

11 Tips for Optimal Health *By Rachel Abrams, M.D.*

1. **Love.** No, really. And not just on Valentine's Day. The research shows that the health protective effects of regular affection, relationship, and community are more impressive than whether or not you smoke. So get your hugs on; it's good for you. And if you don't have someone to snuggle with, it turns out that affection with your pet helps, too. I love you Spot.
2. **Move.** Humans did not evolve to sit in armchairs. Our entire physiology has evolved around the vigorous physical work it has taken to survive for the last 10,000 years. So when we take "vigor-man or woman" and make them sit at a desk all day and come home and sit some more—they get slow, depressed, irritable and inflamed—on the *inside*. This stagnation creates the basis for heart disease, strokes, diabetes, depression and cancer. So move. In whatever way you enjoy. Walk. Skip. Dance. Make your body happy.
3. **Sleep.** Americans are more deprived of sleep than exercise—which is saying something! The *average* amount needed is 8 hours—with 50% of folks needing *more* than 8 hours. If you get less sleep than you need on a regular basis, you are more likely to be depressed, irritable, overweight (yes, less sleep causes weight gain) and have poor concentration and performance. And coffee does not help. Cut the caffeine and get your zzzz's! You'll feel better!
4. **Enjoy.** It makes a big difference to your physiology if you spend your time in anger, blame and resentment (more inflammatory reactions, high blood pressure, poorer immune response) or in gratitude, joy and play (calmer nervous system, balanced immune response, less risk of heart disease). Life is full of difficult situations, but the way that you approach those situations makes all the difference. And because we spend so many hours at work, do your best to choose work that you enjoy, most of the time. And don't forget to play!
5. **Eat food.** If you can't pronounce it, don't eat it. If it doesn't look like any recognizable fruit, vegetable, grain or meat, don't eat it. If sugar is the first or second ingredient, don't eat it. Try to stick to fruits, veggies, whole grains (skip the white stuff), plant proteins (beans, nuts and legumes) and some high quality (e.g. organic, no added hormones) animal proteins. Most of us know this. You might want to get some support in eating this way if it's hard for you—it is *well* worth the investment as food really is medicine—all foods send chemical signals to your body that contribute to your health or your decline. And if you just can't eat well, at least take a multivitamin and some essential fatty acids (fish or flax oil). It's a good start.
6. **Pray or Meditate.** When life gets difficult, all you have are your inner resources (patience, love, trust, a sense of perspective, creative problem-solving) to get you through it intact. Taking some deep breaths, and even a small amount of time, to express gratitude, ask for help, find peace, and set your intention for your day, is invaluable in maintaining your equilibrium on the inside and the outside. Meditation or prayer significantly reduces all causes of cardiovascular disease, eases depression and anxiety and helps us stick to our good health decisions.

7. **See your Doc once by 45.** Even if you are healthy. Sometimes we have health risks we are unaware of. I've had tri-athletes with severely elevated cholesterol. It's good to know these things early because there are *many* approaches we can use to enhance your vitality and life span.
8. **Detoxify.** We live in a world rife with chemicals that didn't exist 50 years ago and we have no idea what the majority of those chemicals do to humans. But for good reason, many of us in the science world are concerned about emerging research showing the effects of toxins on brain function, cancer, fertility and obesity. Limit your risks by ditching that Teflon pan (ever wonder where that flaking Teflon goes when it disappears from the pan?), eating organic as much as possible (especially milk, meat and eggs), not heating food in plastic, finding non-toxic alternative for pesticides, and using green cleaning and home maintenance products. Exercise, sweating, drinking plenty of water and eating fiber are good ways to detoxify naturally.
9. **Watch out for addiction.** Okay, we've all got them. Coffee, cigarettes, marijuana, alcohol, chocolate, sugar, soda, T.V, Facebook, even exercise—you can treat just about any activity addictively. If you are using an activity to avoid experiencing how you actually feel, it's an addictive use of that activity. Some addictions are more dangerous than others, but if we use our addiction to numb our negative emotions, we stop ourselves from taking action to *change* the way we feel (e.g. changing jobs or relationships, getting therapy, setting boundaries with others). We live in a very addictive society, where there is a pill for every ailment. Take an honest look at your life and give yourself the gift of change where it's needed. It's better than a double latte.
10. **Limit screens.** Oh, for goodness sake, didn't we think that computers were better than television? Not. If you spend all of your time in front of a computer, television, or smart phone, what are you missing? Items one through four on this list. Human interaction (texts and e-mail are not the same thing), movement, sleep, good food—don't get swallowed by your screens. Get outside, get some sunlight, hang with your friends, surf. Live inside your body (that's the part of you attached to the hands on the keyboard or remote).
11. **Don't obsess.** Change takes time. Be patient with yourself. And perfectionism, even with your health, is not good for you. Life is short. Don't forget to dance and occasionally eat chocolate cake.

Rachel Carlton Abrams, MD
Santa Cruz Integrative Medicine & Chi Center
www.santacruzintegrativemedicine.net
831-465-9088