

NIH News in Health

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Making Your Resolutions Stick How to Create Healthy Habits

New Year's resolutions—they're easy to make but easier to break. Why is it so hard to make the healthy changes that we know can help us feel better and live longer? And why is it so hard to make them last? NIH-funded scientists are learning more about how we can make healthy changes and, even more important, how we can sustain them.

"Change is always possible," says Dr. Linda Nebeling, an expert in behavioral change and nutrition at NIH. You're never too out-of-shape, too overweight or too old to make healthy changes.

Some of the most common New Year's resolutions are losing weight, getting more physical activity, eating more nutritious foods, quitting cigarettes, cutting back on alcohol, reducing stress and sleeping better. But no matter which healthy resolution you choose, research suggests that some common strategies can boost your chance of making the change a habit, a part of your daily lifestyle.

"One challenge with New Year's resolutions is that people often set unrealistic goals. They can quickly become frustrated and give up," says Nebeling. "Any resolution to change needs to include small goals that are definable and accompanied by a solid plan on



how you'll get to that goal."

For instance, a resolution to lose 30 pounds may seem overwhelming. Instead, try setting smaller goals of losing 5 pounds a month for 6 months. Think baby steps rather than giant leaps.

Next, develop an action plan. You might decide to walk a half hour each day to burn calories. You might stop buying vending machine snacks. Or you might limit and keep track of your daily calories. "These are specific behaviors that could help you meet your larger goal of losing 30 pounds," says Dr. Deborah Tate, an obesity and behavioral researcher at the University of North Carolina.

To make a long-lasting change in your life, prepare yourself for the challenges you might face. "Think about why you want to make the change. Is it important to you, or is it mostly influenced by others—like your doctor, your spouse or a friend?"

says Tate. "Research suggests that if it's something you really want for yourself, if it's meaningful to you, you're more likely to stick to it."

Think of exactly how the change will enhance your life. For instance, when you stop smoking, your risk plummets for cancer, heart disease, stroke and early death. Reducing stress might cut your risk for heart disease and help you fight off germs. Even small improvements in your physical activity, weight or nutrition may help reduce your risk for disease and lengthen your life. In one study, overweight or obese

people who lost just 7% of their body weight slashed their risk for diabetes by nearly 60%. Keeping facts like this in mind can help you maintain your focus over the long haul.

Setting up a supportive environment is another step toward success. "Think about the physical support you'll need, like the right equipment for exercise, appropriate clothing and the right kinds of foods to have at home," says Dr. Christine Hunter, a behavioral researcher and clinical psychologist at NIH. Remove items that might trip up your efforts. If

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you're quitting smoking, throw away your ashtrays and lighters. To improve your nutrition, put unhealthy but tempting foods on a hard-to-reach shelf, or get rid of them.

Social support is also key. Research shows that people's health behaviors—like smoking or weight gain—tend to mirror those of their friends, family and spouses. "You can



Wise Choices Making Healthy Changes

- **Set realistic goals.** Write down the steps that will help you achieve them.
- **Plan for obstacles.** Figure out how to overcome them. Don't give up just because you've slipped.
- **Track your progress.** A journal or diary is one of the best tools for helping you stay focused and recover from slip-ups.
- **Get help.** Ask friends and family for support. Consider enrolling in a class or program.
- **Reward yourself.** Give yourself a healthy treat when you've achieved a small goal or milestone.
- **Add variety.** Keep things interesting by adding new activities or expanding your goals to make them more challenging.

enlist friends and family to help you eat better, to go on walks with you, to remind you to stay on track," says Tate. "Find things that are fun to do together, and you'll be more likely to stick with it."

"It helps when you're connected to a group, where lifestyle change like weight loss is a joint goal," says NIH's Dr. Sanford Garfield, who heads a large study called the Diabetes Prevention Program. Participants who lost weight through dietary changes and physical activity reduced their chances of developing diabetes. Group counseling that emphasized effective diet, exercise and behavior modification were credited, in part, with participants' success. "There's a long history of group support leading to good results," Garfield says. "People learn from each other and reinforce each other in working toward their goals."

