

Exercise as important as drugs for cancer prevention

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The importance of exercise to reduce the risk of heart disease has long been known.

Now, exercise is considered as important to cancer prevention as chemoprevention drugs and the latest screening tools, according to Dr. Leslie Bernstein, professor of preventative medicine at the Keck School of Medicine, University of Southern California in Los Angeles.

Epidemiological studies strongly suggest that just a few hours each week of moderate to vigorous exercise can reduce a woman's exposure to ovarian hormones that cause breast cancer, said Bernstein.

Bernstein – speaking at the National Institute of Health's "Advances in Cancer Prevention Lecture" in August 2002 – said lifestyle can offer important opportunities in the prevention of breast cancer.

"By promoting physical activity, we not only impact breast cancer, but also colon cancer and possibly endometrial cancer. We can look towards lifestyle, in particular physical activity and the reduction of obesity, as important targets for cancer prevention," Bernstein said.

Despite the growing evidence, the number of people overweight and obese continues to increase. The Center for Disease Control reports only 26 percent of adults in the United States engage in vigorous leisure-time physical activity three or more times per week.

A National Health Institute survey found 40 percent of U.S. adults never engage in any exercises, sports or physically active hobbies in their leisure time.

And, according to the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, an estimated 64 percent of U.S. adults aged 20 and over are overweight or obese. Between 1980 and 2000, obesity of adults in the country has doubled from 15 percent to 31 percent.

Why don't more people heed the advice to exercise more and establish a regular exercise routine? The reason given most often for not starting or staying with an exercise regime is lack of motivation followed by not having enough time to exercise.

If you've been one of those lacking the motivation

to begin a regular exercise program, here are some recommendations.

- Be specific when starting an exercise program. Set a goal to do a particular exercise for a set number of minutes on a weekly regime.
- Having a variety of exercises (aerobic, strength-training, stretching) in your program will increase your chances of you staying with the routine. Everyone usually gets bored doing the same exercises over and over.
- Make fitness a mantra and not something to be avoided. Take the stairs, walk at lunch, bike to work, do your own yard work.
- Get involved with others in fitness routines. Having a friend will help motivate you when your motivation is low. Most fitness centers and malls have walking groups.
- Set goals and reward yourself for achieving your fitness objectives.
- Be ready to overcome temporary setbacks like sore muscles, bad weather and unexpected schedule conflicts. Keep your eye on the long-term picture and build on your successes.

If you're in need of additional motivation and want a medal for your efforts, check out www.presidentschallenge.com. You can sign up to accumulate points for your exercise program and earn a "Presidential Achievement Award."

Another way to recognize your exercise efforts is to participate in local runs and walks. Most have a range of distances and categories for age group. Even if you don't win a trophy, you'll get a t-shirt and meet a lot of other people involved in fitness/exercise.

If lack of time is a problem for starting an exercise program, consider combining family time with activities such as walking, hiking, biking, gardening, skating, swimming or canoeing. You'll increase your family time while improving your fitness.

Additional ways to add exercise to a full daily schedule is to use part of your lunch time for a brisk walk, or buy an exercise bike or treadmill and use it while you watch your nightly television.

Exercise can't guarantee you won't develop cancer, but the growing evidence indicates it can improve your odds while promoting your overall health and well-being.