

10 Ways to Achieve a Healthy, Happy New Year

For Baby Boomers and their parents, the International Council on Active Aging has a plan

When we cry out "Happy new year!" we mean it; just about everyone wants to be happy in the new year. As we age, happiness stems less from material possessions and more from health, good relationships and fulfilling activities that keep us engaged in life. In fact, losing their health is the greatest worry of older adults, according to polls conducted by AARP and USAToday/ABC News.

You can take action to have both health and happiness in the new year. Get active. Not just physically active, but intellectually and socially active, too. You'll feel better, improve your health and attitude, and keep your brain working. That'll make you happy!

Every year International Council on Active Aging (ICAA) searches current research studies to find those most pertinent to an active-aging lifestyle (ICAA Research Review, <http://www.icaa.cc/newsletter.htm>). And we access the knowledge of a skilled group of experts in successful aging. Use this year's key messages to form next year's Get Active plan.

Plan to be active in 2007

ICAA has taken care of the action items; you need to plan the dates and locations. Get out the paper calendar or Blackberry, and schedule 15 minutes each day for the next 4 days to plan how you'll get started. Get your best friend to join in and keep you motivated. Start a Get Active club at your community center or place of worship. Plan on trying these activities over the next months; don't do everything at once. But work on all of the 10 ways to get active; each will bring you a year's worth of rewards.

1. Invest in a good pair of shoes. When your feet are happy, so are you. Foot pain is not a normal part of the aging process, points out the American Podiatric Medical Association. If you have pain in your feet, see a podiatrist (foot doctor), a visit that is likely covered in part by health insurance. Comfortable, well-fitting shoes are a must and worth the investment.

2. Play games. Games keep your brain working and cognitive skills healthy. Plus, it's a fun way to spend time with others. Trivia, math, memory, acting—there is a game for most personalities. You can be competitive or challenge yourself. Traditional board games (chess or Monopoly), crossword puzzles, anagrams, Sudoku puzzles and optical illusions can be played at different skill levels. There are many free games on the Internet, along with sources for those you can purchase. Enter the words "mind games," "puzzles" or "brain teasers" into your computer's search engine for hundreds of options.

3. Take a walk or roll. Walk around the block, walk to the store, walk a mile. Walking improves lower body strength, maintains mobility and helps prevent cognitive decline. Research studies have shown that two short walks a day can be as good as a single, longer stroll. Need a personal coach? Get a dog and walk it at least twice a day. Besides getting you out of the house, dogs are loving companions. Once you are walking well, increase your speed and distance.

Need help from a cane or walker or wheelchair? Take your assistive devices on a walk, and ask a friend or companion to join you. While you're out, look around, enjoy the architecture and landscaping and smell the flowers.

4. Stand on one leg. Actually, you will work up to standing on one leg by performing balance exercises. Good balance helps you with everyday activities, like reaching into a cupboard, and avoiding falls. When you have confidence in your balance skills, you also have confidence to walk outside, wash the car and visit a museum. Many exercise classes designed for older adults incorporate balance training, and tai chi is gaining a lot of attention for improving balance (as well as reducing fear of falling).

5. Visit an eye doctor. Failing eyesight is not a given as we age. A study reported in JAMA (295:2158, 2006) found that almost all the vision impairment in a large group of people over 60 years old could be improved with corrective lenses. Age-related macular degeneration is the most common vision loss as we get older, but studies have shown that people who smoke cigarettes and are obese are the most likely to get it. (Of course, there are many health benefits once you quit smoking and lose weight). An optometrist can figure you the best plan for your eyes.

6. Increase your physical activity. Physical activity and exercise do a lot of good things, not only for physical health, but also for maintaining cognitive skills and reducing the risk of dementia. You have to use it or you lose it. Since most people already know this, the question becomes, "how do I get started?"

First, remember that physical activity means housework and yard work (put some effort into it), walking to the store and playing ball with the neighbor kids. Second, make opportunities for activity, like a weekly walking date with a neighbor or friend. Join a wellness center, community center or a health club that has equipment and programs geared to your interests. Find a likely place by reading ICAA's "How to select an age-friendly fitness facility" and "How to choose an age-friendly personal trainer"

7. Seek out your friends, family and neighbors. Social connections are good for your emotional well-being. Studies have shown that friendships and the social support network developed at seniors centers, places of worship and neighborhoods not only prevent loneliness, but also provide a ready source of intellectual, physical and volunteer activities. Besides, people with a strong social network lowered their risk of Alzheimer's disease, according to data from the Rush Memory and Aging Project.

8. Eat a lot of fruits and vegetables. Switch to a Mediterranean diet (emphasizing fruits, vegetables, legumes, cereals, some fish and alcohol, and limiting dairy and meat) and you can lower your body weight and cholesterol levels. By the way, the Mediterranean diet has been associated with lowering the risk of Alzheimer's disease. People who eat a balanced plant-based diet don't worry much about counting calories, and gain many vitamins and minerals. You can find fruits and vegetables fresh, frozen, canned, dried and juiced.

9. Laugh a lot. Laughing increases circulation, immune system defenses and mental functioning while decreasing stress hormones. Watch comedies or read a humor book and the comics. Not finding these funny? Then try an exercise recommended by the World Laughter Tour (www.worldlaughtertour.com/). Take a deep breath, then exhale with a big sigh ("Haaaaaa...."). Put your hands at your cheekbones and "hee hee hee hee hee," move your hands over your heart and "ha ha ha ha ha," then place hands on your belly for a "ho ho ho ho ho." Now you're warmed up and ready for spontaneous laughter. Try this with your younger kids or grandkids and let the jokes begin.

10. Get enough sleep. When life gets hectic, adequate sleep seems to fall by the wayside. Don't let it go. Get your seven to eight hours of sleep each night. Insomnia affects almost half of adults 60 years and older, states the National Institute on Aging, making it the most common sleep complaint. If you have trouble falling or staying asleep, make a few changes in your habits, such as skipping daytime naps, adopting a nighttime routine and starting a regular exercise program. Try listening to music, too. By the way, changing your habits is more successful at improving sleep than taking medications (JAMA, 295:2851, 2006).

Did you notice that virtually every activity improves your mental health and reduces the risk of dementia? By increasing your levels of physical activity, social interactions and intellectual engagement, your new year plan of activities that will increase your health and happiness.

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