While making a change is one thing, sticking to it is something else. "Maintaining a change requires continued commitment until the change becomes a part of your life, like brushing your teeth or washing your hair," says Nebeling. "People who can maintain or engage in efforts to change their behavior, and do it for 6 to 8 weeks, are more likely to be able to support that effort longer term."

Some researchers are studying people who've made lasting healthy changes. The ongoing National Weight Control Registry compiles information on more than 5,000 adults who've dropped at least 30



Web Links

For more about making healthy lifestyle changes, see our links online:

<http://newsinhealth.nih.gov/issue/Dec2010/Feature1>

pounds and kept it off for a year or more. Although the way these people lost their weight varied, those who've maintained their weight loss tend to use similar strategies. Notably, many participants track their progress closely, often in a daily journal or diary. If the numbers rise, they have an early warning to adjust their behaviors.

"Self-monitoring or tracking seems to be critical for almost every sort of behavior change," says Hunter. That includes jotting down the foods you eat, keeping an exercise diary or making a record of your sleeping patterns.

Monitoring yourself might feel like a burden, but it's one of the best predictors of successful change. "Think about how you can make tracking more convenient, so it fits naturally into your life," Hunter says. For some people, that might be a pad of paper in a purse or pocket; for others, a mobile app or a computer program.

Make sure to have a plan to get back on track if you start to slip. "If you feel that your motivation is waning, think back and remind yourself why the change was important to you in the first place," says Tate. "Maybe you wanted to have more stamina, feel better, to be able to play with grandchildren. Recalling these personal reasons can encourage you to get back on track."

Of course, you don't need a new year to make healthy changes; you can make them any time of the year. But New Year's is an opportunity to think about the improvements you'd like to make and then take concrete steps to achieve them. Set realistic goals, develop an action plan and set it in motion. Make your new year a healthy one. ■

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Healthy Horizons

Lasting Gift Ideas

Computers, mobile phones and other gadgets often become outdated before you even figure out how to use them. This holiday season, why not try giving gifts that will last a lifetime? Help your friends and loved ones stay healthy, and they'll remember how much you care about them for years to come.

A variety of kitchen gadgets can help you prepare nutritious low-fat foods. Durable nonstick cookware helps cooks cut down on added fats and oils. Slow cookers, rice cookers and vegetable steamers can all aid in the preparation of healthy meals. You can also encourage loved ones to prepare tasty, healthy dishes by giv-



Wise Choices Healthy Cookbooks

- Get healthy cookbooks like the bilingual English/Spanish *Delicious Heart Healthy Latino Recipes* and *Heart Healthy Home Cooking African American Style* from NIH's National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute. Go to <http://emall.nhlbihin.net> and click on "Healthy Eating," or call 301-592-8573.
- *Down Home Healthy Cooking: Recipes and Tips for Healthy Cooking*, from NIH's National Cancer Institute, has low-fat, high-fiber versions of traditional favorite African-American recipes. Order it at <https://cissecure.nci.nih.gov/ncipubs/details.asp?pid=1385> or call 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237).
- *Tasty Recipes for People with Diabetes and Their Families*, from NIH's National Diabetes Education Program, has recipes with Latin American flair in English and Spanish. Call toll-free at 1-888-693-6337 or go to <http://ndep.nih.gov/publications/PublicationDetail.aspx?PubId=131>.

ing a healthy cookbook. NIH has several no- and low-cost options with nutritious recipes reviewed by NIH experts (see *Wise Choices*).

Some people get a surprising amount of their empty calories by going out to lunch or getting take-out food throughout the work week. Encourage them to bring healthy food from home with an insulated soup container, a lunchbox that doesn't look like it's left over from grade school or a reusable storage container with several small compartments for food.

For that friend or family member who's been talking about getting into shape, make up a coupon for a run, bike ride or workout together. A pass to a local, state or national park system can encourage walking, biking, hiking or even kayaking. Give a gift card for a visit with a fitness trainer or classes at a local health club, pool or community center. Or try to revive interest in a neglected sport with a tune-up at a local bike shop, protective eyewear for an indoor racket sport or a nice yoga or Pilates mat.

Exercise clothing can make a great holiday gift. So can accessories, like a pedometer or a watch with a heart rate monitor. A watch with a GPS (global positioning system) helps runners track distance and pace. Hikers might also appreciate a GPS device or other accessories, like a walking stick.

