

[Living healthier doesn't have to be complicated or time-consuming, experts say](#)

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WebMD Feature

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How much do you know about what makes up a healthy lifestyle? Here's a pop quiz.

1. How do you define working out?

- a. Going to the gym.
- b. Turning the jump-rope for the neighbor's kid.
- c. Playing Frisbee with your dog.

2. How do you define good nutrition?

- a. Eating a vegetable at every meal.
- b. Eating two vegetables at every meal.
- c. Drinking a fruit smoothie for breakfast.

3. Which of these is a healthy activity?

- a. Push-ups, sit-ups, or [running](#) the track.
- b. [Walking](#) the dog after dinner.
- c. Spending Saturday afternoon snoozing on the sofa.

Believe it or not, the correct answer to every question is A, B, *and* C -- even that Saturday afternoon snooze! According to the growing "Stealth Health" movement, sneaking healthy habits into our daily living is easier than we think.

"You can infuse your life with the power of prevention incrementally and fairly painlessly, and yes, doing *something*, no matter how small, is infinitely better for you than doing nothing," says David Katz, MD, MPH, director of Yale University's Prevention Research Center and of the Yale Preventive Medicine Center. Katz is also co-author of the book *Stealth Health: How to Sneak Age-Defying, Disease-Fighting Habits into Your Life without Really Trying*.

From your morning shower to the evening news, from your work commute to your household chores, Katz says, there are at least 2,400 ways to sneak healthy activities into daily living.

"If you let yourself make small changes, they will add up to meaningful changes in the quality of your diet, your physical activity pattern, your capacity to deal with [stress](#), and in your [sleep](#) quality -- and those four things comprise an enormously powerful health promotion that can change your life," says Katz.

And yes, he says, a nap on the couch can be a health-giving opportunity -- particularly if you aren't getting enough sleep at night.

Nutritionist and [diabetes](#) educator Fran Grossman, RD, CDE, agrees. "You don't have to belong to a gym or live on wheat grass just to be healthy," says Grossman, a [nutrition](#) counselor at the Mt. Sinai School of Medicine in New York. "There are dozens of small things you can do every day that make a difference, and you don't always have to do a lot to gain a lot."

Do a Little, Get a Lot

The notion that good health can come in small tidbits is not really new. Research showing that making small changes can add up to a big difference has been quietly accumulating for a while.

For example, a study published in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* in 2004 found that adding just 30 minutes of walking per day was enough to prevent weight gain and encourage moderate [weight loss](#) .

And if 30 minutes is still too big a bite? Another study, published in *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise*, found that three brisk 10-minute walks per day were as effective as a daily 30-minute walk in decreasing risk factors for [heart disease](#) .

"Just the act of going from sedentary to moderately active gives you the greatest reduction in your risks," says Helene Glassberg, MD, director of the Preventive Cardiology and Lipid Center at the Temple University School of Medicine in Philadelphia.

But it's not only in [fitness](#) where small changes can make a difference. The same principles apply at the kitchen table (and the office snack bar).

"Reducing fat intake, cutting down on sugar, eating a piece of fruit instead of a candy bar -- over time, these things can make a difference," says Grossman.

As long as the changes are moving you toward your goal -- be it weight loss, a reduction in [cholesterol](#) or blood pressure, or better blood sugar control -- you can get there by taking baby steps, she says.

Moreover, Grossman tells WebMD, making small changes can help give us the motivation to make bigger ones.

"A lot of bad eating habits are about not taking charge of your life, and that attitude is often

reflected in other areas," says Grossman. On the other hand, she says, when you make small changes at the kitchen table, the rewards may show up in other areas of your life.

"It's the act of taking control that makes the difference in motivating you," says Grossman. "An inner confidence and power begins to develop that can be seen in other areas of life."

Tripping Over Baby Steps

Of course, not everyone is certain that baby steps can walk you all the way to good health. Marc Siegel, MD, a clinical associate professor at the NYU School of Medicine, says that while doing something is certainly better than doing nothing, making such small changes is like using a Band-aid to stop a hemorrhage.

"It's a small, gimmicky idea to target people with very unhealthy lifestyles, and for some it may be useful," says Siegel, author of *False Alarm: the Truth about the Epidemic of Fear*. But he fears that for most people, it's sending the wrong message.

"In some ways it's a resignation, an admission that things can't be changed -- and that's certainly not the long-term answer," Siegel tells WebMD.

Katz concedes that the Stealth Health approach may not be right for everybody.

"There is a trade-off because if you try to make the pursuit of health easier for people, you run the risk of leading them to believe they don't need to do very much -- and that would be the wrong message," he says.

At the same time, Katz believes that for those who find making health changes a daunting task, Stealth Health techniques can make a difference.

"If you want the really big gains, there has to be some pain," says Katz. "But there is a lot to be said for the idea that you can make some gains with little or no pain, and that's infinitely better

than no gains."

Try the Stealth Health Approach

Tempted to give "Stealth Health" a try? Katz recommends picking any three of the following 12 changes and incorporating them into your life for four days. When you feel comfortable with those changes, pick three others. Once you've incorporate all dozen changes, you should start to feel a difference within a couple of weeks, he says.

To Improve Nutrition:

1. Buy whole foods -- whether canned, frozen, or fresh from the farm -- and use them in place of processed foods whenever possible.
2. Reject foods and drinks made with corn syrup, a calorie-dense, nutritionally empty sweetener that many believe is worse for the body than sugar, says Katz.
3. Start each dinner with a mixed green salad. Not only will it help reduce your appetite for more caloric foods, but it also will automatically add veggies to your meal.

To Improve Physical Fitness:

1. Do a squat every time you pick something up. Instead of bending over in the usual way, which stresses the lower back, bend your knees and squat. This forces you to use your leg muscles and will build strength.
2. Every time you stop at a traffic light (or the bus does), tighten your thighs and butt muscles and release as many times as you can. (Don't worry, no one will see it!) This will firm leg and buttock muscles, improve blood flow -- and keep you mildly amused!
3. Whenever you're standing on a line, lift one foot a half-inch off the ground. The extra stress on your opposite foot, ankle, calf and thigh, plus your buttocks, will help firm and tone muscles. Switch feet every few minutes.

To Improve Stress Control:

1. Give your partner a hug every day before work. Studies show this simple act can help you remain calm when chaos ensues during your day, Katz says.
2. Have a good cry. It can boost your immune system, reduce levels of stress hormones, eliminate [depression](#), and help you think more clearly.
3. Twice a day, breathe deeply for three to five minutes

To Improve Sleep:

1. Sprinkle just-washed sheets and pillowcases with lavender water. The scent has been shown in studies to promote relaxation, which can lead to better sleep.
2. Buy a new pillow. Katz says that studies show that pillows with an indent in the center can enhance sleep quality and reduce [neck pain](#) . Also, try a "cool" pillow -- one containing either all-natural fibers or a combination of sodium sulfate and ceramic fibers that help keep your head cool.
3. Eat a handful of walnuts before bed. You'll be giving yourself a boost of [fiber](#) and essential fatty acids along with the amino acid tryptophan -- a natural sleep-inducer.