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FIVE HABITS YOU SHOULD CONSIDER BREAKING

It's a New Year – and if you can only stick to your resolutions – you'll soon see a new you. But while our pledges to increase activity and reduce calories may result in big changes in a relatively short amount of time, there are many other changes we can make that, while having less visible results, have a huge impact on our health over the long haul. What bad habits should you consider breaking in 2016? Here are FIVE you can't afford not to consider:

1. Eating red and processed meats. Just a few months ago, the International Agency for Research on Cancer reviewed over 800 scientific studies on the consumption of red meat and processed meats and the subsequent development of cancer. The conclusion was that there is "limited" evidence that consumption of red meats, such as beef, pork, and lamb, contribute to the development of cancers such as colorectal, prostate, and pancreatic cancer, and that there is "sufficient" evidence that processed meats, such as bacon, hot dogs, and corned beef substantially increase the risk of these cancers.

While this research is new, there has been other research dating as far back as the 1950s that has suggested an association between eating meat (any kind) and health problems such as obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, and some cancers, said Joel Kahn, MD, cardiologist and author of "The Whole Heart Solution." According to Dr. Kahn, not only do meats contain saturated and trans fats, but they also contain toxins, many of them formed when high temperature cooking methods (such as grilling and pan frying) are used. "Processed meats are the worst, then red meat. The best situation is a plant-based diet," he claimed.

Can't do without your bacon? Dr. Kahn suggested that you look at it like you would a cigar – "something you might indulge in once a month on a porch overlooking a lake – knowing full well that it may cause cancer." The American Institute for Cancer Research suggests avoiding processed meats altogether, and limiting red meat to no more than 18 ounces per week.

2. Drinking soda. Whether diet or regular, sodas wreak havoc on the body, said **Franci Cohen, CPT, CDN, certified nutritionist, exercise physiologist, and CEO of Fuel Fitness**, located in Brooklyn, New York. According to Cohen, two of the ingredients that cause health problems are phosphoric acid, which may weaken bones and cause tooth decay, and high fructose corn syrup in regular soda, which contributes to obesity and high lipid levels, both having the potential to cause heart disease. Diet soda can also lead to weight gain, as artificial sweeteners may trigger sweet cravings.

Diet sodas have cancer-causing potential, too. Aspartame, an artificial sweetener, breaks down into several toxic substances, including formaldehyde, and diet sodas may contain potassium benzoate, a preservative that in the presence of ascorbic or citric acid (often added to soda), breaks down to a chemical called benzene, which is associated with leukemia and other blood cancers.

Cohen's advice? "There are so many healthier and tastier options these days, that I don't ever see a need to drink soda," she said.

Of course, the healthiest choice is filtered water. But if you crave the occasional fizzy drink, try a sparkling water such as La Croix, or a no calorie soda called Zevia, which is sweetened with the nutritional supplement stevia.

3. Ignoring your (or your partner's) snoring. Almost everyone snores from time to time, said Michelle Sherwood, DO, owner along with naturopathic doctor and husband Mark of Functional Medical Institute in Tulsa, Oklahoma. According to Dr. Sherwood, you're more likely to snore if you're obese, if your belly is too full at night, or if you're lying on your back. Colds and allergies, drinking too much alcohol, and smoking can also contribute to snoring.

It's when snoring is bad enough that it disrupts sleep that it begins to cause health problems, she added. Chronic snoring that causes daytime drowsiness may indicate sleep apnea, a serious sleep disorder that causes drops in blood oxygen levels and stress to the nervous system. This condition occurs when the muscles in the back of the throat relax too much, disrupting sleep. "Sleep apnea can lead to obesity, hypertension, and cardiac problems," said Dr. Sherwood.

Mild cases of snoring may be relieved by lifestyle changes, such as losing weight, reducing alcohol consumption, using a room humidifier, and sleeping on your side. More serious snoring problems, especially if accompanied by intermittent gasping or choking in your sleep or daytime drowsiness, should be investigated by your doc, recommended Dr. Sherwood. A sleep study, done in a sleep lab, and the use of a CPAP machine (continuous positive air pressure, a mild air pressure treatment to keep the airways open) can help you – and your partner – to catch more ZZZs, not to mention improve your overall health.

4. Using plastic to store, cook, consume, or reheat food. It's almost impossible to avoid plastic in the food industry; plastic equipment is used to process food, and food is packaged in plastic lined cans and other containers. We use plastic in our homes in the form of dishware, cooking appliances like food processors, mixers and pans, and storage containers.

But certain plastics contain "endocrine-disrupting" chemicals that are harmful to the reproductive system, among them BPA (bisphenol-A) and phthalates. This would be fine if the plastic stayed in the container or appliance. Instead, tiny pieces of plastic leach into our food, where it's consumed, eventually causing problems with the reproductive system as well as possibly contributing to diabetes, heart disease, and liver toxicity.

Leaching is increased at high temperatures (think food microwaved in a plastic container or covered with plastic wrap, or hot liquids placed in a plastic bottle or storage container), and also when plastic comes into contact with fatty, salty, or acidic foods. And even though it's just a little bit of plastic, said Mark Sherwood, ND, "When it comes to toxins, even a little bit matters."

How to avoid plastics? The best option is to eat fresh foods and to avoid packaging of foods in plastic containers or plastic-lined cans, advised Dr. Sherwood. Use glass or stainless steel containers for food storage and for drinking, and especially for heating foods. And research the best options for plastic-free cookware.

5. Sitting for prolonged periods of time. Shortly after New Year's Eve last year, a study published in the Annals of Internal Medicine suggested that those who sit for prolonged periods of time – even those who exercise regularly – are at increased risk for heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and death. It seems that prolonged sitting, whether in front of TV or in front of your computer at work, or driving, slows down the biochemical processes needed to break down harmful fats and sugars in your body. That hour you spend a day at the gym? While any amount of exercise is good, it simply is not enough to counteract the damage spent by sitting, say the experts.

What to do – especially if you have a sedentary job? If you can't get your hands on a standing desk, at least stand more during the day said Katy Bowman, MS, biomechanist and author of Don't Just Sit There. "Walk for three minutes every half hour to keep the blood flowing smoothly," she advised.

Walking – or simply standing – can be incorporated into your workday by standing while you talk on the phone, walking to a co-worker’s office to talk face to face rather than using the telephone, and walking during your lunch break rather than sitting in the break room. At home, you can easily work physical activity into your schedule by walking the dog, standing or exercising while watching TV (even just during commercials), and playing with the kids.

The benefits of decreased sitting time will help your muscles and blood vessels, too, both of which are impacted by prolonged sitting, added Bowman. “On a muscular level, the muscles that have to shorten to accommodate the sitting position stay shortened,” she explained. And “on an arterial level, arteries in non-working, sitting muscles stay narrow, restricting blood flow.”

How To Establish New Habits

When you’re trying to break bad habits, you’re really trying to establish better habits to replace them. Here are three tips to get you started:

»Start small. You’re not going to be able to develop lots of new and positive health habits right out of the gate. Focus on one at a time, and start slowly. If you’re trying to reduce red meat consumption for example, try limiting your usual weekly servings by one serving each week.

»Focus on what you’re going to do, not what you won’t be doing. If you’re trying to increase physical activity after work, think how fun it will be to take a walk with a friend rather than how awful it is to miss your favorite TV show while sitting on the couch.

»Establish the right environment. You won’t get extra brownie points for choosing the herbal tea over the diet Coke chilling in the fridge. Eliminate as many of the things you want to avoid in your environment, and substitute healthier alternatives. MS&F