For kids, sports equipment can be a great gift. Even something as simple as a flying disc, boomerang, football or soccer ball can provide hours of healthy and fun family activity.

An exercise guide can encourage life-long healthy habits. Older people on your gift list might enjoy *Exercise & Physical Activity: Your Everyday Guide from the National Institute on Aging*. This 120-page book helps you get motivated and describes exercises that enhance endurance, strength, balance and flexibility. It also



suggests ways to modify activities so people with chronic conditions and disabilities can exercise safely. Request a free copy by calling 1-800-222-2225, or order online at www.nia.nih.gov/Exercise.

NIH also offers *A Primer for Women's Health: Learn About Your Body in 52 Weeks*. The Primer provides 52 health topics, one for each week of the year, with practical guidelines and strategies. You can order a free copy at <http://orwhpubrequest.od.nih.gov>.

A useful gift for your entire family is a family health portrait. Tracing the illnesses of your parents, grandparents and other blood relatives can help family doctors predict the disorders your family members may be at risk for. Then you can take action to reduce your risks and stay healthy. Try the free web-based tool at <https://familyhistory.hhs.gov>.

Another idea is a subscription to a healthy living magazine. Whether cooking, fitness or general health, a monthly dose of good advice can help people stay on track all year round. You can even give a subscription to *NIH News in Health*. Just send the name and address to nihnewsinhealth@od.nih.gov, and we'll send health information from the nation's top experts to your loved one's mailbox every month. ■

Health Capsules

For links to more information, see these stories online:
<http://newsinhealth.nih.gov/issue/Dec2010>

Where Kids Get Their Empty Calories

A new study found that nearly 40% of the energy consumed by kids and teens comes in the form of “empty” calories. Half of those empty calories come from the solid fats and added sugars in just 6 sources: soda, fruit drinks, dairy desserts, grain desserts, pizza and whole milk.

Today, nearly 1 in 3 children nationwide is overweight or obese. These children have an increased risk of developing diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, cancer and asthma. Both greater energy consumption (counted in calories)

and less physical activity are factors that contribute to the nation’s growing weight problems.

NIH scientists examined extensive data on children’s diets to learn more about where the extra calories are coming from. Overall, the top 5 sources of energy were grain desserts (cakes, cookies, donuts, pies, crisps and granola bars), pizza, soda, yeast breads and chicken dishes.

Experts recommend that kids limit their intake of empty calories to between 8% and 20% of their total calories. But the researchers found

that nearly 40% of the children’s total energy came from empty calories. Sugar-sweetened beverages, a major source of empty calories, contributed a whopping 10% of total energy.

“The epidemic of obesity among children and adolescents is now regarded as one of the most important public health problems in the United States,” says study co-author Dr. Jill Reedy of NIH’s National Cancer Institute. The findings suggest that sugar-sweetened drinks should be a major target of efforts to improve our children’s health. ■

Avoid SIDS During Cold Weather

During wintry months, you may be tempted to wrap your baby in extra blankets and warm clothes before sleep. But take care. Over-bundling may cause infants to overheat, increasing their risk for sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS)—the third leading cause of infant death.

Most SIDS deaths happen when babies are between 2 and 4 months old. The exact causes of SIDS are still unknown, but several things can raise the risk (see the Wise Choice box).

Multiple layers of heavy clothing, heavy blankets and warm room temperatures are known to increase the risk of overheating. One sign that a baby is in danger of overheating is if he or she feels hot to the touch.

Take steps to avoid SIDS. Visit this NIH web site to learn more: www.nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/Sudden_Infant_Death_Syndrome.cfm. ■



Wise Choices Reduce SIDS Risk

- Always place babies on their backs to sleep. This is the single most effective way to reduce the risk of SIDS.
- Dress the baby in light sleep clothing.
- Keep the room at a temperature that’s comfortable for an adult.
- Use a firm, safety-approved mattress.
- Never smoke around an infant.
- Keep toys, blankets and other loose objects out of the crib. If you need to use a blanket, keep it away from the baby’s face.



Featured Web Site Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

<http://go.usa.gov/C60>

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is one of the most common childhood disorders. It can also affect teens and adults. This site will help you learn more about the symptoms, diagnosis and treatment of ADHD.



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