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Dear Friends,

The fast food (“fast junk” in my terms) restaurants are being attacked in the way that tobacco companies once were—lawsuits claiming that they are responsible for illness, activists in schools trying to improve the diets of schoolchildren and remove vending machines selling junk, and widespread media coverage of these events.

One lawsuit claims that the victim’s high cholesterol, obesity, diabetes, and heart disease are the result of eating at McDonald’s, Burger King, Pizza Hut, and Kentucky Fried Chicken, with no warning from the companies that there was a risk in doing this. It seems that one of the defenses is that everyone knows that these products are unhealthy, so there is no need for a warning.

Indeed, it seems that everyone should know this, but it will be fascinating to see if the companies mount the defense that everyone should know that their products are unhealthy, and therefore they are not liable.

Of course, they could take another stance, each of them claiming that their products alone are OK, but if someone is eating them, they should not be eating the rest of their meals at their competitors’ establishments. Thus, there would be no individual restaurant that is responsible for the illness and premature deaths.

Who is responsible?

Lost in all this shuffle is the individual responsibility for our own health that each of us has. And while I am heartened to see the “perpetrator” companies squirm, I am also aware that for people who smoke, overeat, choose the wrong foods, do not exercise, and lead stressful lives with no restorative breaks, and inadequate sleep, they are likely to run into trouble with chronic, degenerative, and lethal diseases, as well as everyday health problems.

However, it seems to me that the companies are not without responsibility, especially when it comes to addicting children to poor diet choices through extensive advertising, and toys, games and animated characters that promote their products directly to children. They are also responsible for the financial incentives they give to schools, and the extensive lobbying they do to prevent healthy programs from displacing them in the school cafeterias and vending machines.

If children are addicted to sugary, fatty, salty, fried, refined foods (and what could represent this more than a double cheeseburger, fries, and a shake?), this is likely to be their diet as adults. It is just as likely that pediatricians’ offices will continue to see a dramatic rise in the chronic diseases (diabetes, obesity, heart disease) formerly thought to be related to aging, but now known to be related to lifestyle.

Enhancing Longevity

You can take action through your lifestyle choices to prevent, manage, and treat the chronic diseases that are often associated with aging, and increasingly even at younger ages. You can also do more to enhance the years that you gain, to make them more pleasurable, and even further extend your life.

A recent study on positive feelings and attitudes shows that people who have an upbeat outlook about the aging process itself can outlive those who view aging with fear and disdain. In the study of 660 people over 50 years old, researchers evaluated perceptions of aging, through survey questionnaires. They then evaluated mortality data among the subjects up to 23 years later (you have to be very patient to do aging studies).

Those subjects who answered positively to statements such as “I have as much pep as I did last year” were the ones who lived longer, compared to those who agreed with statements such as “As you get older, you are less useful,” or, “Things keep getting worse as I get older.”

The researchers evaluated other possible influences on aging, such as gender, socioeconomic status, loneliness, and health, but the influence of positive feelings were still highly significant, and the results were not minor. The positive subjects lived 7.5 years longer than those with negative perceptions.

Positive attitudes affect more than the will to live. They reduce the effects of stress on the heart. After positive subliminal messages, systolic and diastolic blood pressures and heart rate rise less in response to stress. Positive feelings also improve speed and stride during walking.

Inspiration for Longevity

In my experience with patients, helping them develop a positive attitude is not just a matter of telling them how important it is. It also requires giving them tools to work with and ideas about improving their lives, as well as informing them of all the positive changes they can make in their lifestyles that will improve the aging process.

One inspiration that I find helpful is from *The Summing Up*, the autobiographical work of the author, W. Somerset Maugham. He said that he “looks forward to old age without dismay...For the

complete life...includes old age as well as youth and maturity. The beauty of the morning and the radiance of noon are good, but it would be a very silly person who drew the curtains and turned on the light in order to shut out the tranquility of the evening. Old age has its pleasures, which, though different, are not less than the pleasures of youth...Paradoxical as it may sound, it has more time...[aesthetic] taste improves...[old age] is liberated from the trammels of human egoism; free at last, the soul delights in the passing moment, but does not bid it stay.”

Interestingly, Maugham wrote such positive words about aging in 1938, when he was 64 years old. He lived another 27 years, and died in 1965, when he was 91. Such is the power of positive feelings and attitudes.

One other benefit of positive attitudes is that they lead you to choose healthier habits. Once people become aware that they can favorably influence their own aging process, those with positive impressions of aging want to know how to do it.

Health Habits for Longevity

In 1997, the journal *Science* published articles with a new focus of gerontology on “successful aging,” rather than just prevention and treatment of disease and disability. They noted that at least two thirds of success was related to lifestyle choices and environment, rather than genetics.

Among other things, you need to keep physically fit through regular exercise. This helps to preserve bone density, muscle strength, agility, brain function, and cardiovascular health, as well as improving sleep, and maintaining normal weight and healthy blood sugar levels.

Also, physical fitness gives you greater stamina so you can be more active without exhaustion. Maintaining muscle strength provides the physical ability to participate in a variety of activities, whether they are aesthetic and cultural events, the simple pleasures of walking and gardening, relationships, or just being able to enjoy all of the other pleasures that life holds.

