Healthy aging: What's physical activity got to do with it?

Commercial products often target our fears of aging with claims to "look younger," "cover-up wrinkles," "hide unsightly bulges" and "improve your memory." While some of these products might be tempting and seemingly quick fixes, the truth is, healthy aging starts with a simple health habit: regular participation in physical activity. It's never too late to make the right changes that help lead to healthy aging, so in honor of World Health Day, why not take a minute to consider how to get the activity you need to be fit and ready for the challenges ahead.

How much exercise do you need? Recommendations include the following:

- **30 minutes of moderate activity 5 days each week.**
  Examples include: walking, dancing, doubles tennis, shooting baskets, water aerobics, golfing (no cart!), canoeing, softball.
  OR
- **20 minutes of vigorous activity 3 days each week.**
  Examples include: jogging, jumping jacks, singles tennis, soccer, basketball, aerobics, water jogging.
  OR
- **A combination of the above.**

With a little consideration, you can see there are many ways to achieve this. For example: A 30 minute walk every day before or after work, 20 minutes at a good pace on a treadmill, stationary bike or elliptical trainer on Monday/Wednesday/Friday, or 1 hour of Zumba or other aerobic class 3-4 days/week.

It's also important to strive for strengthening exercises that target the major muscle groups of the body at least 2 days a week. This can be achieved through yoga, weight lifting, circuit training, or a Body Pump class to name a few.

Here's a few tips to get you started or keep you going with this vital health habit:

- **Make a list:** what are 3 (physical) activities you enjoy doing, and have access to on a regular basis?
- **Identify:** at least one person you can talk to today about encouraging each other to stay active on a regular basis
- **Think about it:** People who exercise for weight loss alone are less likely to stick to an exercise program. Take time to consider what you get from exercise and how it helps you be healthier (examples: reduce stress, feel and be strong, stay fit as I get older, be healthy to care for my family)
- **Automate it:** New research shows that the key to making a behavior change that "sticks" is to automate it. Like the habits of brushing teeth before bedtime or having money moved directly from your paycheck to a retirement account each month, regular physical activity is most easily achieved by "automating" it so you don't have to think about fitting it in, it's just part of the regular routine.
Instead of buying all those products that claim a quick fix against aging, consider taking on the one health habit shown to challenge the problems associated with aging. Regular physical activity has been shown to help manage weight gain, reduce memory loss, and reduce the risk for stroke, heart disease, and diabetes. More practically, exercise makes it easier to play with or take care of grandchildren, makes it easier to walk across a long parking lot when crowding forces you to park far away, and makes it easier to go up those multiple flights of stairs when the elevator isn't available. Today is a great day to start, so GET MOVING!

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