Healthy Lifestyle Choices

How can you help the people you support make healthy lifestyle choices?

Each of us makes choices every day that affect our health. As a helper (direct support professional, family member, or other caregiver), you can educate the individuals you support about healthy choices they can make. You can also encourage and assist individuals as they learn how to make healthy choices.

For example, you can provide opportunities for individuals to eat healthy foods and add physical activity to their daily routines. By making these kinds of healthy lifestyle choices, the people you support will lower their risks for:

- Obesity
- Heart disease
- High cholesterol
- Injuries

Eating Right

Eating good food helps people stay healthy. By eating a healthy diet, the individuals you support can maintain a healthy weight. Maintaining a healthy weight lowers a person’s chances of developing medical problems such as heart disease, diabetes, or arthritis. You can help the individuals you support make healthy food choices.

Having a healthy diet means eating healthy foods. Healthy foods provide lots of nutrients. Some examples of healthy foods are:

- Fruits and vegetables
- Whole grains
- Milk and milk products
- Meats, poultry, fish, beans, eggs, and nuts

Less healthy food choices have more fat and sugar, and fewer nutrients. Some examples of unhealthy foods are:
• Fried foods, such as french fries or fried chicken
• Buttery foods, such as cookies, brownies, or cakes
• Sugary foods, such as sodas or candy

It is okay to eat unhealthy food sometime. The important thing is not to eat too much unhealthy food, or eat it too often. You can encourage the person you support to make healthy food choices. One way to do this is to give them the opportunity to sample and enjoy healthy foods. For example, introduce the person to healthier options such as thin crust pizza with vegetables instead of deep-dish pizza with greasy toppings.

The Right Amount of Food
The amount of food a person needs to eat every day depends upon their age, sex, and level of physical activity. Younger people usually need to eat more food than older people. Men usually need to eat more food than women. Physically active people usually need to eat more food than people who are not physically active.

One way to tell how much food an individual should eat is to count calories. Calories are the amount of energy people get from food. Most people need about 1600-2000 calories each day. If they eat more than this number of calories, people don’t use all the energy, and it turns into fat instead.

Ask the person you support if they know how many calories they eat every day. If they don’t know, you can help them count the calories. You can tell how many calories are in foods by looking at the labels on food packaging. You can also use calorie counting tools on the internet, like the MyPyramid tools from the USDA. (The link is listed below.)

If the person is eating too many calories, you can talk to them about eating less. Lots of calories from unhealthy food (food with lots of fat and sugar) are “empty.” This means that people don’t get nutrients out of that food. People can stop eating these foods and still get plenty to eat.

If the person is eating too few calories, you can help them find more healthy foods they like to eat. If someone you support is eating too few calories, you should talk to their doctor. The person may have a medical condition that keeps them from feeling hungry.

These are a few tips for healthy eating. For more information, check out the resources at the end of this article or talk to a doctor or nutritionist.
Some of the individuals you support may need to follow special diets because of a health condition (such as diabetes). Always ask an individual’s doctor before making any changes in their diet.

**Physical Activity**

Another important way to stay healthy is to be physically active every day. Physical activity improves overall health in many ways, including:

- Increasing heart and lung strength
- Improving flexibility and endurance
- Protecting against diseases
- Helping with anxiety and depression

You can encourage individuals to be more physically active by supporting them to find activities they like to do. Some examples of healthy physical activities are:

- Walking, jogging, or running, either outdoors or on a treadmill
- Lifting weights
- Swimming
- Wheelchair activities, such as basketball or resistance training
- Stretching, yoga, or pilates
- Playing sports, such as basketball or baseball

Some of the individuals you support may need extra help to add physical activity to their lives. For example, a person with cerebral palsy or another developmental disability that makes moving difficult may find it hard to include exercise in their life. You can help this individual learn about exercises they can do in bed or while sitting in a wheelchair.

It is important to check with the doctor who treats the person you support before increasing their physical activity. Doctors and other health care professionals can also help individuals make a fun exercise plan that works for them. Physical or occupational therapists can design an exercise program based on the person’s physical abilities, including range of motion, strength, balance, and other related issues.

There are other things you can do to help individuals add physical activity to their daily lives. For instance, you can encourage each person to:
1. Propel their own wheelchair instead of asking their support person to push them (if the destination isn't too far away)
2. Ask their support person to park further away from their destination so they can walk or propel their wheelchair
3. Take the stairs instead of the elevator (unless the person uses a wheelchair)
4. Physically move during the day, whenever possible, such as getting up to change the television channel instead of using a remote control

Remember to talk to the individual’s doctor before the individual starts any new exercise plan. A doctor can tell you which exercises are right for the individuals you support and how to help each person exercise safely.

Resources

It may be helpful for the individuals you support to talk with you about ways they can improve their lifestyle choices. You can help the person decide what choices make the most sense for them. It may even be helpful for individuals to write down their healthy lifestyle choices. This planning sheet can be a helpful starting point:


You can also support individuals to learn more about healthy lifestyle choices. They can learn more by talking with health care professionals or by checking out these resources on the internet:

**DDS Safety Net Power Point Presentations:**

Other web resources:

- Nutrition information from the USDA: http://www.mypyramid.gov/index.html
- Healthy People: http://www.healthypeople.gov/BeHealthy
- Exercise and Fitness for People with Disabilities: http://www.ncpad.org/exercise