.
- You need to find some extra help to get going.
- You are not sure how you will overcome the roadblocks that stand in the way of success.

“I have made up my mind.”

Preparation is the stage of change when people become planners and figure out specific ideas that will work for them.

You might be in this stage if:

- You have decided that you are going to change and you are ready to take action.
- You have set some specific goals that you would like to meet.
- You have thought about ways that can help you reach your goals.
- You are getting ready to put your plan into action and get started soon.

“I am going for it.”

In the **action** stage, people are acting on their plan and making the changes they set out to achieve.

You might be in this stage if:

- You have been making eating or physical activity changes in the last 6 months or so.
- You are adjusting to how it feels to eat differently or be more active.
- You have been “trouble-shooting” to overcome things that have gotten in the way of your success.
- You are thinking about more ways you can keep up, or add to, the changes you have already made.

“I am in the groove.”

The **maintenance** stage is when you have become used to your change and have kept it up for more than 6 months.

You might be in the maintenance stage if:

- Your change has become a habit. This means you are being physically active on most days of the week or making healthful food choices regularly.
- You have found creative ways to keep going and stick with your routine.
- You have had slip-ups and setbacks but have been able to get past these snags.
- Your healthy habits are a positive example for your friends, family, coworkers, or others.

Learn strategies for change.

Did you find your stage of change? If so, take a look at these stages again, this time with an eye on strategies you can use to get past your roadblocks and move on to the next stage.

The Contemplation Stage ("It has crossed my mind.")

It can be hard to make the leap from thinking about change to taking action. It might be

helpful to ask yourself about the pros (benefits) and cons (drawbacks) of changing your habits. It can be easier to move ahead when your pros outweigh your cons. Look at the lists below. Check off statements that you believe are true for you.

If your pros outweigh your cons, you might be ready to move on to the preparation stage. During this stage, you closely explore your barriers and think of ways to overcome them.

Physical Activity...

Pros

- Improves my health.
- Reduces my risk for serious health problems.
- Makes me feel better about myself.
- Makes me stronger.
- Is fun.
- Gives me some time alone.
- Lets me spend time with others.
- Gives me more energy.
- Helps me relax.
- Helps me maintain a healthy weight.
- Makes me a role model for others.
- _____
- _____
- _____

Cons

- Takes too much time.
- Is boring.
- Makes me tired.
- Is too difficult.
- Costs too much money.
- Makes me self-conscious.
- Makes me nervous about my health.
- Is something I am not good at.
- Is something I do not know how to do.
- Is hard to do by myself.
- Is for people younger and fitter than me.
- _____
- _____
- _____

Healthy Food Choices...

Pros

- Help me feel energetic.
- Improve my health.
- Lower my risk for health problems.
- Help me lose weight.
- Help me maintain a healthy weight.
- Make me feel proud of myself.
- Are fun to explore.
- Set an example for friends and family.
- Taste delicious.
- _____
- _____
- _____

Cons

- Are too expensive.
- Do not taste good.
- Mean giving up foods I love.
- Make me stand out in my family or workplace.
- Are confusing to make.
- Are difficult to shop for.
- Are not usually available to me.
- Take too much self-control.
- Are not important.
- _____
- _____
- _____

However, it is okay if you have more cons than pros. Remember that it is best to move at your own pace. Begin thinking of ways to get past your drawbacks. Your solutions do not need to be perfect, but you need to believe that there *are* ways to overcome your barriers, no matter how difficult they may seem.

Think about how the benefits of physical activity or healthy eating might relate to your personal life. For example, suppose your blood pressure is a bit high and you have a parent, sister, or brother who has heart disease. This means you are at risk of developing heart disease too. You may find that it is easier to work out and eat healthy knowing that it may help you live a life free of heart disease. In this way your efforts may mean more to you.

You can learn more about the positive outcomes of changing your eating and activity habits from your health care provider. You may find that knowing more about the benefits of physical activity and healthy eating may help you begin to take action.

The Preparation Stage ("I have made up my mind.")

If you are in the preparation stage, you are about to take action. This does not mean taking big steps. Rather, it means creating your plan for action and beginning to make small changes.

To get started, look at the list of pros and cons above. Which pros or cons were true for you? How can you move past your drawbacks and emphasize the benefits?

Also, consider these common ways to prepare yourself:

- Make time.
- Ask friends and family for support.
- Develop a plan.
- Set small goals and rewards.

When you start making changes, track your progress through a physical activity log or healthy eating journal. This can help you identify your strengths, spot areas where you can improve, and stay on course. You need to record not only what you did, but how you felt while doing it—your feelings can play a role in our habits.

The chart on the **next page** lists barriers and solutions common to many people as they begin changing their habits. Think about these things as you make your plan. You can keep using these tips when you actually do spring into action.

The Action Stage ("I am going for it.")

You are making real changes to your lifestyle, which is fantastic. To stick with your habits, it is helpful to assess how you are doing, overcome your setbacks, and reward yourself for your hard work and commitment.

Track your progress.

- Review your plan and keep an activity journal or food diary to track your progress. Writing down your progress can be one of your most important tools for staying on a healthy path. It serves as a good reminder, helps to keep you focused, and will help you catch slip-ups. Keeping a journal is a great way to measure how close you are to reaching your goals.

Overcome your barriers.

