



CONSUMED



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YOUR PICTURE OF HEALTH: SIX STEPS TO SUSTAINABLE LIFESTYLE CHANGE

By Michelle May, M.D.

Have you seen a photo mosaic? From a distance, it looks like an ordinary portrait, but up close, you realize that it's actually comprised of thousands of small detailed photographs.

Your health is like that: a mosaic of the thousands of small decisions you make about your eating, physical activity, and well-being. No single decision determines the outcome, but altogether, they create your picture of health. Here are six steps you can take:

1. Find the middle ground.

Think of eating and physical activity as a pendulum with two extremes: All and Nothing. What happens if you draw a pendulum in one direction and let it go? Of course, it swings to the opposite extreme. Too often, this is how people approach their choices: all or nothing.

No individual snack, meal, or drink—or day on the couch—will ruin your picture of health, but a *pattern* of overconsumption or disregard for your health will affect the end result. Since perfection is not possible (or even necessary), find the balance in-between. When your eating and exercise plan take into account your schedule, preferences, goals, health concerns, and other issues, you can establish a healthy lifestyle that's flexible enough to withstand the realities of your daily life.

2. Check your fuel gauge.

You wouldn't pull into a gas station to fill up without first checking your fuel gauge. But how often do you eat just because it's there? To recognize the difference between *wanting* to eat and *needing* to eat, pause and ask yourself, "Am I hungry?"

It's a deceptively simple question. You'll probably be surprised to discover how often you feel like eating because you're bored, tired, stressed, or want a reward. Eating food your body doesn't need leads to weight gain—and doesn't meet your emotional needs very well either.

By asking "Am I hungry?", you may also realize that sometimes you're *too* hungry. Skipping meals, especially breakfast, sets you up for overeating and poor choices. Be prepared by keeping nutrient rich foods on hand for snacks. Examples of great choices include a handful of nuts, fresh or dried fruit, yogurt, whole grain crackers with string cheese, or a pouch of ready-to-eat tuna.

3. Use nutrition as a tool, not a weapon.

Rigid rules set you up for failure because when your favorites are off-limits, you'll still want them. This can trigger cravings, overeating, and guilt so you may find yourself in the trap I call the "eat-repent-repeat" cycle. Instead, enjoy the foods you really love without guilt. This freedom actually decreases cravings and overeating, and increases enjoyment and moderation. When guilt is no longer a factor, common sense prevails.

Remember that all foods can fit into a healthy diet. Just keep in mind the common-sense principles of balance, variety, and moderation: balance eating for enjoyment with eating for nourishment; choose a variety of foods to feel healthy and satisfied; and practice moderation in all things.

If your eating is out of balance, ask yourself, "Is there a healthier choice I could make without feeling deprived?" You may discover that you're just as satisfied with frozen yogurt in place of ice cream, whole grain crackers instead of chips, or a small instead of a large. That is balance, variety, and moderation.

4. End eating on autopilot.

Eating on the run is problematic because multitasking is a myth. Your brain can only focus on one thing at a time so everything else goes on autopilot—especially eating. That's why you can get to the end of a meal and feel stuffed, but strangely unsatisfied.

On the other hand, mindful eating is eating with *intention* and *attention*. Eat with the intention of feeling better when you're done than you did when you started. Eat with

attention by taking a break to refuel and recharge. Minimize distractions, pay attention to your hunger and fullness cues, and appreciate the aromas, appearance, and flavors. Awareness of your fuel needs and conscious enjoyment of the entire experience leads to more pleasure with less food.

As you experience the benefits of eating more mindfully, ask yourself what other areas of your life would improve with less multitasking and more mindful intention and attention.

5. Exercise for health, not punishment.

Don't make the mistake of exercising to earn the right to eat or pay penance, as in, "I was so bad yesterday so I have to go to the gym." This negative approach leads to dread and avoidance. Instead, exercise for energy, productivity, health, function, and longevity.

Find activities that you really enjoy and that work well in your schedule. Even busy people quickly discover that it's a great return on their investment. If you're too busy to exercise, you're just too busy.

If you aren't in shape yet, start small and you'll quickly adapt. Picture that pendulum: small steps practiced consistently are more effective than one large, temporary overhaul.

6. Take responsibility for your well-being.

Self-care is not an indulgence, it is a necessity. But don't expect someone else to say, "You know what you really need? Time for yourself!" You have to believe you deserve it and be willing to invest your precious resources to make sure you get it.

Even the little things—restful sleep, connecting with family and friends, time for favorite hobbies, quiet relaxation—all contribute to your effectiveness, health, and vitality. When you keep the big picture in mind, tile by tile, choice by choice, you'll create a masterpiece of good health!

Michelle May, M.D. is a recovered yoyo dieter and the award-winning author of *Eat What You Love, Love What You Eat*. Download a copy of 101 Things to Do Besides Eat at www.AmiHungry.com.