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Stop Dieting! Adopt a Healthy Lifestyle During Healthy Weight Week

The holidays have come and gone, and many New Year's resolutions are now a fading memory. One of the most common resolutions Americans make is to loose weight, and as a culture, we are willing to try practically any new fad diet that comes along. However, David L. Katz from the Yale Prevention Research Center points out in his article in the Annual Review of Public Health although "short-term weight loss is consistently achieved by any dietary approach to the restriction of choice and thereby calories, lasting weight control is not." In other words, diets, particularly fad diets, do not work in the long run.

Every year, the Healthy Weight Network highlights the worst diets of that year, handing out "Slim Chance Awards" to the greatest offenders. Award winners have included a bottled water that claimed to burn fat, a "magic ear staple," and green tea patches. The awards are usually presented in conjunction with Rid the World of Fad Diets and Gimmicks Day, which falls on January 23rd this year, in the middle of Healthy Weight week.

Instead of emphasizing the need for Americans in general to lose weight, the focus of Healthy Weight Week is to learn about healthy lifestyles and celebrate diversity in size. It is important that people recognize that the idealized slim figure seen in the movies and on television is not realistic or even healthy for most people. People vary in size, shape, and body type – a healthy weight for one person is not necessarily a healthy weight for another. Developing a healthy lifestyle not only will prevent eating and weight problems, but will result in fewer related medical problems.

Healthy Weight Week promotes good health at every size. Our culture's obsession with thinness and dieting, while encouraging the consumption of fatty foods, has created a climate of shame, guilt, and unhealthy eating patterns. While on the one hand, a former Surgeon General warns of an "obesity epidemic," cases have been documented of 6 year olds with "full blown eating disorders" and 80% of 10 year old girls are restricting food, according to information published by the U.S. Army. Unhealthy eating habits can result in obesity, which can lead to serious diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, arthritic joints, asthma, and an increased risk for certain cancers. Unhealthy eating behavior can also lead to problems caused by inadequate food intake, such as irregular heartbeat, loss of bone and muscle mass, kidney and liver damage, gastric disorders, weakened immune system, low blood sugar, anemia, and stunted growth. Both overeating and under-eating can result in depression and other emotional disorders.

Fortunately, by the 3rd week in January, most people have lost their enthusiasm for the new fad diet they thought would turn them into thinner versions of themselves. They are ready to resume a more "normal" dietary routine. According to Frances M. Berg, a licensed nutritionist, author, and adjunct professor at the University of North Dakota School of Medicine, "normal eating is eating at regular times, typically three meals and one or two snacks to satisfy hunger," and it is "regulated by internal signals of hunger, appetite, satiety – we eat when hungry and stop when satisfied."

The opposite of normal eating is dysfunctional eating, characterized by dieting, fasting, bingeing, skipping meals, or overeating or under-eating considerably more or less than one's body wants or needs.

By adhering to a practice of healthy eating, a person can achieve and maintain the ideal weight for his or her own body, resulting in increased mental and physical well being, an enhanced quality of life, and greater life expectancy. During Healthy Weight Week, people are encouraged to eat moderately, live actively, and accept themselves while respecting others. The key to achieving a healthy weight is to stop dieting and begin eating sensibly while getting enough exercise. Weight should not be discussed in negative terms. This is a time to set new goals such as starting an exercise program and eating a wide variety of foods.

As Frances Berg points out, "Diets don't work. Neither do pills or potions. What works is to develop a healthy, normalized lifestyle that allows excess weight to come off naturally. This takes time, but it is the healthy and lasting way to deal with weight."

This year, why not begin a new regimen that will make your lifestyle a healthier one? And while incorporating more activity and healthier foods into your daily routine, remember that healthy people come in a variety of shapes and sizes.

To learn more about ways to celebrate healthy weight week and how to improve your well-being, visit the Healthy Weight Network at www.healthyweightnetwork.com. For further information about this or other public health concerns, contact the Central Connecticut Health District at 860-721-2822 (www.ccthd.org).