

HealthSMART Lifestyles: How to Self-Manage to Improve Health Outcomes

Some health experts think we are our own worst enemies, with many of us adopting unhealthy lifestyles that adversely affect our health. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lists the top ten causes of death in the U.S. as heart disease, cancer, stroke, accidents, chronic lower respiratory disease, diabetes, Alzheimer’s disease, Influenza/pneumonia, kidney disease and septicemia.¹ Many of these disorders are affected by our lifestyle choices, beginning early in life and extending throughout the various stages of our lives. While heredity may play a factor in some of these diseases and consumers need to explore their family histories to determine health risks, they also need to adopt a “take charge” approach to personal health, making choices that promote healthy lifestyles and disease prevention.

One of the biggest studies of lifestyle factors, the Nurses’ Health Study (U.S.), conducted by Harvard School of Public Health and Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston, found that women who adhered to healthy lifestyle choices, that is, good nutrition, daily exercise, no smoking, low alcohol intake and good weight control, had lower mortality rates in middle age than those who did not control these lifestyle factors. A total of 28 percent of deaths during follow-up could be attributed to smoking and 55 percent to the combination of smoking, being overweight, lack of physical activity, and a low quality diet. Additionally, considering alcohol intake did not substantially change this estimate. The researchers, who followed more than 77,000 women over a more than 20-year period, suggest efforts to eradicate cigarette smoking and to stimulate regular physical activity and a healthy diet should be intensified.²

HealthSMART Tip: Consumer lifestyle choices make a positive difference in personal health. Consumers can self-manage their health with practices that embrace the following lifestyle choices:

Good nutrition – Design an eating plan with healthy meals and snacks that combine fruits, vegetables, proteins, healthy grains and reduces intake of salt and refined sugars.

Daily exercise – Develop a daily routine that that keeps you moving, which can help keep your heart healthier, control blood glucose levels, and maintain a healthy weight.

Smoking cessation: In the U.S., an estimated 24.8 million men (23.1 percent) and 21.1 million women (18.3 percent) are smokers. These people are at higher risk of heart attack and stroke. If you are a smoker, you can stop smoking via various smoking cessation options, including counseling and quitline support, nicotine patch or drug treatments, and in some cases, hypnosis.

Weight control: Healthy nutrition and daily exercise can help keep your weight under control. Set realistic goals and avoid starvation or fad diets.

¹ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. FastStats: Death and Mortality. <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/deaths.htm>. Accessed May 9, 2010.

² Van Dam, R. et al. Combined impact of lifestyle factors on mortality: prospective cohort study in US women. *BMJ* 2008;337:a1440.