Recent studies show the importance for the brain of fruits and vegetables, with their high levels of many antioxidants. For example, blueberries and cranberries contain high levels of anthocyanins, potent protectors of brain and nerve tissue. These

antioxidant compounds are unusual in that they are the most effective at penetrating the nerve cell membranes, where they can protect cognitive function and prevent Alzheimer's disease. In animal studies, blueberries and cranberries in the diet helped maintain cognitive function

Anthocyanins are also available as dietary supplements, as are other antioxidants that help the brain. I previously mentioned the aging benefits of supplements of acetyl-L-carnitine and alpha-lipoic acid, as well as N-acetyl cysteine, vitamin C, vitamin E, ginkgo biloba, and numerous carotenoids, such as lutein and lycopene.

Ask Dr. J

Q. I have been diagnosed with fibromyalgia. Can you tell me what foods or supplements might help?

ML, Nebraska, via Internet

A. Fibromyalgia is similar in symptoms to chronic fatigue syndrome, but with specific muscle and connective tissue pain (ligaments and tendons). Pain at trigger points is common, such as the neck, shoulders, back, and legs. It is often accompanied by fatigue, depression, and insomnia.

You asked about food sources of serotonin, but serotonin is made in the brain from the amino acid tryptophan, with an intermediate called 5-hydroxytryptophan, or 5-HTP. Eating foods with tryptophan does not help because other amino acids in protein compete with it for absorption, and most of it is used to make new proteins.

Supplements of 5-HTP can promote serotonin production, and studies have shown that high doses of 5-HTP can help with insomnia, depression, and other symptoms of fibromyalgia. Typical doses of 5-HTP would be 50 to 100 mg at bedtime for depression and insomnia, but with fibromyalgia, doses can range up to 600 mg daily.

Magnesium supplements (500 to 1000 mg) may help with chronic fatigue, and SAMe (S-adenosyl methionine), can relieve depression and may help with fibromyalgia, if the dose is high enough. You may have to take over 600 to 800 mg daily to benefit from SAMe.

I also recommend high-dose supplements of vitamin C, up to 10 to 20 grams a day, and I will often treat patients with intravenous vitamin C, mag-

nesium, and B-complex. You can find a doctor in your area for intravenous treatment through the American College for Advancement in Medicine (www.acam.org, or 800-532-3688).

Diet can also help. Eat high amounts of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, seeds, nuts, and beans as the staples of your diet. Sometimes food allergies make fibromyalgia worse, and common ones include wheat and milk, so eliminating them might be of value.

Q. In your last column on cholesterol and hypertension, why did you neglect the importance of homocysteine as a risk factor? DE, via Internet

A. It was not because I do not recognize its importance, but there is only so much room, and I've mentioned it before. Homocysteine is an intermediate metabolite, and a high blood level is a known risk factor for heart disease. You can lower it by supplementing the diet with folic acid, vitamin B6, and vitamin B12. This is one of many risk factors, and it helps to be aware of all of them. Past newsletters cover some of the others.

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In the Health News

- Applying a topical preparation of vitamin C to sun-damaged skin can reverse some of the damage and protect skin from the deterioration seen with aging and free-radical exposure (Fitzpatrick RE, Rostan EF, Double-blind, half-face study comparing topical vitamin C and vehicle for rejuvenation of photodamage. *Dermatol Surg* 2002 Mar;28(3):231-6). Patients were evaluated for wrinkling, hydration, pigmentation, and inflammation. Treated skin showed decreased photodamage, and biopsies indicated new collagen formation, indicating skin repair. Other topical treatments that reduce aging include alpha-lipoic acid and MSM. The amino acid lysine is also essential for collagen formation.

Diet and Disease

- In addition to smoking, blood pressure, and serum lipids, drinking coffee is a risk factor for developing a stroke (Isaksen J, et al., Risk factors for aneurysmal subarachnoid haemorrhage: the Tromso study. *J Neurol Neurosurg Psychiatry* 2002 Aug;73(2):185-7). These researchers found that people who drank more than 5 cups of coffee a day had a significantly increased risk of this unusual form of stroke. It is possible that lower amounts might also be a problem, but not sufficiently great to appear in statistics. One doctor not involved with the study commented that this is not enough data to make recommendations. I wonder if his suggestion is to continuing drinking coffee until you become proof of the association.
- Diets with adequate linoleic acid (an essential fatty acid; linolenic is the other) can reduce the risk of stroke (Iso H, Linoleic acid, other fatty acids, and the risk of stroke. *Stroke* 2002 Aug;33(8):2086-93). Linoleic acid is found in corn, sunflower, and soybeans. The authors studied over 7000 Japanese subjects. They speculated that benefits may be due to reduced blood pressure and platelet aggregation, or greater red cell flexibility.

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Potato Salad

I love potatoes for their taste, texture, fiber and vitamin C content, and their variety and ease of preparation methods. I also like to grow them in the garden. Start with organic potatoes to avoid the numerous chemicals used on commercial ones (including pesticides and anti-sprouting agents). Clean and steam them in 1-2 inch cubes. When they cool, fold in enough tofu mayonnaise to coat them (I use Nayonnaise), and add minced scallions, chunks of organic sweet peppers, fresh or frozen organic peas, some chopped fresh spinach, a small amount of minced parsley, and crushed peppercorns. I often add a teaspoon of curry powder or some thyme for variety. This is a great side dish with a lentil stew or soup, or a summertime cold tomato gazpacho.

- I see patients at WholeHealth in Arlington, MA. Call 781-641-1901 for an appointment. I also do phone and Email consults.
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