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Shaping a get-in-shape plan for 2011

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Once the holidays have come and gone, it's time to start making up for the 3,000-calorie-per-day diets that often begin around Thanksgiving. And while past New Year's resolutions may have started in January and been forgotten by February, with the right advice and a small amount of will power, 2011 could shape up to be your healthiest year yet.

You Are What You Eat

After the holidays, people's bodies are "traumatized [and] stressed out," says Christine Avanti, a nutritionist and chef. Because of that, she says, when clients come into her office in January looking for a plan to lose weight and get healthy, "I really do get strict."

Avanti, author of "Skinny Chicks Don't Eat Salads" (Rodale 2010), doesn't advocate cutting out every bit of gastronomical joy—that's the good news. What she does suggest is replacing packaged foods—anything made with heaps of chemicals and preservatives—with real food like fruits, veggies, whole-grain carbohydrates and lean meats.

"Packaged food ... is just kind of a minefield" of unhealthy ingredients, like trans fat and processed sugar, she says. "You are going to be much better eating sugar in the form of fruit rather than a sugar cookie."

Avanti adds that while labels may claim food is low-fat, fat-free or trans fat-free, you still have to read ingredients to be sure that you know what you're getting.

For instance, "Anything that's hydrogenated is a trans fat. ... Hydrogenated oil is not good for our bodies. If it has it on [the label], don't buy it."

And eating healthy isn't only about what you leave off your plate. To ensure that your diet is well-rounded, try to incorporate fruits and vegetables in a wide variety of colors. For instance, dark purples, reds and blues—like blackberries, blueberries, pomegranates and beets—are rich in antioxidants, and foods with yellow and orange coloring protect cell membranes from damage, which is particularly important during weight loss.

To avoid feeling hungry, depressed or anxious while changing your diet—all signs of hypoglycemia—space your meals out by no more than three to four hours, and include carbohydrates and protein at each.

"Combining carbs with protein at every meal stabilizes blood sugar," Avanti says, adding that the combination also provides a satisfying diet that actually encourages pounds to drop off. "A strict diet will cause people to drop water and muscle weight, and the last thing they lose is fat."

Move More

No New Year's resolution would be complete without a promise to hit the gym, but many people find that time constraints get in the way.

That needn't be the case, personal trainer Mike Donovanik says. Fitness routines that included long slogs on weight machines are a thing of the past, he says, and have been replaced by workouts that are more invigorating and efficient.

"As trainers and as an industry, [we] are moving away from single muscle groups and single joint movements because they aren't really as effective," he says.

Donovanik, who teaches a circuit training class at Crunch in West Hollywood, suggests that for both weight loss and weight maintenance, gym-goers should incorporate compound movements, which engage the whole body at once to save time, pushing your body and getting your heart rate up.

"Let's say you're doing squat to biceps curl to press," he says. "Your heart has to shoot blood into your legs, then bring it back and shoot it in to your upper body."

Compound movements are part of strength training – and, in addition to strength training, anyone looking to shape up needs to do regular cardio. For weight loss, aim for 30 to 45 minutes of cardio and 45 minutes of strength training five to six times per week.

To maintain a weight at which you feel comfortable — or to get back to your pre-holiday self — shoot for 20 to 30 minutes of cardio five to six days a week and 45 minutes of strength training three to four times per week. When combining workouts, strength training should be done before cardio.

On days that you only do cardio, challenge yourself to do interval training — work out at a comfortable pace for about a minute, then push yourself as hard as you can for 30 seconds.

"Say you run at 8 miles per hour," Donavanik says. "Sprint for 30 seconds at 8 miles per hour, then bring that down to a jog — 4, 5 or 6 miles per hour." During sprints, he says, to get the most benefit, "you need to go really hard."

Relax and Focus

To keep your workout routine interesting, you need to incorporate different elements. Yoga can be the perfect addition — and the benefits are both mental and physical.

"It's meditation in motion," says Julie Kleinman, director of programming at YogaWorks in Los Angeles. "You get your heart rate up, tone muscles, work on your organs — it's mind/body."

When searching for a class, Kleinman says, start with a beginner level — no matter how in shape you may be.

"Even if you are athletic in other arenas, yoga is specific and sometimes complicated," she says. "Start with level one or beginner."

And stay away from classes labeled "flow" when starting out. Because those classes go straight from one pose into another, it can be overwhelming for someone learning the basics.

While there seem to be unlimited kinds of yoga classes, they can be easily categorized. Hatha yoga is an umbrella term that refers to more physical practices rather than those that rely heavily on chanting, Kleinman says. Under the hatha umbrella, students can think about taking ayengar or ashtanga, among others.

"Anyone who really is more intellectually oriented, someone who really likes to learn things correctly, will be well-served in an ayengar class," she says. "Someone who wants to learn more quickly" might benefit from an ashtanga class, which is derived from vinyasa flow.

When starting a yoga practice, Kleinman suggests taking at least two classes per week. She adds that shorter classes — which generally clock in at about an hour — are just as effective as longer, 90-minute classes. "It's much more about frequency than length of practice," she says.

Stick With It

So how do you get these New Year's resolutions to last for the rest of the year?

When it comes to food, Avanti suggests kick-starting a new eating regimen by ridding the house of any foods that will tempt you to indulge. Also, take time to prepare some healthy meals and snacks, so that when you reach for something, it's right there.

"Have the stuff on hand," she says. "I hard cook a dozen eggs every week" so they're ready to pull from the fridge. Avanti also suggests buying single-serving cheeses, like Laughing Cow or Babybel for an easy source of protein.

When it comes to exercising, both Donavanik and Kleinman recommend setting a routine, not going full bore right off the bat and being realistic.

"Take your time to get into it," Donavanik says. "There's no quick fix."

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