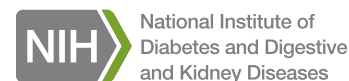


# Changing Your Habits: Steps to Better Health

U.S. Department of Health  
and Human Services



**WIN** *Weight-control Information Network*

## Introduction

*Are you thinking about being more active?*

*Have you been trying to cut back on fattening foods?*

*Are you starting to eat better and be more active but having a hard time sticking with these changes?*

Old habits die hard. Changing your habits is a process involving several stages. Sometimes it takes a while before changes turn into new habits. You may face challenges along the way.

But adopting new, healthier habits may protect you from serious health problems, such as diabetes. New habits may also help you look better and feel more energetic. After a while, if you stick with these changes, they may become a part of your daily routine.

This fact sheet offers strategies to help you improve your eating and physical activity habits and outlines four stages people may experience when changing a health behavior which include:

- Contemplation
- Preparation
- Action
- Maintenance

Whether you feel like change is a world away or just around the corner, this fact sheet can help you move closer to your healthy eating and physical activity goals.

## Step up to healthy habits.

Get 150 to 300 minutes of moderately intense or vigorous physical activity each week.

- Brisk walks, tennis, swimming, soccer, basketball, hikes, hula hoops—do whatever you enjoy best.

Strengthen your muscles at least twice a week.

- Do push-ups or pull-ups, lift weights, do heavy gardening, or work with rubber resistance bands.

Eat more of these foods:

- fruits and vegetables
- whole-grain breads and cereals
- fat-free or low-fat dairy
- seafood, lean meats, and eggs
- beans, nuts, and seeds

Limit these foods and drinks:

- sugar-sweetened drinks and desserts
- foods made with butter or other fats that are solid at room temperature
- refined grains (bread, chips, and crackers)

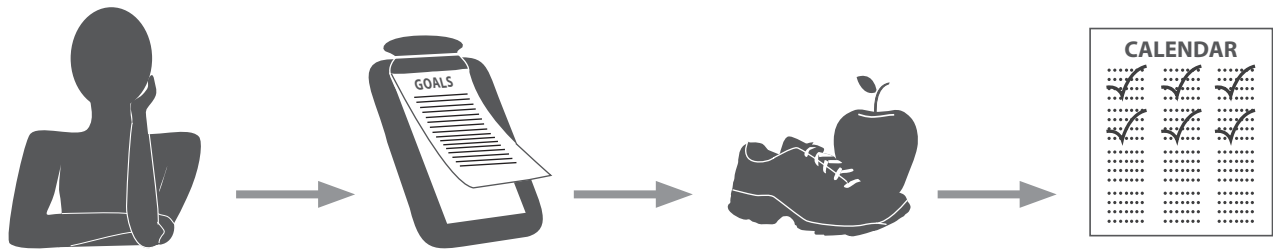
For more ideas, see the links to federal dietary and physical activity guidelines in the Resources section of this fact sheet.

## What stage of change are you in?

The first step in developing your personal plan for change is to figure out how you are feeling about changing your habits. The stages of change diagram describes four stages that people may go

through when changing a health behavior. Think about where you are in terms of eating better and/or moving more. What stage seems to best match where you are right now?

### STAGES OF CHANGE DIAGRAM



<p><b>■ 1. CONTEMPLATION</b> <i>"I'm thinking about it."</i></p> <p>You are thinking about change and trying to become more motivated to get started.</p> <p>You might be in this stage if</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ you have been considering change but you are not ready to start.</li> <li>■ you believe that your health, energy level, or overall well-being will improve if you develop new habits.</li> <li>■ you are not sure how you will overcome the roadblocks that stand in the way of success.</li> </ul>	<p><b>■ 2. PREPARATION</b> <i>"I have made up my mind."</i></p> <p>You are making plans and figuring out specific ideas that will work for you.</p> <p>You might be in this stage if</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ you have decided that you are going to change, and you are ready to take action.</li> <li>■ you have set some specific goals that you would like to meet.</li> <li>■ you are getting ready to put your plan into action and get started soon.</li> </ul>	<p><b>■ 3. ACTION</b> <i>"I have started to make changes."</i></p> <p>You are acting on your plan and making the changes you set out to achieve.</p> <p>You might be in this stage if</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ you have been making eating or physical activity changes in the last 6 months or so.</li> <li>■ you are adjusting to how it feels to eat differently or be more active.</li> <li>■ you have been "troubleshooting" to overcome things that have blocked your success.</li> </ul>	<p><b>■ 4. MAINTENANCE</b> <i>"I have a new routine."</i></p> <p>You have become used to your change and have kept it up for more than 6 months.</p> <p>You might be in this stage if</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ your change has become a habit.</li> <li>■ you have found creative ways to keep going and stick with your routine.</li> <li>■ you have had slip-ups and setbacks but have been able to get past these snags.</li> </ul>

Did you find your stage of change? Read on for ideas on what you can do if you are in one of these four stages of change. →

## Are you thinking about making changes?

### 1. CONTEMPLATION

Making the leap from thinking about change to taking action can be hard. Asking yourself about the pros (benefits) and cons (things that get in the way) of changing your habits may be helpful. Look at the lists below. Check off the items that you believe are true for you. Feel free to add others that you think are important.

