

Healthy Activities Challenge: 9 Steps to a Healthier Lifestyle



Adopt a healthy lifestyle with simple, easily manageable steps. These minor changes can have a big impact on how you feel. Your challenge for the month is to try these 9 steps and track your daily progress.

1 - Clear the Clutter - prepare yourself for the month ahead with some cleaning and organization. Donate any items you no longer need, use. Rid your fridge/pantry of junk food and/or outdated items. Make and complete a list of any other jobs that need to be done to clear your life of clutter. You'll be surprised how good this makes you feel!

2 - Breathe - Take 5-10 minutes throughout the day to enjoy some relaxing crocodile breathing. Lie face down and slowly inhale through your nose for a count of 4, feeling your stomach expanding into the floor. Hold the breath for a count of 7 and exhale through the mouth for a count of 8 drawing your stomach inwards. Repeat for 3 more cycles of breath. Crocodile Breathing encourages you to breathe using your diaphragm, rather than the more typical "shallow breathing" which uses intercostal muscles. Diaphragmatic breathing uses more core muscles than shallow breathing, and we could all use a little more core muscle!

3 - Drink More Water – Water makes up 85% of your brain. Dehydration can lead to fatigue, slow down your metabolism, and decrease your energy. If you feel thirsty, you have already lost approximately 2 cups of body water.

Drink between a third to half of your body weight (lbs.) in ounces of water each day. For example, a 200lb person should be drinking between 66-100 ounces of water per day. Add a little lemon juice or sliced cucumber for taste if needed!

4 - Eat 5-10 Servings of Fruits and Veggies each Day - Your risk of every chronic disease, including heart disease, cancer, diabetes, osteoporosis and even Alzheimer's is greatly reduced by simply eating more fruits and vegetables.

Veggies and fruits contain plant enzymes, phytochemicals and antioxidant vitamins, which boost immune function, inhibit cholesterol plaque formation, protect bone density and maintain memory. A serving is a medium piece of fruit, 1 cup of raw, leafy vegetables, ½ cup of other vegetables cooked or chopped raw, or 2 tablespoons of dried fruit.

5 - Replace Those Hidden “Bad” Fats and Oils - To avoid trans fats, make sure you read the label on anything you eat especially commercially baked and processed items. If it says "hydrogenated" or "partially hydrogenated"...even if it claims to be “trans fat-free...Avoid It! Refined vegetable oils can also be problematic, including canola oil, vegetable oil, corn oil, soybean oil, cottonseed oil and margarine. Any fried food ordered from a restaurant is likely fried in a trans-fat.

For a healthier option, choose fats that are mostly polyunsaturated or monounsaturated.

Monounsaturated fat good sources include:

- Olive, canola, peanut, and sesame oils
- Avocados
- Olives
- Nuts and nut butter (almonds, macadamia, hazelnuts, pecans)

Polyunsaturated fat good sources include:

- Sunflower, sesame, pumpkin seeds
- Flaxseeds (grind them in a coffee bean grinder)
- Walnuts
- Fatty fish (salmon, mackerel, herring, trout, sardines)
- Organic soybean and safflower oil
- Organic Tofu or Soymilk

6 - Reduce Sugar Intake – The average American is consuming 90 grams of sugar each day, the equivalent of 21 teaspoons! The American Dietetic Association recommends that we restrict added sugars to just 25 grams or 6 teaspoons a day.

Added sugars are not only “empty” calories, they contribute to weight gain. Research also shows that diets high in added sugars increase the risk of developing type 2 diabetes, increase blood levels of triglycerides thus increasing the risk of heart disease, and is associated with cancer.

7 - Go to Bed Early - Often overlooked, sleep and stress levels can have a major effect on your health.

Studies show that chronic lack of sleep lowers immune system functions and increases one’s risk of high blood pressure and heart disease. Short sleep duration may be one of the strongest risk factors for weight gain. What can ensure a good night’s sleep? Sleep rituals! Sleep rituals are far more powerful than just going to bed early.

First, set up your environment for a good night's sleep. Your room should be as dark as possible and slightly cool. A white noise machine can help neutralize sound or provide calming sound choices. And a comfortable mattress and pillows are a must!

- Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day (give or take 20 minutes)
- Avoid heavy meals, caffeine and alcohol late in the evening as they can interrupt sleep in the middle of the night
- Keep all blue light electronics (TV, smartphones and tablets) out of the bedroom.
- Exercise regularly, but not right before bed as it tends to rev you up instead of calm you down
- If you do wake up in the middle of the night and can't get back to sleep after 10 minutes, get out of bed and sit quietly in another room and breathe or meditate (don't turn on electronics)

Below is a bedtime toolbox that can promote sleepiness and a better night's sleep:

- Hot bath/shower
- Reading
- Gentle stretches
- Journal writing
- Hot cup of herbal tea
- Meditation
- Quiet time

Using the ideas above, make small incremental until you find you are sleeping well.

8 – Move! - Exercise leads to so many benefits and is highly protective against pretty much any chronic, Western disease.

It is also incredibly beneficial for improved mood, overall well-being, and avoiding depression, which is a very common problem today. When it comes to exercise, what you do is not what's important. What IS important is finding something that you enjoy doing and seems more like play than work.

9 – Socialize - Socializing can provide numerous benefits to your physical and mental health. Connecting with friends may also boost your brain health and lower your risk of dementia. People with a greater social circle tend to live longer vs. those who are more isolated. Watch a funny movie, get tickets to a comedy club, play a board game, join a walking club, and you will enjoy better physical and mental health.

Your challenge this month is to incorporate the above practices into your life and record the results.