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Battle With the Bulge: Small, Simple Steps Can Make Big Strides on Road to Fitness

By Kimball A. Johnson, M.D.

There's no doubt about it: America is overweight and out of shape. Thanks in large part to our over-scheduled lives and the modern conveniences we enjoy, as a nation we're exercising less and eating more. The result is an epidemic rise in obesity rates – according to the CDC, more than half of us are now either overweight or obese¹ – across all races, genders, and age groups.

Our obesity epidemic has been well-publicized; most of us are aware that the excess body weight that results from poor eating habits and a sedentary lifestyle can lead to numerous health risks, including heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, diabetes, osteoarthritis and other joint problems, and certain types of cancer. And while you've also likely heard about some of the more drastic solutions – extreme dieting, surgery², metabolism-enhancing and appetite-suppressing drugs – for most of us, there are small, simple steps that can be taken to combat and prevent obesity and its related complications.

Be realistic. No one – and no body – is perfect; unrealistic goals (like fitting into the jeans you wore in junior high or looking like your favorite celebrity) only set you up for disappointment. Focus on overall health and lifestyle improvements, and remember that improved cardiovascular fitness is a more important indicator of good health than weight or waist size.

Get moving. Increase your activity any way you can; even just a little more movement each day will have an impact. You don't have to run out and join a gym; walking is one of the best forms of exercise around, and it requires no special equipment, training, or expense!

Keep moving. If you're already active but find that you're getting bored with your fitness routine, or if you've hit a weight-loss "plateau," experiment with different activities to keep you motivated. Sign up for a Yoga or Pilates class; take a weekend hike; try adding some simple, safe exercises with weights, starting with light weights to avoid injury. For women – who typically tend to focus less on upper body strength than do men – in particular, the incorporation of weight-bearing exercise into the fitness routine may accelerate weight loss.

Stick with it. Exercise is a great natural anti-depressant; if you persevere, you may find that not only is your health improved, but so are your mood and outlook.

Watch what you eat, but avoid the "D" word. There are a myriad of competing diet programs out there, and new evidence supporting or refuting each of them emerges daily. Rather than following the latest dieting trend, start by simply moderating your portion size first, and then moderate your intake of fat, sugar, starchy foods, alcohol, and caffeine. Make an effort to keep healthy food on hand and keep tempting but unhealthy treats out of your

home and workplace. Also remember that alcohol will put on the pounds and/or keep them from coming off – so decide if you'd rather drink your calories or eat them.

Pay attention to portion size. You can pack on the pounds with even the healthiest of food choices if you're eating double the portions you need. If you dine out frequently, remember that restaurant portion sizes are typically excessive. Consider asking for a doggy bag at the beginning of the meal and pack up half of the serving before you begin eating; you won't eat it if it's not on your plate. Another eating-out alternative is to split an entrée with a companion; of course, some servers may not appreciate this practice, which reduces your bill as well as your portion size, so be sure to leave a bigger tip!

Watch when you eat, too. We all have a "weak" time of day when it comes to eating; for many of us, that time comes late in the evening. Identify your prime snacking time and try to find alternative activities to provide the relaxation, comfort, and/or entertainment you may have been finding in food in those hours. Worthy of note is one current weight-loss theory that maintains that it's best, metabolically speaking, not to eat after 7:30 p.m., or within three hours of your bedtime. While the jury is still out on this, observational evidence does suggest that you'll feel better, and likely consume fewer total calories for the day, if you don't go to bed with a full (or over-full) stomach.

Most importantly, keep in mind that even small changes in your life and lifestyle can make a tremendous positive impact on your personal health and, in turn, on the obesity epidemic. So, toss out your excuses and take that first step – just a baby step – to a healthier you today!