How would life be better if you made some changes? Think about how the benefits of physical activity or healthy eating might relate to your personal

life. For example, suppose your blood sugar is a bit high and you have a brother, parent, or sister who has type 2 diabetes. This means you may develop type 2 diabetes, too. You may find that it is easier to work out and eat healthy knowing that it may help you control your blood sugar and protect you from this serious health problem.

You can learn more about the benefits of changing your eating and activity habits from your health care provider. This knowledge may help you to take action.

#### HEALTHY HABITS—SAMPLE LIST OF PROS AND CONS

	PROS	CONS
HEALTHY FOOD CHOICES	<input type="checkbox"/> Feel more energetic. <input type="checkbox"/> Improve my health. <input type="checkbox"/> Lower my risk for health problems. <input type="checkbox"/> Lose weight. <input type="checkbox"/> Maintain a healthy weight. <input type="checkbox"/> Feel proud of myself. <input type="checkbox"/> Try new, delicious foods. <input type="checkbox"/> Set an example for friends and family. <input type="checkbox"/> _____ <input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> May spend more on food. <input type="checkbox"/> May need to cook more often at home. <input type="checkbox"/> May need to give up foods I love. <input type="checkbox"/> Need new recipes. <input type="checkbox"/> Need to buy new foods. <input type="checkbox"/> Need to convince my family. <input type="checkbox"/> _____ <input type="checkbox"/> _____
	PROS	CONS
PHYSICAL ACTIVITY	<input type="checkbox"/> Improve my health. <input type="checkbox"/> Reduce my risk for serious health problems. <input type="checkbox"/> Feel better about myself. <input type="checkbox"/> Become stronger. <input type="checkbox"/> Have fun. <input type="checkbox"/> Have some time alone. <input type="checkbox"/> Spend time with others. <input type="checkbox"/> Have more energy. <input type="checkbox"/> Relax. <input type="checkbox"/> Maintain a healthy weight. <input type="checkbox"/> Become a role model for others. <input type="checkbox"/> _____ <input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Do not have time. <input type="checkbox"/> Do not have the energy. <input type="checkbox"/> Do not have enough money. <input type="checkbox"/> Feel self-conscious. <input type="checkbox"/> Am nervous about my health. <input type="checkbox"/> Am not good at being active. <input type="checkbox"/> Do not know what to do. <input type="checkbox"/> Am not young or fit enough. <input type="checkbox"/> _____ <input type="checkbox"/> _____

## Have you made up your mind?

### ■ 2. PREPARATION

If you are in the preparation stage, you are about to take action. To get started, look at your list of pros and cons. How can you make a plan and move to action?

The chart below lists the types of barriers and solutions you may face as you begin to change your habits. Think about these things as you make your plan.

#### HEALTHY HABITS—COMMON BARRIERS AND SOLUTIONS

BARRIER	SOLUTION
"I don't have time."	<b>Make your new healthy habit a priority.</b> Whenever you can, fit in physical activity. Try taking the stairs or getting off the bus a stop early, if it is safe to do so. Set aside one grocery shopping day a week, and make healthy meals that you can freeze and eat later when you do not have time to cook.
"Healthy habits cost too much."	<b>Start a walking group.</b> Walk around the mall during off-peak hours, find a school track, or go to a local park. Eat healthy on a budget by buying in bulk and choosing frozen or canned fruits and vegetables. The Weight-control Information Network (WIN) publications listed at the end of this fact sheet offer more ideas.
"I can't make this change alone."	<b>Recruit others to be active with you.</b> 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."	<b>Forget the old notion that being physically active means lifting weights in a gym.</b> You can be active in many ways, including dancing, walking, gardening, or taking fun fitness classes. Make your own list of options that appeal to you. Explore options you never thought about, and stick with what you enjoy.
"I don't like healthy foods."	<b>Try making your old favorite recipes in healthier new ways.</b> For example, you can trim fat from meats, and reduce the amount of butter, sugar, and salt you cook with. Use low-fat cheese or milk rather than whole-milk foods. Add a cup or two of broccoli, carrots, or spinach to casseroles or pasta. For sources where you can find more ideas, see the Resources section of this fact sheet.
"I don't know enough about healthy habits."	<b>Talk to your health care provider, a fitness professional, or a registered dietitian to learn more.</b> You do not have to be an expert to change your habits. A few tips and ideas can do wonders. Check the WIN Facebook page for healthy tips and resources: <a href="http://www.facebook.com/win.niddk.nih.gov">http://www.facebook.com/win.niddk.nih.gov</a> .
"I'm not motivated."	<b>Think about your most important reasons for being healthy.</b> For example, do you want to be there for your family? Would you like to be able to do the things you love without feeling tired or out of breath? Would you like to stop worrying about your health risks? Think about these things when you want to quit. Also, try different activities or try exercising in new places to stay interested.

