

Making Better Choices for Better Health

By **Dennis Malik, M.S., D.C., Palmer Chiropractic Clinics**

As winter arrives in the Quad Cities, bringing cold weather, holiday treats and less time for getting regular exercise, it's a good time to review our health habits and those of our children. The group that has drawn my attention lately is six- to 12-year-old children, but all of us could benefit from making better nutritional choices and getting more exercise.

We've all seen the media coverage over the past several years about the epidemic of childhood obesity in the United States. Snacking is one of the reasons for this epidemic. I vividly remember reading an article in the Quad-City Times about how snacking has influenced the rising rate of obesity in this country. The study referred to in the article surveyed the eating habits of 31,000 children ranging in age from two to 18 years old, comparing the eating habits of this age group in 1977 to their habits in 2006. Researchers discovered the following:

- > The children and youth took in about 586 calories a day from snack foods in 2006, compared to 418 calories a day in 1977.
- > Their total calorie intake for the entire day in 2006 was 2,111, up from 2,000 in 1977.
- > The 2006 group received a greater percentage of their snack food calories from sweetened beverages, juice, salty foods, candy and cereal than kids did in 1977.
- > The group in 2006 had a smaller percentage of their snacks from milk and other dairy products than the group in 1977.

This may not come as a surprise, but your children and grandchildren should be reminded to make better choices when it comes to snacking. The author of the nutrition study, Barry Popkin, Ph.D., said that children “consume more French fries as snacks than healthy vegetables.” Again—no surprise—but we can certainly encourage children to eat more vegetables, fruit and dairy products as snacks.

On the exercise front, we may be inspired to go to a local gym for intense exercise to work off those wintertime comfort foods and goodies consumed during the holidays. Perhaps we could channel that enthusiasm for exercise by focusing on ways to incorporate exercise into our daily habits. Here are a couple of points to consider:

1. For those of us who lead a couch potato existence, an exodus to the local gym might not be the right choice for regular exercise. Consider gradually making lifestyle changes such as taking the stairs rather than the elevator, parking further away from the front door of the store or office, and getting up during the TV commercials to do something physical. Slowly incorporating these changes will be the beginning of a beautiful relationship with the bathroom scale, and a lifetime of improved fitness.

2. Making exercise fun for yourself is important, too. Try partnering with someone who shares your willingness to battle the bulge. A little competition is good for your physical soul. To change things up, try downloading audio books as well as listening to music while you sweat. There are many good books available from your local library.

Another consideration is the benefit of regular physical activity for our psychological health. Many sources indicate that exercise affects the level of serotonin, which serves to keep us from being depressed. Exercise also affects dopamine levels and serves to motivate us. This alone can ease depression.

Stress is a problem that affects the body and can be relieved with regular exercise. In addition to regular chiropractic care, regular exercise will lower levels of hormones and chemicals that build up from periods of intense stress. You may see other changes such as being in a better mood, less insomnia and improved self-image, along with a better connection with nature if you exercise outdoors.

Naturally, you should start slowly as you begin your new exercise routine. I wouldn't suggest an intense workout or running five miles to start out. What's needed to begin with is just a slight adjustment to your lifestyle like the suggestions above. You'll feel better and perhaps inspire your whole family to enjoy more time being active together.