Small Steps for Your Health

There are many things the "experts" tell us to do to get to and stay at a healthy weight and prevent type 2 diabetes: Choose healthy foods, make healthy meals, and be active 30 minutes a day. But where should you start? It's not easy to do all of this everyday living in today's fast-paced and fast-food world. And it can be even harder if you have a lot of changes you want to make.

It's easier to make lifestyle changes one step at a time—over months and years. Think of each small step as one piece of your effort to change your habits. Making changes one step at a time gives you the best chance to reach and stay at a healthy weight and prevent type 2 diabetes.

The good news is that making just a few small changes can have a big impact on your weight and health. Learn how to make these changes step-by-step.

Is Your Health at Risk?

People around you may tell you that you have a problem with your weight or health. But what do you think? If you don't believe you have a problem, you will probably not want to make changes. You may even resent or be angry at the people pushing you to change. If you do think you have a problem, you will probably succeed. Step number one: accept that you have habits you need to change.

Are You Ready, Willing, and Able to Change?

To succeed at making lifestyle changes you need to answer YES to the question, "Are you ready, willing, and able to change?" The experts say that for people to change, making the change must be important to them. In other words, you must have good reasons to change. For example, maybe you want to live long enough to see your grandchildren grow up. You must have more reasons to change than reasons not to change. The experts also say that you must be confident—believe that you can change.

To succeed, take what you want to do and break it down into small steps. Then think about a few things you are ready, willing, and able to change. Leave other habits that you don't feel ready, willing, and able to change for another time.

What are You Ready, Willing, and Able to Change?

To answer this next question, think about your current eating and activity habits. What foods do you buy? How active are you? Try to keep honest food records for a few days to get a true picture of what you eat. Based on your current habits, start with a few changes that are easy to tackle. Pick some changes that you want to do the most, and that will make the biggest impact. Perhaps choose one change in your eating habits and another in activity. Remember; don't try to change everything at once.
For example, maybe you tend to eat a bowl of ice cream every night while you watch TV. Can you switch that ice cream to a healthier snack? Maybe fruit or a small bowl of cereal? Or just a smaller portion of ice cream. And can you take 15 minute break from the TV and go for a walk?

For each goal, think about four things:

1. How long will you try to reach this goal? Keep it short.
2. Is it easy to do in your regular daily life? Keep it realistic.
3. Is it limited in scope? Be specific.
4. How often will you do this?

Keep your goals realistic. Don't try to do too much too quickly. Let's look at three examples of realistic goals.

1. Eating: For the next month (how long), four days each week (how often) I will eat two pieces of fruit a day — one at breakfast and one as an afternoon snack. (realistic and specific).
2. Eating: The next five times (how long) I go to a fast food restaurant (how often), I will order a small French fries and a single hamburger, rather than a large French fries and double hamburger (realistic and specific).
3. Physically active: For the next month (how long), four days each week (how often) I will take a 15 minute walk after lunch (realistic and specific).

Notice that the eating goals are not "I will eat more fruit" or "I will eat healthier." The activity goal is not "I'll walk more." These goals aren't specific like the examples above.

Set 1 to 3 goals at a time. Write them down. Put them in a place where you will see them often — on the refrigerator, your bathroom or bedroom mirror, or in your purse or wallet.

Did You Succeed?

The last step is to see how you did at making the change. Once the time you set is over, look at the goals you set. Ask yourself these questions: Did you succeed? Did you set your sights too high? Did something happen in your life to keep you from being successful? If you were successful, give yourself a BIG pat on the back. (Or maybe a trip to the movies!)

Wait, you are not done! Making a change for two weeks or a month does not mean that it will stick for life. It's so easy to slip back to your old ways. Practice the new habits faithfully. It will take months before they become your way of life. If you weren't successful, try again. Revise your goals or choose easier ones. Make sure they contain the four parts of setting a goal that's within reach. Make sure you want to make changes in this area and that you believe you can.