- Problem-solve to "outsmart" your barriers. In addition to those discussed above, WIN's publications *Tips to Help You Get Active* and *Just Enough for You: About Food Portions* offer tips for overcoming barriers. Remember to ask a friend or family member for help when you need it and always try to plan ahead. For example, if you know that you will not

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<i>Barrier</i>	<i>Solution</i>
“I don’t have time!”	Make your new healthy habit a priority. Whenever you can, fit in physical activity. Try taking the stairs or getting off the bus a stop early. Set aside one grocery shopping day a week, and make healthy meals that you can freeze and eat later when you do not have a lot of time to cook.
“It costs too much.”	Start a walking group! Walk around the mall during off-peak hours, find a school track, or go to a local park. Eat healthfully on a budget by buying in bulk and opting for frozen or canned fruits and vegetables. See the WIN publications listed at the end of this fact sheet for more ideas.
“I can’t make this change alone.”	Recruit others to be active with you. That will help you stay interested and be safe. Also, consider signing up for a fun exercise class, like salsa dancing. Get your family or coworkers on the healthy eating bandwagon. Plan healthy meals together with your family, or start a healthy potluck once a week at work.
“I don’t like physical activity.”	Forget the old notion that being physically active means playing football or lifting weights in a gym. You can be active in many ways, including dancing, walking, ice skating, gardening, or taking fun fitness classes. The list goes on and on! Explore options you never thought about, and stick with what you enjoy.
“I don’t like healthy foods.”	Rather than suddenly switching to new foods, find out how you can make your favorite foods in a healthy way. For example, you can trim fat from meats, use applesauce when you bake, and reduce the amount of butter, sugar, and salt you cook with. For more information, see the Additional Resources section of this fact sheet.
“I don’t know enough about it.”	Talk to your doctor, a fitness professional, or a registered dietitian to learn more. You do not have to be an expert to change your habits. A few tips and ideas can do wonders!
“I’m not motivated.”	Think about your biggest reasons for being healthy. For example, do you want to be there for your family, be able to do the things you love without feeling tired or out of breath, or reduce your health risks? Think about these things when you want to quit. Also, try mixing things up to stay interested.

To stick with your habits, it is helpful to assess how you are doing, overcome your setbacks, and reward yourself for your hard work and commitment.

have time to be physically active after work, go walking with a coworker at lunch or start your day with an exercise video. If you tend to snack mindlessly while the television is on, prepare a cup of hot tea to sip instead.

Reward yourself!

- Set rewards to stay motivated. Ideas include new workout gear, a hot bath, a new hobby, or a new book. While you should be proud of your progress, keep in mind that a high-calorie treat or a day off from your exercise routine are not the best rewards. If negative thoughts creep in, remind yourself how much good you are doing for your health by eating healthier and getting more physical activity.

The Maintenance Stage ("I am in the groove.")

Now that healthy eating or physical activity has become a part of your routine, you need to keep things interesting, avoid slip-ups, and find ways to cope with what life throws at you.

Add variety and stay motivated.

- Mix up your routine with new activities, physical activity buddies, foods, recipes, and rewards.

How do I deal with unexpected setbacks?

- Plan ahead to avoid setbacks. For example, find other ways to be active in case of bad weather, injury, or other unusual situations. Think of ways to eat healthfully when traveling or dining out, like packing healthy snacks while on the road, or sharing an entrée with a friend in a restaurant. If you do have a setback, do not give up! Setbacks happen to everyone. Regroup and focus on meeting your goal as soon as you can.

Challenge yourself!

- Revisit your goals and think of ways to expand them. For example, if you are comfortable walking 5 days a week, consider adding strength training twice a week. If you have successfully limited your saturated fat intake, try cutting back on added sugars too.

Additional Reading From the Weight-control Information Network

Better Health and You: Tips for Adults

National Institutes of Health

(NIH) Publication No. 04-4992

Energize Yourself and Your Family

NIH Publication No. 08-4296

Just Enough for You: About Food Portions

NIH Publication No. 03-5287

Tips to Help You Get Active

NIH Publication No. 06-5578

Weight Loss for Life

NIH Publication No. 04-3700

Additional Resources

American Heart Association

Just Move

This website features a free online physical activity tracker.

Internet: <http://www.justmove.org>

Toll-free: 1-800-242-8721

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Stages of Change for Adding Physical Activity Into Your Life

This website offers more information about the Stages of Change.

Internet: <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/physical/starting/index.htm>

Toll-free: 1-800-311-3435

National Diabetes Education Program

The National Diabetes Education Program website provides information about diabetes and obesity prevention and control.

Internet: <http://www.yourdiabetesinfo.org>

Phone: 1-888-693-NDEP (1-888-693-6337)

**Make your future
a healthy one.**

Remember that eating healthfully and being physically active are lifelong behaviors, not one-time events. Always keep an eye on your efforts and make adjustments to deal with the planned and unplanned changes in your life.

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

Aim for a Healthy Weight

This website includes a “Portion Distortion” quiz and BMI assessment tool.

Internet: http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/obesity/lose_wt

Phone: 301-592-8573

U.S. Department of Agriculture

ChooseMyPlate

This interactive website has in-depth dietary and physical activity information.

Internet: <http://www.choosemyplate.gov>

Toll-free: 1-888-779-7264

Inclusion of resources is for information only and does not imply endorsement by NIDDK or WIN.

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Publications produced by WIN are reviewed by both NIDDK scientists and outside experts. This publication was also reviewed by John M. Jakicic, Ph.D., Chair, Department of Health and Physical Activity, Director, Physical Activity and Weight Management Research Center, University of Pittsburgh, and Rena Wing, Ph.D., Professor of Psychiatry and Human Behavior, Brown University.

This fact sheet is also available at
<http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov>.