With the winter coming, I find it more difficult to get out to exercise. Do you have any ideas?

We have great empathy with you—exercise requires motivation even in the finest weather. As winter approaches, outdoor activities become more challenging, especially in the northern climes. Whatever our environment, it is important to know the benefits of exercise. Some flippantly quip that life consists of so many heartbeats, why waste some of them on exercise? This could not be further from the truth.

There is increasing evidence that regular exercise has wonderful health benefits, including aiding with depression. It improves virtually every aspect of our well-being. Exercise has been proven as a preventive measure in:

- high blood pressure (hypertension)
- coronary artery disease
- stroke
- type 2 diabetes
- osteoporosis
- controlling blood fats (importantly, in elevating HDL)
- delaying the onset of Alzheimer’s
- diminishing the recurrence rate of some cancers

Exercise is not only preventive, but it also beneficially influences the outcomes of many of the above diseases.

As we review the literature, we are more and more impressed that exercise is extremely important and very much neglected. Recently, researchers have shown that the three leading causes of death in the United States in 2000 were smoking (435,000), poor diet and physical inactivity (400,000), and alcohol consumption (85,000); this total of almost 40 percent of all the deaths often had associated cardiovascular diseases from these "deathstyles" (as opposed to lifestyles). These figures emphasize the great need to improve diet, promote physical activity, and increase smoking cessation.

So now that we are intellectually convinced (we hope!), how do we go about making exercise the energizer of our existence? Some smart exercise tips include consulting with your physician before you begin—this is most important; using other reliable sources (e.g., [www.acsm.org](http://www.acsm.org), [www.acefitness.com](http://www.acefitness.com)); and avoiding fitness fads—if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is!

The best way to a healthier and happier life is good old-fashioned work. Use this easy acronym: **FIT**.

**Frequency:** How often you work out—strive for five or more times per week.

**Intensity:** If you don't do enough, you won't see the results you need. Avoid strain and pain; start off slowly and build up.
Time: Build up to at least 20 minutes per day over time, and slowly increase the duration of each workout. If you are a beginner, start with five minutes a day, and build up by one minute daily until you reach 20 minutes per day or more.

Variety helps to maintain an exercise program. Boredom is one of the most common reasons people give up on their exercise routines. Walk when circumstances permit; use the stairs instead of the elevator; use a stationary bicycle or a treadmill—variety will take you a long way!

Set realistic goals in your initiative:

- Cut out the candies and refined foods.
- Aim to lose one pound a week if weight loss is an objective.
- Gradually increase your workout time

Write down these goals, and place them where you will see them daily. Get help from meaningful resources. Apart from the Web sites mentioned above, Kenneth Cooper's book on aerobic exercises (first published more than 20 years ago) is still available. Many of these exercises can be done indoors when the weather is bad. Aerobic exercise is good for improving cardiac fitness. Weight-bearing exercise (the use of weights and other forms of resistance) is particularly important for muscle strength and combating osteoporosis.

Remember the children. They need to be active and informed by precept and example of the benefits of exercise. Childhood and teenage obesity has become a major problem in developed countries.

Exercise needs to be a way of life. It adds to the quality and enhancement of life. It also helps to lessen those winter blues and the regrets of excessive eating, especially when the summer wardrobe is donned!

With the festive season approaching, quite frankly, I'm dreading it! I have carefully lost 20 pounds over the past six months, and the prospect of blowing it over the holidays frightens me. Everyone is coming home for the holidays, and I don't want to be like the Grinch who stole Christmas. Any advice?

Don't I understand! It seems I have the same problem—six months to take it off, six days to put it on. Those fat cells not only can increase in size twenty-fold at the drop of a hat (or a chocolate bar!), but it seems like they are waiting for the slightest excuse to increase in number.

The trouble with the holiday season is that we have equated gluttony with festivity, and surfeit with generosity.

It begins with our equating of eating with sociability, and of abundance with unselfishness. But we are in danger of becoming slightly obscene, especially if we consider the homeless, the poor, and the children in need.

You are in a fantastic position to make a change, seeing that you will be the hostess this season.

I suggest you start by planning now—well ahead. Look at the foods you will serve and the way you will prepare them. There's a huge difference between roasted potatoes or baked or boiled. Also, take a look at some of the dainties you leave around littering the side tables and coffee tables, piano, etc.

The first step is to choose wisely. Pick out lots of low-calorie fruits and veggies. Look at the colors, especially the reds and greens. Bring on the broccoli, the green beans, the cabbage, the collards, even the Brussels sprouts (there are folks who just love them!). The carrots, tomatoes, sweet peppers, and sweet potatoes add color and nutrients, and need not be very energy-dense. Plan salads, and for the main meal, go really "ritzy" and serve a low-calorie soup. By stretching out the meal with soup and a salad, besides making everyone feel this is a special meal, you allow time for the sense of satiety to kick in, which usually takes 20 minutes. Then you can offer smaller portions. That way, folks eat well but don’t have to mimic the turkey and be stuffed!

Vegetarian fare is always better—and of lower calorie content—but I'd be dreaming if I didn't realize that many people who are vegetarian the rest of the year want turkey over the holidays. Even here, plan ahead. Why buy the biggest? If you can get by with a 12-pounder, why get a 20-pounder? We only encourage gluttony by overloading the table. Again, remember the key to whatever you offer: smaller portions.

Instead of creamy, sweet desserts, choose colorful fruits. Instead of ice cream, use sherbet. A nice touch is to serve a diminutive blob of the latter as a course all by itself, with the murmured words, "This is to cleanse
the palate."

Instead of littering the house with chocolates and nuts and other treats that tempt people to eat between meals, buy some of those sugarless hard candies—they give the appearance of abundance without the risks.

Then, instead of lolling about like medieval lords and ladies, why not plan an afternoon of going out as a family to help others? Your local social services will give you names of people in need who could benefit from a food basket. There may be shelters that would welcome your assistance over the holidays. If you know a family that’s finding times to be tough, why not invite them over. Instead of spending on all those boxes of chocolates, rich shortbreads, and high-calorie cookies, buy some gifts for others. Even if you are in a cold climate, a good, brisk family walk will help dissipate some of the excess energy (and calories).

So here’s to your having a happy holiday season—without ballooning the waistline!

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