## Have you started to make changes?

### ■ 3. ACTION

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

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 your habits. See “Ideas for Staying on Track with Healthy Habits” for ideas about how to track your progress.



Remember that a slip-up does not mean you have failed. All of us experience setbacks. Focus on each step you take to reach your goal.

#### IDEAS FOR STAYING ON TRACK WITH HEALTHY HABITS

##### TRACK YOUR PROGRESS.

**Review your plan** and keep an activity journal or food diary to track your progress.

**Write down your progress.** This can be one of your most important tools for staying on a healthy path. Recording progress serves as a good reminder, helps to keep you focused, and helps you catch slip-ups.

**Keep a journal.** It's 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 the barriers discussed earlier, WIN's publications *Tips to Help You Get Active* and *Just Enough for You: About Food Portions* offer tips for overcoming barriers.

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

##### REWARD YOURSELF!

**Set rewards and right after you exercise, treat yourself to something you enjoy.** Ideas include a relaxing shower, a fruit smoothie, a phone call to a friend, or new workout gear.

**Choose rewards carefully.** 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 to keep you healthy.

**Pat yourself on the back.** If negative thoughts creep in, remind yourself how much good you are doing for your health by moving more and eating better.

## Have you created a new routine?

### ■ 4. MAINTENANCE

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 healthy 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 again 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 limited your saturated fat intake, try cutting back on added sugars, too. Small changes can lead to healthy habits for life!



#### MAKE YOUR FUTURE A HEALTHY ONE.

Remember that eating healthy and being physically active are lifelong behaviors, not one-time events.

Always keep an eye on your efforts and adjust to deal with the planned and unplanned changes in your life.

### Research

The National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) conducts and supports a broad range of basic and clinical obesity research. More information about obesity research is available at <http://www.obesityresearch.nih.gov>.

Clinical trials are research studies involving people. Clinical trials look at safe and effective new ways to prevent, detect, or treat disease. Researchers also use clinical trials to look at other aspects of care, such as improving the quality of life for people with chronic illnesses. To learn more about clinical trials, why they matter, and how to participate, visit the NIH Clinical Research Trials and You website at <http://www.nih.gov/health/clinicaltrials>. For information about current studies, visit <http://www.ClinicalTrials.gov>.



## Resources

### Additional Reading from the Weight-control Information Network

The following publications are available online at <http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications> and also by calling WIN toll-free at 1-877-946-4627:

- **Better Health and You: Tips for Adults** helps adults plan steps toward consuming healthier foods and beverages and being more physically active. Featuring a tear-off tip sheet perfect for posting on your fridge, this brochure also explains the benefits of getting healthy and the harmful effects of being overweight (available online at [http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/better\\_health.htm](http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/better_health.htm)).
- **Energize Yourself and Your Family!** describes how being healthy and active can help you gain the energy you need to keep up with the demands of your busy life. Tips suggest how you can take better care of yourself to be there for the people who depend on you (available online at <http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/energize.htm>).
- **Just Enough for You: About Food Portions** explains the difference between a portion and a serving, and offers tips to help readers choose healthy portions (available online at [http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/just\\_enough.htm](http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/just_enough.htm)).
- **Tips to Help You Get Active** offers tips to help readers become more physically active, overcome barriers to activity, and stay motivated (available online at <http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/tips.htm>).

### Additional Resources

- **2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans.** These guidelines provide general information on physical activity, including how often you should be active and which activities are best for you. <http://www.health.gov/PAGuidelines>
- **Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2010.** These guidelines and website include information and tips on healthy eating, shopping, and cooking. <http://www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines>
- **MyPlate.** Information, tips, and interactive tools about healthy eating and physical activity, as well as healthy eating on a budget, are available from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). <http://www.choosemyplate.gov>
- **National Diabetes Education Program.** Publications from this program provide information about diabetes and obesity prevention and control. <http://www.yourdiabetesinfo.org>
- **National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute.** The Aim for a Healthy Weight website includes a "Portion Distortion" quiz and other tips and tools. [http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/obesity/lose\\_wt](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/obesity/lose_wt)
- **National Kidney Disease Education Program.** Publications from this program provide information about detection and management of kidney disease, as well as the impact of kidney disease on African Americans. <http://nkdep.nih.gov/resources.shtml>
- **Nutrition Website.** A website of the USDA that provides information and resources on food and healthy eating. <http://www.nutrition.gov>

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

## Weight-control Information Network

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<http://www.facebook.com/win.niddk.nih.gov>.

The Weight-control Information Network (WIN) is a national information service of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK), part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). WIN provides the general public, health professionals, and the media with science-based, up-to-date, culturally relevant materials and tips. Topics include how to consume healthy foods and beverages, barriers to physical activity, portion control, and eating and physical activity myths.

Publications produced by WIN are reviewed by both NIDDK scientists and outside experts. This fact sheet was also reviewed by Carla Miller, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Ohio State University.

You may also find additional information about this topic by visiting MedlinePlus at <http://www.medlineplus.gov>.

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

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