By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- Recognize why a healthy lifestyle can serve as a stress preventer
- Identify recommendations regarding activity, nutrition, sleep, and other behaviors that may facilitate a healthy lifestyle
- Illustrate practical strategies for incorporating some of these recommendations into your daily life
As you ponder the topics related to a healthy lifestyle - nutrition, exercise, and sleep to name a few - you might be wondering how each of these issues relates to stress prevention. When you eat a balanced diet, get enough sleep, are active, and practice other healthy lifestyle habits, you'll no doubt feel better. And, when you feel better, your perceptions and experience of stress tend to be reduced.

Think about the last time you didn't get enough sleep, for instance. Were you able to function at your highest level? Did you perhaps have a lower tolerance for frustrations and interruptions than usual? Were you your normal sunny self? For most of us, if we honestly answer those questions, we have to admit that our tendency for stress tends to be higher when we're not feeling our best.

That's where these lifestyle behaviors come into play. Research has shown that nutrition, activity patterns, sleep, and other behaviors can have a significant impact on our health—both short-term and long-term. So, to give yourself a head start on the quest for less stress and overall better health, try to incorporate some of the recommendations provided in this lesson.

The key to good nutrition is giving your body the right fuel, in the right amounts, at the right times. It's kind of like putting gas in a car. Food is your fuel! We've all heard that overconsumption of food can be harmful, but it's important to remember that eating too few calories and nutrients can also be problematic. It's common for students to skip meals or otherwise miss the nutrients they need on a daily basis.

You need to feed your body a wide variety of foods on a consistent basis to keep it functioning well. The human body is designed to consume small amounts of food every few hours. If you're skipping meals or not eating for many hours at a time, you're doing your body a disservice. When you skip meals, your metabolism slows down and you may even feel sluggish. Replacing meals with caffeine can lead to mood swings and energy crashes. What are you like when you're hungry? Are you able to function at your best? Can you concentrate on lectures or coursework? How would you rate your patience for other people and things? To keep you well fueled throughout the day and to prevent you from becoming crabby or irritable when hungry, try taking healthy snacks with you when you're off to class or work. Finally, keep in mind that when you're not eating enough, you're depriving yourself of important nutrients that your body needs.
Do you find yourself overwhelmed and even confused by all of the nutrition advice you see and hear? If you do, you're not alone! With so many fads, supplements, and advice from so-called experts available these days, it's hard to know just what to believe. Luckily, there are reputable sources of advice and information available; you just need to evaluate each source carefully. Keep the following in mind when considering nutrition information or advice:

- What is the source?
- Is the person making the recommendations a registered dietitian (RD) or does he or she have some other reputable credentials?
- If an organization or company is making a recommendation, will they benefit financially from choices you might make?
- Does the advice seem reasonable and practical?
- Does the information or advice recommend that you drastically change your habits, or begin purchasing special products?

Eating in a healthy manner does not have to be terribly complicated. So, if you receive advice or information that seems a bit extreme or even unbelievable, you should question it. Recommendations for healthy eating should be realistic, feasible, reasonable, and believable.
The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Agriculture publish a set of national Dietary Guidelines every ten years, with updates released every five years. The latest Guidelines were released in 2010 and they provide an excellent roadmap to healthy eating. The Guidelines are based upon the most current nutrition and health research and seek to address the most pressing nutrition-related concerns in the population. There are two major themes in the 2010 dietary guidelines.

The first major theme is energy balance. This involves balancing the number of calories taken in through diet with the number of calories you expend through activity. To accomplish this you want to move more and sit less. The more active you are, the more calories your body needs. Weight gain occurs over time when you take in more calories than you expend.

The second theme is to focus on consuming more nutrient-dense foods and beverages such as vegetables, fruits, whole grains, fat-free or low-fat dairy products, and lean meats or plant-based sources of protein. In turn, try to eat less foods and beverages high in sodium, added sugars, saturated or trans fats, as well as alcohol.
In general, a healthy diet focuses on foods with a high degree of nutrient density. A nutrient-dense food is a food that provides a significant amount of nutrients like vitamins, minerals, and protein relative to the number of calories it provides. Let’s compare two beverages as an example: soda and 100% orange juice.

