

Vowed to be fitter and healthier?

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By CATHERINE HOLAHAN
STAFF WRITER

Around December, a little voice inside of each of us starts making promises.

"Next year, I'll stop getting lunch from the vending machine," mine whispers, as I press D12 to release a bag of M&M's.

"Next year, I'll renew my gym membership," it assures me, as I zone out in front of the television after work.

"Next year, I'll get healthy."

Getting fitter, leaner and healthier is among the most popular New Year's resolutions for Americans, according to a 2005 survey by the Opinion Research Corp. in Princeton.

Well, 2006 has arrived. It's time for that little voice to stop promising and start motivating.

To help it along, we interviewed dietitians, nutritionists, health coaches, personal trainers and cookbook authors from New Jersey and throughout the United States. Here are 22 of their top tips.

1. DRINK MORE WATER. This suggestion is a favorite among health experts. After all, maintaining good hydration helps skin glow, reduces appetite, and limits cravings for unhealthy liquids, such as sugary soft drinks.

However, they disagree on what kind of water is best. Jana Klauer, a medical nutrition specialist and author of the upcoming book "How the Rich Get Thin," recommended calcium-rich mineral water.

But Susan Burke, chief nutritionist for ediets.com, said plain tap water is fine.

"Most municipal waters are as clean and healthy as bottled water," she said. "Many studies show bottled water is not always reliable, and water from the spout may actually be cleaner."

2. EAT MORE OFTEN. Eating small meals throughout the day prevents ravenous bingeing at dinner, said Jyl Steinback, a personal fitness trainer and cookbook author.

Linda Vero, chief dietitian at Westwood's Pascack Valley Hospital, agrees.

"Avoid going longer than four hours between meals," Vero said. "Having three well-balanced meals and healthy between-meal snacks is important ... to reduce sugary cravings."

3. KEEP YOUR PLATE COLORFUL. Adding fruits and vegetables to the standard gray-yellow American diet of carbohydrates and proteins helps ensure we get our daily doses of vitamins and minerals, said Veronica Atkins, cookbook author and chairwoman of the Dr. Robert C. Atkins Foundation.

4. WALK AROUND. 30 minutes of walking three to five times a week reduces stress and cardiovascular problems, said Mary Lyon, administrative director of Cardiac Services at Pascack Valley Hospital.

"It improves your heart muscle, it lowers your risk of having a heart attack or stroke, and it improves your circulation," Lyon said. "It also helps with your stress management."

5. ADD SPICE TO LIFE. Several spices improve the immune system, said Kathleen Hall, author of "A Life in Balance: Nourishing the Four Roots of True Happiness."

"Try adding a little cinnamon to your breakfast foods," Hall recommended. "This tasty addition actually boosts

your immune system."

Hall also suggested sprinkling hot pepper on dishes, which increases endorphins that bolster the immune system.

6. STRETCH YOUR LIMITS. Tight muscles can cause back pain and cramping and increase the chance of physical injury. Jim Ryno, a fitness trainer and owner of three fitness clubs including LIFT in Ramsey, recommends stretching daily.

"So many people neglect stretching because they don't see enough results from it," he said. "But in order to avoid injury and have your body function properly, you have to stretch."

7. EAT YOUR BROCCOLI. Mom's advice wasn't an old wives' tale, said Kalli Campbell, a nutrition manager at Cancer Treatment Centers of America in Tulsa, Okla. Cruciferous vegetables such as broccoli, cabbage and cauliflower have "indoles," which are nutrients that guide hormone metabolism and may also protect against cancer.

8. TAKE THE STAIRS. It's an easy way to add five minutes of exercise to your day, Vero said.

9. GOT YOGURT? Fat-free yogurt is a healthy snack, said Klauer. Campbell added that the active bacteria cultures in yogurt help the immune system. Yogurt also has calcium, which can reduce the risk of colon cancer and help control blood pressure, Campbell said.

