



This Year, Make a “Change-Plan”

Once again, resolution time is in full-swing. According to the “New Year’s and Health Issues Survey” conducted by Kaiser Permanente, about 60 percent of Americans make health-related resolutions. Some of the top health resolutions include adding exercise, losing weight, enjoying life more, and quitting smoking or drinking. Although most people make resolutions with full intentions of succeeding, only an estimated 10 percent keep resolutions faithfully! This year, if you really want change, opt out of the cookie-cutter quick fixes and set your sights on a resolution that individually works for you.

Before you come up with a plan, consider the essentials. First, your goal must be truly important to you. This may seem obvious, but resolutions are often hastily made. Change takes time, resources, patience, and accountability (among other things) so make sure your goal is something that you believe is worth the effort. Secondly, make sure your goal is attainable given your particular circumstances, lifestyle, personality and resources. For example, if you need accountability and are not a “morning-person,” then getting up an hour early each day to exercise by yourself probably won’t last much longer than a month. However, finding a coworker to walk with after work several times per week may be just what you need. Beware of barriers such as goals that are too difficult, too large or too demanding of your resources. Look at your goal from every angle and try to account for any obstacles that may arise.

Once you have a goal that is both important to you and is realistically achievable, break your plan into small gradual steps such as adding an extra serving of fruits or vegetables each week until you reach 5+ per day, or packing your lunch an additional day each week. Real change takes time. Small steps will help you to stay motivated and avoid an unnecessary and useless cycle of feeling like a failure. Not only that, but where change involves health, small steps give your body and emotions time to adjust. For example, one of the most common errors when trying to improve health is losing too much weight too quickly. Unless your weight is at a critical level, weight loss should not exceed 1 or 2 pounds per week. Any more than that is actually harmful to the body and can perpetuate a cycle of failed weight loss attempts and slowed metabolism.

Finally, keep track of your efforts. Set several “check-in” dates to evaluate your progress. If you are not where you had hoped, ask yourself two questions: “What went wrong?” and “How do I adjust?” Adjust your goals as you continually learn what works best for you. You may want to mark a date on your calendar each month to assess your progress. When you succeed at making a change, even on a small level, reward yourself with something special such as a movie night, a pair of comfy socks, or an afternoon with a good book, a nap, and a family member to watch the kids.

In order to be one less of those uncompleted attempts, consider your New Year's Resolution to be a "change-plan." Wouldn't it be nice to look back on 2008 as a year of fresh perspective, better health, and permanent change? We all have good intentions, but a well-thought plan is key to success.

If your New Year's Resolution includes changing your food habits, keep in mind that junk science lurks around every corner. Consider the following red flags of junk science* when searching for a nutrition plan.

1. Promises of a quick fix
2. Claims that sound too good to be true
3. Dire warnings of danger from a single complex study
4. Simple conclusions drawn from a complex study
5. Recommendations based on one single study
6. Dramatic statements that are refuted by reputable scientific organizations
7. Lists of "good" and "bad" foods
8. Recommendations made to help sell a product
9. Recommendations based on studies published without peer review
10. Recommendations from studies that ignore differences among individuals or groups

*From the American Dietetic Association, 2007