How to Break a Habit

by Julia Rodack

Common Habits That Can Affect Your Heart Health

Work schedules and family life can make old — and often unhealthy — habits particularly easy to fall back into. And unhealthy habits damage more than your waistline, they can be dangerous to your heart as well. The American Heart Association reports that unhealthy behaviors can slow the process in reducing heart disease and stroke in the population, and that, despite some progress, high cholesterol, blood pressure and diabetes are still on the rise.

By proactively confronting bad habits head-on, you stand a better chance of leaving them —and their heart-harming effects — behind, once and for all. Think you've got your food habits in check? Here, Maribet Rivera-Brut, nutritionist and volunteer for the American Heart Association, shares six unhealthy eating habits you might not even realize you're doing.

6 Common Unhealthy Eating Habits

1. Eating in front of the TV or computer
2. Eating when you are stressed, depressed or in a rush
3. Dining out (especially late dining)
4. Going grocery shopping while you're hungry
5. Not being cautious of servings and portion sizes
6. Rewarding yourself with food

When life gets busy, prioritizing your health can often fall by the wayside, making room for the above bad habits to sneak in to your routine. Maribet explains that most people fall into unhealthy eating habits for several main reasons.

Reasons for Unhealthy Eating Habits

Personal health is not a priority.

"People put their jobs and other related commitments first, rather than health," she says. "We need to understand that our health is a priority and if we do not keep ourselves healthy, then we won't be able to enjoy family and keep up with work."

Your goals are unrealistic.

To really thrive, your goals should be realistic and fit into your lifestyle. "Goals should always help keep us focused," Maribet says.

You lose motivation.

A huge factor in changing a bad habit to a good one is staying motivated. Maribet suggests finding a good reason — beside your health — to motivate you toward success. (Maybe it's fitting into your favorite little black dress, or prepping for bathing suit season.) "Always aim for something that will help your health to stay in shape," she says.

So, what can you do to help prevent and stop unhealthy behavior?

How to Break an Unhealthy Habit

Acknowledge some of your actions are unhealthy.

You have to recognize and acknowledge your actions are unhealthy. "Admit that you have a health condition that requires you to change your lifestyle," says Maribet. "Even without a health condition we still need a healthy lifestyle to prevent chronic disease." She suggests keeping a diary or writing your behaviors down (such as a food diary) to help you understand what you're doing and then to formulate a game plan for reversing those unhealthy actions.

Create a plan to improve your health.

"Create a plan that will help you improve your health," she says. "Set realistic goals and reasons to motivate yourself and then put that plan into action."

Part of maintaining a healthy lifestyle is identifying, in advance, areas of your life that might cause you to slip up. "Once you've identified them, then think how you can avoid them, so you don't back track," Maribet says.

Set realistic goals every day.

The best way to keep your healthy actions front and center is by putting them into practice every day, Maribet says. "If you don't keep up that new healthy habit, there may be a chance you won't maintain it. And if so, then it will be harder to start over again." And remember, once you've reached a nutritional milestone reward yourself.