If we looked at the nutrition labels of these drinks, we would see that both provide calories, but that the soda provides no other nutrients in any substantial quantity. Thus, you could call soda an empty-calorie drink because it provides calories, but very little real nutrition.

100% orange juice, on the other hand, is a much more nutrient-dense choice. It is a good source of thiamin, potassium, vitamin C and folate. So, even though a serving of soda and a serving of orange juice both provide similar amounts of calories and sugar, the orange juice is a better choice, because it is more nutrient dense.

In general, to cultivate a healthier diet try to choose more nutrient dense foods and beverages more often. That’s not to say that empty calorie foods and beverages should always be avoided and can never be enjoyed - everything in moderation!

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) developed a resource to simplify the Dietary Guidelines into feasible, actionable advice (2011),\(^1\) and help Americans manage and improve their nutrition habits. It's called "Choose My Plate" and uses a graphic of a dinner plate to help guide food choices. Some of the practical advice of the Choose My Plate campaign includes:

- Enjoy your food, but eat less
- Avoid supersized portions
- Aim for about half of the food you eat each day to come from vegetables and fruits.
- Make at least half your grains whole grains
- Use fat-free or low-fat dairy products
- Compare sodium in foods like soup, canned foods, and prepackaged meals and choose those with less
- Drink water instead of beverages high in added sugar or caffeine

These simple recommendations go hand-in-hand with the Dietary Guidelines and are great steps to achieving a healthy diet!

Part of the purpose of the plate is to stress the importance of all food groups: grains, fruits and vegetables, protein, and dairy. It's always a good idea to eat a wide variety of foods within each of the food groups. Be adventurous - try new foods! You'll not only improve your nutrient intake, but you might also discover some new foods you enjoy.


\(^1\) Image 1: U.S. Department of Agriculture
You've probably heard that physical activity is another important ingredient for a healthy lifestyle. But improving your physical health isn't the only benefit of exercise! It can improve your mental health, as well.

Additionally, we know that exercise helps your body release chemicals called endorphins. Have you ever heard of a runner's high? Routinely, after exercise, people report feeling better and having a more positive outlook.¹ Time spent exercising can also serve as time away from the stressful aspects of life. It gives you a little break and also allows you time to think. In short, exercise is great for your body and your mind!

Contrary to popular belief, you don’t need a lot of fancy equipment or special clothing to be physically active. In fact, about the only thing you really need is a good pair of comfortable athletic shoes to protect your feet. We would recommend wearing clothes on the rest of your body as well, but don’t feel that you have to wear special workout clothes. Shorts and a t-shirt are just fine!

Now, the big questions are: What type of exercise will I do? How often? How intense? How long? When will I exercise? Luckily, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services created Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans and Be Active Your Way (2008b). These documents can help answer all of these questions - and more!

One thing to keep in mind as we discuss the guidelines is that simply being physically active is most important. So, even if can’t see yourself working out, you probably can find a dynamic activity you enjoy. Is it dancing? Gardening? Even walking to class! Every activity counts.

Have you ever played a game of basketball or gone dancing and felt really good afterwards? The more often you engage in these activities, the better you’ll feel. Plus group physical activity is a great way to meet new people and build your social support system!

Recommendations call for doing something aerobic at least three times per week. An aerobic or cardiorespiratory activity is one that works your heart, lungs, and blood vessels, and uses fat as a primary fuel. When you’re engaged in aerobic activity, your heart beats faster, your breathing rate increases, and your blood pressure goes up. So, you’re strengthening your entire cardiorespiratory system. Examples of aerobic activity include: walking, biking, jogging, swimming, fitness classes like aerobic dance or spinning, or jumping rope.

Even some sports qualify as aerobic, depending on how vigorously they’re played. Basketball, tennis, hockey, and soccer are all good options. The guidelines recommend that each individual participate in 150 minutes of aerobic activity each week and this time can be spread out over several days. This recommendation gives you something to shoot for. Remember, gradually working toward a goal will prove more successful than trying to change everything overnight. If you need to start with 15 minutes 3 times per week, that’s just fine. You can start from anywhere and gradually build upon this base. The idea is to do at least something everyday to strengthen your cardiorespiratory system and train your body to better handle stress responses.
One often overlooked, but still very important, component of fitness is flexibility. Flexibility is simply the ability of your muscles to stretch. People who are more flexible are less likely to become injured because their muscles are less resistive. To maximize your flexibility, stretch slowly and gently until you feel a pull. Then, hold that stretch for 10-15 seconds. The best time to stretch is after an exercise session, but stretching any time can be very beneficial.

