

This February, make creativity the heart of your fitness routine

January 15 2010, by Sara Peach

(PhysOrg.com) -- Exercise is key to preventing heart disease, but many people think they don't have time for it. For American Heart Month, two UNC Health Care experts explain why exercise matters and share creative tips for working it into tight schedules.

For Judy Hinderliter, taking care of friends means refusing to talk to them on the phone.

Instead, when friends want to chat, Hinderliter, a dietitian and personal trainer at the UNC Wellness Center at Meadowmont, encourages them to join her for a brisk, heart-healthy walk.

That's just one of the creative strategies for maintaining a healthy cardiovascular system that Hinderliter and her husband, Alan, a cardiologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Medicine, share with their patients.

Despite advances in medical care, heart disease has remained the leading killer of Americans for the past 80 years. Each year, about 650,000 Americans die from heart disease, a term that refers to problems such as heart arrhythmias, [heart failure](#) and [coronary artery disease](#), which can lead to heart attacks.

Alan Hinderliter said mortality from heart disease has decreased in the past decade because of better treatments and lifestyle changes.

"People are less likely to smoke than they were 20 years ago," he said. "They're a little more likely to [exercise](#)."

But he cautioned that the rise in obesity and diabetes, important risk factors for heart disease, has cut into these gains. Meanwhile, children exercise less than they did in previous generations, thanks to the prevalence of video games and cuts to physical education classes.

Exercise has a myriad of benefits to the heart. It strengthens the heart and cardiovascular system and can help people lose weight. Significantly, exercise can also improve mood.

"That in turn can affect how we feel about ourselves and affect a lot of our [lifestyle choices](#)," Alan Hinderliter said.

In other words: Exercise helps you fight the blues, which means you'll be less likely to eat unhealthy comfort foods.

But surprisingly, while researchers know that exercise is beneficial, they have not yet untangled how it causes positive changes in the body.

"We don't fully understand the mechanism," Alan Hinderliter said.

Most current knowledge about exercise and heart disease has been determined from observational studies, in which scientists track the eating and exercise habits of large groups of people over many years. Such studies enable researchers to show that exercise habits and [heart disease](#) are related, but can not directly show how one causes effects in the other.

When such experiments are done, Alan Hinderliter said, researches will better understand the optimal forms and quantities of exercise to get.

In the meantime, the Hinderlitters advise people starting a new exercise program to consult a physician and to start slowly.

"A lot of people try to do too much at once and fail or become injured," Judy Hinderliter said. "I really encourage people to start out gradually with any changes in eating and exercise, so it becomes part of their lifestyle."

Other tips:

- Turn social occasions into fitness time. (The Hinderlitters went on a run for their first date, redefining the meaning of "heart-pounding.")
 - Schedule exercise into your day, just as you do with other appointments.
 - Vary the type and intensity of exercise to avoid boredom.
 - Play games, such as tennis, racquetball or squash. Such games are "a way to keep it fun and interesting, but also a great workout," Alan Hinderliter said.
 - If you can afford a personal trainer, get one. A professional can help you design an effective exercise program and show you how to avoid injuries.
 - If you can, try walking to work. "Instead of a 15-minute commute, make it a half-hour walk," Alan Hinderliter said.
- Don't forget to eat a heart-healthy diet: whole grains, lean meat and low-fat dairy products, plenty of fruits and veggies, and few saturated fats. For an average person, the caloric content of a tablespoon of butter requires a mile of walking to burn off, Judy Hinderliter said.

- Get a minimum of 30 minutes of moderate exercise, such as brisk walking, at least five times a week, or 30 minutes three times each week of vigorous exercise such as running, swimming, bicycling or playing basketball.
- The bottom line on exercise? "The more the better, for the most part," Alan Hinderliter said.

Provided by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Medicine

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