10. SIT DOWN TO EAT. People are more conscious of what they eat when they are concentrating on eating it, Vero said.

In North Jersey, "we are very good at eating on the run. And when you are grabbing something on your way out, you don't feel satisfied," she said.

"Enjoy meals at a table, whether you are dining with friends and family, or solo," recommended Janice Taylor, a weight-loss coach and artist who writes about her successful struggle to lose weight on her Web page, "Our Lady of Weight Loss."

"Be present and savor the flavor," she said.

11. TURN OFF THE TV, Vero adds. When families sit down to dinner, they should be aware of how much they are eating without the boob tube demanding their attention, she said. Plus, without the television, families just might talk more, leading to more aware parents and healthier kids.

12. SAVE TIME FOR R&R. A little rest and relaxation goes a long way to improving mental and physical health, Ryno said. "Take private time for yourself," he said. "Take in a book, take a bath ... and I recommend, if you can, take a trip in the upcoming year that is health- and activity-related ... like to a spa."

13. AVOID FRIED FOODS. We all know fries, potato chips and cheese sticks are bad for us. But they are so easy to microwave! Well, cutting a slice of cheese and placing it on a wheat cracker is easy too, Vero said, and more healthful.

14. BROIL, STEAM, GRILL AND BAKE. Vero recommends preparing meats and fish with these techniques to reduce bad fats. People who dine out frequently should order items that are roasted or baked or grilled.

15. SLEEP MORE. The average person needs 7.2 hours of sleep to feel rested, said ediet's Burke. A good night's sleep increases productivity and cuts down on cravings for high-calorie snacks.

"Studies show that people who lack a regular sleep pattern or sleep quantity tend to eat more calories and high-fat, high-calorie-type foods," Vero said.

16. SKIP THE STARBUCKS. Coffee is addictive and makes the body jittery, and all those add-ins can be high in calories.

"Coffee is shaking Americans' wallets," Burke said. "Especially if you're ordering one of those 'chino' drinks, full of whipped cream and calories."

Hall recommended drinking green tea instead, which has caffeine but also antioxidants that protect against

certain cancers and tooth decay.

17. EAT YOUR WHEATIES. Whole grains are healthier than processed breads, said author Steinback. Replace the white bread on your lunch sandwich with the whole wheat or multi-grain variety.

18. HAVE AN APPLE A DAY. It may not keep the doctor away, but snacking on fresh fruit cuts down on cravings for vending-machine fare. And the less junk food you consume, the more likely you will have a good checkup, Steinback said.

If you have kids, Veronica Atkins recommends packing fresh fruit in their lunch boxes, rather than giving them money.

"Lunch money is too often used for junk food," she said.

19. CHEW, CHEW, CHEW. Chewing your food allows you to savor it, adding to satisfaction and cutting down on unintentional overeating. Chewing sugar-free gum can also help cut down on food cravings, Steinback said.

20. GIVE YOUR RECIPES A MAKEOVER. Try to find ways to make your favorite dishes healthier, recommended Linda Reese, a Weight Watchers meeting leader in Colorado and one of the many counselors quoted on Weight Watchers' new toll-free tip hot line.

21. STAND UP STRAIGHT. Fitness trainer Marilyn Larkin said, "Incorporating good posture into your fitness routine ... keeps joints and bones in correct alignment to ensure muscles are being used properly, decreases abnormal wear and tear on the surface of joints, prevents muscle and back pain [and] decreases fatigue because muscles are used properly." Plus, you look taller.

22. HAVE REALISTIC RESOLUTIONS. Make sure resolutions are attainable, Steinback said. Consider that 75 percent of body shape and size is genetic, she added: "You can really only change 25 percent."

Setting yourself up to fail can lead to increased stress, anxiety and even depression.

"Keep your perspective realistic," she said. "Thin is out, healthy living is in."

E-mail: holahan@northjersey.com

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