Yoga is a guided means of stretching and strengthening. Yoga can serve as a great stress management tool as it helps you focus on several important techniques at once. Research has shown that yoga practices that include warm-up stretches, breathing, meditation, reflection and spiritual teachings can yield benefits related to depressive symptomology, reported stress, hopefulness and cortisol levels. Participants report feeling calm, relaxed, and refreshed after each class.¹

Another form of yoga is Laughter Yoga! In Laughter Yoga, the participants are led through laughing exercises interspersed with deep breathing. Sustained laughter has been shown to improve blood flow, lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol and boost the immune system. Laughter yoga is based on the idea that the body cannot tell the difference between genuine laughter and forced laughter during yoga. You will see the same benefits.

* Image 1: Paul Turnbull
It's easier to stick with a program or plan if someone else is in it with you. Talk to your friends and see if any of them would like to work out with you. This is also a great way to strengthen current relationships and even meet new people. If you are looking for something to do with a new neighbor, invite them to a group fitness class with you or on a bike ride. You can encourage and motivate each other along the way! Also, attending a scheduled exercise session or class can help hold you accountable to fitting it in. If the same people expect to see you in class each week, this can be a good push to get to the gym even when you aren't feeling motivated. Exercise is a great way to reduce stress and also to cultivate social support - both of which build resilience!

- Image 1: Ramasamy Chidambaram
With a full school schedule, you may be wondering, when is the best time to exercise? We say, exercise at a time that’s best for you. Your schedule may dictate that you exercise in the evening, afternoon, or even later at night. You may hear people recommend times when you should workout, but, really, the most important factor to consider when choosing a workout time is what time works best for you. If you work out when it’s most convenient for you to do so, you'll be more likely to stay committed to your exercise plan. So, worry less about the recommendations from other people and focus on choosing a time that fits best within your schedule and lifestyle. Remember, exercise should be a priority, but there will be times during the semester when it becomes difficult to squeeze it in. Just keep in mind that exercise should always decrease your stress, not increase it!
Making physical activity a priority requires planning and commitment. Plan ahead for your workouts and activity sessions. At the beginning of each week, review your upcoming schedule and see where exercise might fit. Then, put your workouts on your calendar and treat them as you would any other important obligation. Another way to prioritize exercise is to take a physical education class during college. This way it is built into your class schedule and you're earning credit for it! As we mentioned, exercise should be a priority, but should never become a source of stress. If you can't fit it in one week, look into the next. Continue planning ahead so you eventually schedule these appointments with yourself!
Even small increases in physical activity can add up and make a big difference. Take the stairs, rather than the elevator or escalator when you can. Do a 10-minute yoga routine when you wake up. Park farther away than you normally would when you're at work or at the mall. If you spend a lot of time sitting while studying or working, take a break every hour to walk around. Or better yet, spend part of each hour standing rather than sitting. You could incorporate some stretches and leg lifts when you're sitting at a desk. If you have a short errand to do, walk or bike instead of taking your car. Every day, look for little ways to expend more energy and get your body moving.
In order to prevent boredom and to improve your conditioning results, try to vary your workout routine. If you always walk, try going for a bike ride, a swim, or jog instead. Or, try new calisthenics or weight lifting routines. If you always do the same activities every time you exercise, you may find that your body adjusts to that routine. Each activity uses different muscles. Therefore, you can get the maximum benefit from trying a variety of exercises like: yoga, disc golfing, cycling, rowing, basketball, walking, or swimming. Plus, you might find a new type of exercise that you really enjoy!

- Image 1: Tony Mar
Sleep is another factor that can significantly affect our health and perceptions of stress. In fact, according to the National Sleep Foundation, lack of sleep can lead to problems completing tasks, concentrating and making decisions as well as risky actions. If you're consistently tired during the day it becomes very difficult to focus in class and you are likely crabby towards friends. Obviously, sleep is important! Different people require different amounts to be at their best, but current research generally recommends that adults should try to get an average of eight hours of sleep each night to maintain alertness and health. Of course the quality of your sleep matters just as much, if not more, than the quantity.

