

Script – Print – Living your best life at 50

For many people, turning 50 is a landmark birthday. It not only means reaching a half a century, but it's often a time to reflect. It's an opportunity to think back on your life up to that point, while also looking to your future. From a health standpoint, reaching your 50s could bring on seismic changes, especially if you haven't always taken care of yourself. It means increased risks for chronic conditions like heart disease, diabetes, high cholesterol and some cancers.

It also means developing other changes like slower metabolism and bone density loss. That's why experts say now is the time to make your health a high priority – getting annual physicals and screenings, paying attention to your mental health, re-evaluating what you eat and carving out more time for exercise.

For Travis Swink, DO, a family medicine provider with OSF HealthCare, having these important conversations with patients centers on physical activity. According to Dr. Swink, we start losing muscle strength in our 30s and the trend continues from there. That's why physical activity is so important by the time we reach our 50s.

"The problem is that when we get into our 50s, we get kind of complacent," he says. "We stop exercising, we stop taking care of ourselves, and we're getting into the limelight part of our career. So, we tend to slow down. We need to find out where their activity level is at at that point."

Dr. Swink says starting in our 40s, people tend to gain about five pounds a year. This can be chalked up to poor eating habits and lack of activity. By the time 50 rolls around, many Americans are 20 to 30 pounds heavier than we should be. The physical activity doesn't have to be anything rigorous, like training for a marathon. Unless that's your motivation. Dr. Swink says the simpler, the better. But you should do something seven days a week. "What I tell people is, when we get into our 50s, it's not about running, it's not about cross training, pickleball even, it is about walking," he says. "And if we can do 15 minutes twice a day, that's your best activity."

Dr. Swink adds that walking is the second-best activity behind jumping rope, which most people probably won't do in their 50s. He says the key is to dedicate time and purpose to walking. Walking from one job site to another doesn't count. If you work in an office, take a break or use part of your lunchtime to get in one of your walks. But remember to stretch first to warm up your muscles before heading out the door.

When it comes to strength training, Dr. Swink recommends using free weights instead of machines. And repetition is more important than the amount of weight. "I don't want them to do any machines with heavy weights," he says. "I find that doesn't do very well for certain joints, because as we age, we lose some of our flexibility and range of motion, and a free weight allows you to manipulate that. And so do bands. Bands really limit how much you're going to lift, and they're very good to use."

As far as diet goes, Dr. Swink says the best way to track what we eat is by writing it down or using a calorie-counting app. "The problem is that we have become a very carb generated society, and so most of the time I have people actually write a diet diary, even if they're not overweight, and we sit down and we look at it, because most of them will have a 70 to 80% carb ratio, and that, in itself, is going to be very poor for their health. So that's where I approach it, first." Instead of bread and pastas, Dr. Swink recommends choosing proteins like meat, fish, eggs, nuts and non-starchy vegetables (leafy greens, broccoli, cauliflower, peppers, mushrooms) for low-carb options.

Dr. Swink says, for those over 50, that intermittent fasting should not be included in your lifestyle. By fasting you're putting yourself in slight starvation, which slows your metabolism. "I'd rather have 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. and eating three meals a day and not eating past six o'clock," he says. "Then doing your exercise after your last meal, where then you're taking and breaking down any extra storage before you go to bed."

Dr. Swink adds that the key is everything in moderation. And making changes like curbing alcohol use and making a pact to give up tobacco use could lead to your best decade yet.