



A to-do list for better health

By **DIANE COWEN**

Sometimes the simplest lifestyle changes can result in the biggest health payoffs. Easy measures such as wearing sunscreen can ward off cancer, or eating a healthier diet can lead to weight loss and reduce risk factors for many diseases. Making changes to your fitness routine can bring bigger results, and paying attention to cholesterol and heart health can bring a higher quality of life. We asked five Houston health care professionals for things anyone can do to improve his own health and fitness. We've compiled their answers into a to-do list for better health.

STOP SMOKING: If you are a smoker, the single best thing you can do for your health is to quit smoking. More than 100,000 people in the United States die each year from tobacco-related cancer. Tobacco use is a significant contributor to heart disease as well: Smoking even a single cigarette can initiate the biological events that can increase the risk of blood clot formation in vessels that feed the heart and can thereby cause a heart attack.

There are many ways to quit smoking, but counseling and individualized medication are important components of success. Determination and self-will also are crucial. The health payoff for quitting is huge: One year after your last cigarette, your risk of cardiovascular disease will be the same as the lifelong nonsmoker.

Tobacco cessation research studies often include free counseling and medication. Information on M.D. Anderson's studies can be found at www.mdanderson.org/preventionstudy. For other free help, contact the M. D. Anderson Cancer Center, 877-MDA-6789; American Cancer Society, 800-QUIT-NOW; National Cancer Institute, 877-44U-QUIT.

PROTECT YOUR SKIN. Prevent the most common type of cancer by covering up, using sunscreen with a sun protection factor of at least 30, avoiding sun exposure from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and staying away from tanning beds

DITCH THE FAT: Eliminating as much fatty and greasy foods — particularly trans fats and/or saturated fats — as possible from your diet. These are the bad fats that not only contribute to overweight and obesity, but also contribute to high cholesterol — a risk factor for heart disease and other chronic diseases.

FILL UP ON FIBER: Eat three to five servings of vegetables and fruits each day. (Yes, legumes and whole grains are other good sources of fiber.) They're loaded with fiber, which will help you feel fuller, longer. Not only will a diet that incorporates more fruits and vegetables fill you up and help you lose weight, but also the fiber, vitamins and antioxidants in them will help in many ways. It's recommended that women eat 25 grams of fiber a day and men eat 35 grams of fiber.

STAY ACTIVE: adults should be moderately active (brisk walking, dancing, yoga, slow swimming) for 30 minutes or more at least five days a week. As fitness improves, try for at least 60 minutes of moderate activity or 30 minutes of vigorous activity (running, tennis, aerobics, lap swimming) daily. Achieving a heart rate of 100-150 beats per minute should be your goal. Exercise reduces the risk of many cancers, reduces cholesterol, improves heart health and may even help you sleep better.

SHRINK YOUR WAISTLINE: Obesity is fast approaching tobacco as the top underlying preventable cause of death, raising a person's risk for many cancers, heart disease, diabetes and other chronic diseases. Keep your body mass index at a healthy level (search "BMI" at www.cdc.gov to find yours) and keep your waist measurement at 31.5 inches or less if you're a woman or 37 inches or less if you're a man.

EAT THREE MEALS A DAY: Never skip breakfast or lunch. Eating early in the day causes the body to burn calories more efficiently. Avoid late or large dinners. If you need to snack, make it veggies, nuts or fruits. And when you do eat meals, stop when you feel full. At the end of every meal you should feel like you could have eaten one or two more spoonfuls — but don't!

LIMIT ALCOHOL INTAKE: Alcoholic drinks have been associated with increased risk of cancer of the mouth, pharynx, larynx, esophagus, colon, breast and liver. No more than one serving per day for women and two per day for men is recommended. Serving sizes are 5 ounces of beer or 1.5 ounces of hard liquor. And if you're going to indulge, consider red wine: It's believed to help increase HDL "good" cholesterol.

EAT SEAFOOD: Eat baked or broiled fish such as wild salmon, mahi-mahi, catfish, flounder or tilapia. They're top sources of omega-3 fatty acids, that help you reduce your bad cholesterol and increase your good cholesterol. They're also believed to help with immune function and brain repair. Don't like fish? Try fish oil supplements — make sure you pop enough to get three grams of DHA and EPA per day.

SHOP DIFFERENTLY: Shop the perimeter of the grocery store and avoid the aisles. The perimeter of most grocery stores is filled with fruits, vegetables, dairy, lean meats and other healthy fare. The aisles are filled with canned, frozen and processed foods that are loaded with fat and extra calories. If 90 percent of what is in your shopping cart is from around the perimeter of the store, you are eating a clean, healthy diet. When you do shop the aisles, make sure it's for brown rice, whole wheat bread and flavorful spices.

KNOW YOUR NUMBERS: Check your risk factors for heart disease: blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar (glucose) levels. Record the numbers. If they're too high, talk to your doctor and take action.

SIMPLER IS BETTER: Read food labels to find foods with the fewest number of ingredients — three to four instead of six to eight. The top 5 ingredients listed make up the food, the rest are preservatives and additives.

SKIP THE SUGAR: It should be a red flag if a large amount of sugars and fats are added to the foods you buy. Women need only 200 calories of added sugar per day and men 300 calories.

TRY INTERVAL TRAINING: Pick a cardio exercise you like and vary its difficulty between really hard and really easy. Do 5 to 20 sets of this "fast/slow" combination starting with two minutes hard and three minutes easy.

AGILITY MOVEMENTS: Incorporate side to side movements instead of always going forward and back. The body is smart and lazy, and if we don't move it in different directions/patterns, it forgets how to and we develop stiffness.

EXERCISE IN A GROUP: Being a part of a fitness team or community helps you stay accountable and consistent as well as increases your intensity. All it takes is working out with friends — or making new friends at your gym.