So, how does a person get a good night’s sleep? As you’re probably aware, this is easier for some than it is for others. It can also be tough to do this while you’re in college, with varying schedules, potential roommate issues, and other factors to consider. There are, however, some things we all can do to help ourselves sleep better. A few recommendations would include the following:

- Establish a regular, relaxing bedtime routine. Preferably your bedtime routine will involve doing something quiet and calming like reading a book in bed, listening to relaxing music, taking a bath, or meditating. These are not only great for sleep but for stress management in general. Watching TV or surfing the internet are not good ideas, as they stimulate brain activity and will probably make it harder for you to fall asleep.
- A good sleep environment is dark, quiet, comfortable, cool and is on a comfortable mattress and pillows. You’ll sleep better—and feel better the next day!
- Remember to be active throughout the day. Compared to people who are sedentary, those who exercise regularly and lead active lifestyles often have fewer sleep problems—not to mention all the other stress-management benefits of exercise!
- Avoid caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol before bedtime. Each of these substances can impair your sleep. Caffeine and nicotine can cause you to have trouble falling asleep because they are stimulants. A college student might be inclined to pick up a cup of coffee or energy drink if they haven’t slept well without first considering that it might affect the next night’s sleep. Alcohol inhibits deep restful sleep. So, even if you fall asleep faster when you’ve been drinking, you’re less likely to feel rested in the morning.
- Try to maintain a regular sleep schedule. In other words, try to go to bed at about the same time each night and get up at about the same time each morning. If you maintain a regular schedule, you’ll fall asleep more easily and sleep better as well.
We all have our own internal clock or body rhythm – and every person’s is unique and different from the rhythms of others. If you think about your typical week in an objective manner, you'll probably notice certain patterns: times you wake up, go to sleep, eat, and exercise. The timing of some of these activities is definitely dictated by your schedule, but if you ask yourself what your body seems to prefer in terms of times of waking, sleeping, and eating, you'll probably get insight into your body clock or rhythm.

Many students find that the demands and opportunities of college pose significant challenges to their body rhythms. As much as you can, though, it's a good idea to try to tailor your schedule so that it matches your preferred body rhythms as much as possible. So, if you're really not a morning person, try not to schedule 8 am classes! Alternately, if you find that you're most productive before 2 pm, try to schedule most of your classes in the morning and early afternoon. If you really like to work out after 4 pm and you absolutely detest exercising in the morning, organize your schedule around these preferences. Your body has a clear way of communicating its needs, if only you'll listen to it!
Eating a healthy diet, being physically active, and getting good sleep are all factors that can help you maintain your health and thus, help prevent stress. But, they’re not the only factors to consider. Here are a few other proactive steps we should include:

- Be sure to schedule an annual physical. If possible, try to have a physical every year or so. A yearly doctor’s visit is a good idea for many reasons. Not only will the doctor assess your basic health indicators, but they will also be able to answer any medical or health questions you might have. Establishing an ongoing relationship with your doctor can make appointments more comfortable. Plus, a preventative appointment could help catch a treatable condition that would lead to much more stress if untreated.
- Being sick makes it really hard to keep up with schoolwork. It can be very stressful to fall behind. Why not avoid this by getting a flu shot. College campuses are great breeding grounds for viruses, especially the influenza type! Most campuses offer very low-cost or even free flu shots for students every fall. Be sure to take advantage of this.
- Brush and floss your teeth daily and get regular dental check-ups. Dental health issues can be huge stressors. Taking care of your teeth will help prevent cavities, tooth infections, and other stressful conditions.
Our goal in this lesson has been to introduce a few issues that can have a huge impact on your life, health, and experience of stress. We realize that we've just scratched the surface of nutrition, fitness, sleep, and tips for a healthy lifestyle. If you're hungry for more detail on any of these topics, visit the resources we've listed for this lesson.

Rothenberger Institute's Sleep, Eat and Exercise Course (www.ri.umn.edu)
Congratulations!
You've reached the end of Lesson 13: Healthy Lifestyles.

Please review the resource links below from this lesson for more information about lesson-related topics.

Next Lesson:
Why not continue with Lesson 14: Don't Worry, Be Happy!
It's 21 pages long and will take about 26 minutes

Continue (/Viewer/Course/Main?LessonId=9&CourseId=3&LocationId=2)
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