

How much exercise is really enough?

Moving Grays Harbor

By Maryann Welch

The Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) recently published an article highlighting research that found women who exercised an hour each day were better able to prevent weight gain over time than those who exercised less. Since preventing weight gain is a goal of mine I paid particular attention to this study. My initial reaction was “YIKES!”. I know many women who see this level of exercise as impossible to fit in to busy schedules. In fact, my daughter-in-law inquired whether those 60 minutes included folding laundry. Information such as this can be discouraging to many who are already struggling to meet the federal public health guidelines calling for 30 minutes a day of exercise.

OK, relax and take a deep breath. What does this all mean? How much should we be exercising if we want to prevent weight creep and maintain overall health? I decided to discuss this new recommendation with my good friend Marnie Schumacher, who has maintained a healthy weight over many years. Does she exercise 60 minutes every day? Marnie’s response is that when it comes to activity or exercise her goal is not focused on time guidelines, but rather “I just keep moving and stay physically busy as much as possible.”

Marnie claims that her level of exercise varies by days or weeks. As a Nurse Practitioner at the County Public

Health Department, she does regularly walk a challenging 60-minute hill route on most days during her lunch hour. The routine nature of this walk admittedly relieves her of the need to try to “carve out” time to exercise on work days. In addition to walking frequently Marnie participates in a varied array of activities – yoga, biking, kayaking, golfing and gardening.

So, is all this activity the key to Marnie’s ability to maintain her weight? “It’s important”, Marnie shares, but the other equally crucial part of the equation is “I watch what I eat.” Although she doesn’t formally “diet”, Marnie has established eating guidelines that work for her – eat a high fiber breakfast, the same vegetable-filled lunch every day, no chips or snack foods in the house, no soda pop, avoid eating after dinner, enjoy an occasional indulgence, and cook from scratch (no boxed or frozen prepared foods). Again, these are not “dieting” rules, but just the application of common sense nutrition on a regular basis.

Marnie states that preventing weight gain is only one fitness goal of hers. Her commitment to activity also stems from her wish to remain mobile and flexible so that she can spend quality time with her young grandchildren.

A long recovery from injuries caused by a nasty ski accident almost 20 years ago helped spur Marnie’s desire to be fit. “I have always been an active person but in retrospect, that accident, in spite of being horrific, was a blessing. I chose to refocus on my own health rather than wallow in misery. Yes, my activities were limited for a while, but by working within and pushing my limits I was able to burn calories and feel energized. I lost some extra weight I had been carrying and I gained

confidence in my ability to attain and maintain a healthy lifestyle.”

We all know there are barriers to being active, but Marnie truly believes that motivation is the key, stating: “it has to come from inside”. She cringes when she hears the “*I don’t have time*” excuse, sharing these tips for parents of young children: exercise while your kids are in school or attending practice for sports; get dropped off a mile or two from your destination and walk the rest of the way; walk your kids to school then take the long way home. “Basically, if you make healthy living a priority then you will find the time to live the life you want.”

The JAMA study that concluded the need for 60 minutes of exercise a day did not focus on food intake in the participants, who reported eating a “usual” diet. Based on “self study”, Marnie believes it is safe to say that meeting her goals can best be achieved by establishing good habits in both exercise/activity and eating.

Studies and reports will continue to come and go with seemingly contradicting information. In the end, all of this research highlights the same message – activity at any level means better health. The best advice I have read regarding exercise and activity is: “some is better than none, more is better than some and too much is difficult to get.”

So, no matter where you are now, envision where you want to be or what you want to do and take a step in that direction. You are the only one who has the power to change your life.

Maryann Welch is a life-long harborite, the retired director of Grays Harbor County’s Public Health and Social Services Department, and an avid exercise enthusiast.

If you have questions about becoming more active or have information about free or low-cost activity in the area, contact the health department at 532-8665 ext. 483, e-mail us at moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us or visit our web site at www.healthygh.org