

JUST ONE THING

James H. Carraway, M.D.
Eastern Virginia Medical School

When you look at everything that it takes to keep you healthy and enable you to live a long life, it is sometimes overwhelming to think of all the things you have to do. Because of this, some simply take the comfortable pathway of not making any changes in their lives even if they know it would be to their benefit to do so. There are some people I know who take one thing, such as exercise, taking supplements, or eating foods high in antioxidants, and use that almost as a talisman against the process of aging. I also know some people who try to do it all at once and find it so frustrating that they simply give it up. If you are trying to “find your way” along your personal pathway to good health and have become confused by so many possibilities, perhaps it would be good to do just one thing at a time and realize the benefits of that one step.

One thing you can do which is extremely important is to simply get a good medical checkup in addition to a mammogram and colonoscopy if you are of that age. This will give you some grounding of your medical condition and will give you an idea of where to go from there

If you eliminate sugar as one single thing from your diet, you will decrease your weight, decrease your chance of developing arthritis, and help prevent diabetes. When reading food labels, you will note that everything from ketchup, boxed cereals, and canned goods to yogurt and many other items contain sugar. Another one thing that has no nutrient value and also causes weight gain, heart disease and arthritis is anything containing “enriched” white flour. All white breads, baked goods (including cakes and cookies) which use flour could be eliminated. Hydrogenated fat has been incriminated over the years in heart disease and as a contributing factor to diabetes. Restaurants fry food with hydrogenated fats at such high temperatures that its chemical character is changed to trans fat. By eliminating fried foods and avoiding baked goods and snacks containing trans-fats, you will increase your longevity and freedom from disease.

Another single thing you can do is simply to eat less. When you eat less, you will lean towards eating more highly nutrient foods (you will simply have more of a craving for them). When eating out, either order a smaller portion or split your main course with your dinner partner. Unfortunately, 70-80% of people in this country are overweight and 30% are obese. Part of this can be blamed on the excessive load of carbohydrates found on the heaped-up plates served in restaurants. Most of us eat out several times a week, and this can really add up to a lot of calories. In addition, junk food can be eliminated as part of the process of eating less and getting more highly nutrient food in its place. If you eliminate all junk food, you will lose weight and be healthier.

Up to this point I have spoken about eliminating things which will improve your overall health. However, there are things you can add which will make a difference in your

longevity and continued health. Exercise is the most important single item to make that difference for you. It increases your muscle strength and muscle mass, both of which are useful in burning calories and increasing stamina.

Another one thing to do is to have protein with every meal. Interestingly, when I started on the Zone Diet 17 years ago, I started to incorporate a little protein at every meal. What this does is to help regulate your blood sugar by modulating your body's response to insulin. It can be an egg or bacon for breakfast, some type of meat, fish or fowl for lunch, and a similar type protein for dinner. Another single item which you could add to your "program" is a green food every day, such as broccoli, kale, or spinach. These types of greens contain "phytochemicals" which are healthy antioxidants. They are incorporated into your enzymatic body processes, and can help increase longevity. Most ordinary salads do not have the same level of nutrients that these particular greens have.

One single item to add to any dietary regime and lifestyle is a single multi-vitamin. The Women's Health Initiative Study showed that there were 4 things that mattered in terms of increased longevity and decreased diseases--exercise, not being overweight, not smoking, and taking a multi-vitamin. Each one was factored in separately and made a real difference in the health of the women in this long-term, large study. Any good multi-vitamin would be helpful. The important thing is just to take one every day.

Finally, all of the experts tell us that a single item which makes a lot of difference in our lives is getting enough sleep. If you get an extra hour's sleep every night, either by going to bed one hour earlier or getting up an hour later, it will add to your health and longevity. If you do have a night time snack, use a non-sweet one that contains protein, as this will sustain your blood sugar at a normal level all night long and let you sleep better.

So you can see that simply by the addition or subtraction of a single item from your diet or health pathway, a difference can be made in terms of your overall health and longevity. Once you have gained the sense of accomplishment that comes from changing just one thing, you will have the strength to move on to change another one, and then another one. Before you know it, you'll be the healthiest one in your household or on your block.