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Body & Spirit

Changing Your Health Destiny

NO MATTER WHAT AILMENT IS LURKING IN YOUR FAMILY TREE, YOU HAVE THE POWER TO REDUCE YOUR RISK AND EMBRACE WELLNESS **BY GINA ROBERTS-GREY**

Just because a health condition such as heart disease, cancer or diabetes runs in your family doesn't mean it has to be your fate. You may not have any say in whether you look like your grandmother, but you can control whether you'll share her medical concerns. "Genes provide a setting for your health, but your daily habits determine what actually goes on," says Randall Wright, M.D., director of the

Neurovascular Institute at the Conroe Regional Medical Center in Texas and author of *The Wright Choice: Your Family's Prescription for Healthy Eating, Modern Fitness and Saving Money* (Intouch Media Health Network). "You're not doomed to the same health as your family members." By changing your lifestyle, you can turn the odds in your favor. Here are some common conditions and how to curtail them. ▶

HEART DISEASE

Family history isn't just shared genetics; it's a shared environment and lifestyle, points out John M. Flack, M.D., chairman of the department of internal medicine at Wayne State University School of Medicine in Detroit. "Heart disease runs in families because all the family members make the same mistakes—they don't exercise, eat fatty foods and fall into the same patterns," he asserts. The good news, says Flack, is that you can create a healthier future by replacing those familiar patterns with better habits, such as the following:

EAT MORE NUTRIENT-RICH FOODS. Aim to eat seven to nine servings of fruits and veggies every day. Save the baked goods and

fried foods for an occasional treat. This will help keep your cholesterol and blood pressure down, as well as reduce the buildup of plaque in your arteries.

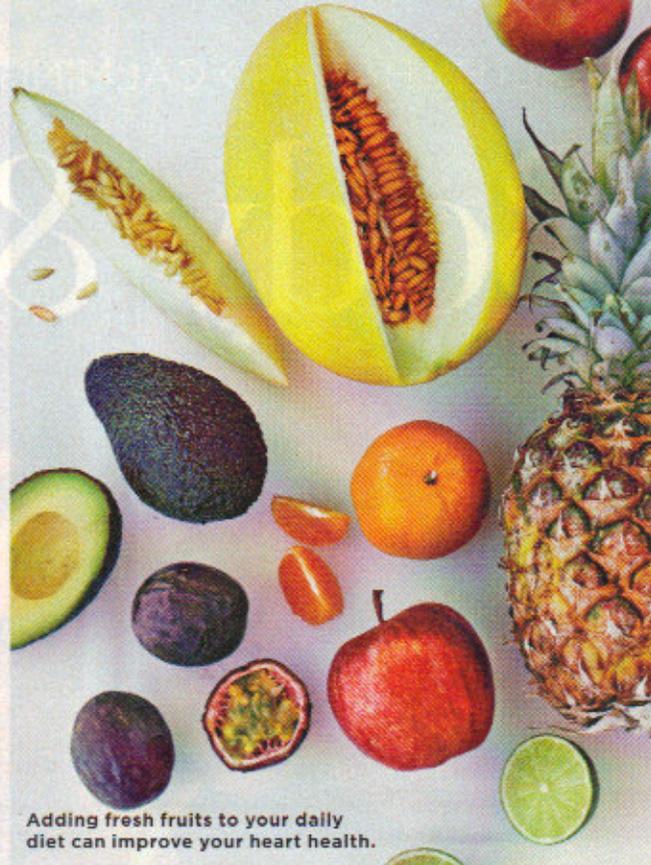
GET A LITTLE EXERCISE EVERY DAY. Get out of the mind-set that if you're not going to a gym or doing an entire workout DVD, you may as well not bother doing anything. "Even if it's only for 10 or 20 minutes, some exercise is better than none," says Flack. A good cardio workout will whittle your waist and strengthen your heart.

IF YOU SMOKE, QUIT. Smoking damages the protective lining of arteries, putting you at greater risk of cardiac complications. Call the National Cancer Institute's Quitline to speak to counselors today at 877-44U-QUIT (877-448-7848).

SING OFTEN. Belting out just two songs can lower blood pressure by as much as 25 percent, according to Harvard scientists. With high blood pressure, the heart has to work harder, and in time, this could lead to a heart attack.

GET REGULAR DENTAL CHECKUPS. A sparkling smile can lower the risk of heart disease by 24 percent and stroke by 13 percent, according to new research. The professional cleaning helps reduce bacteria growth that can cause heart disease or stroke.

CUE UP THE COMEDY. Thirty minutes of laughing at sitcoms and other shows can open up your arteries,



Adding fresh fruits to your daily diet can improve your heart health.

allowing blood to flow more freely and reducing your blood pressure, according to a study published in the *American Journal of Cardiology*. The heart-healthy boost lasts up to 24 hours.

OBESITY Cooking meals full of fat, salt and butter is often a way to pass on family health challenges. To honor family traditions while preserving your health, start by being mindful of portion size. "Read labels to determine how big one serving actually is," says Karen Cooper, D.O., associate staff physician at Cleveland Clinic's Bariatric and Metabolic Institute. In addition to keeping an eye on portion sizes, encourage relatives to maintain an active lifestyle. These tips will also help you shed—or keep off—excess pounds.

OPT FOR EXTRA STEPS. "Little changes can provide a lot of beneficial exercise you don't realize you're doing,"

says Rose Marie Robertson, M.D., chief science officer for the American Heart Association. Park in the space farthest from the grocery store, mall or your office door. Walk around the house when you're on the phone. Make multiple trips to put away laundry. You'll burn up to 100 more calories a day than if you sat still.

WALK ON THE WILD SIDE. Strolling through the mall is good, but walking in a park or on a tree-lined path is even better. Researchers found walking in woodsy places or those with some greenery lowers the stress hormone cortisol by almost 16 percent. It's a double benefit, since cortisol affects how much fat is stored in our body.

CAN THE SODA. Downing two or more sugar-sweetened beverages a day may expand your waistline, according to the American Heart Association. Instead, float >

REWRITE YOUR FAMILY'S HEALTH HISTORY

Take a pledge to adopt positive lifestyle changes and talk to your loved ones at your next family get-together about starting some new, healthier family traditions. The small steps you take to improve your health helps the whole family. "You set the stage for your kids to develop better habits and inspire other family members to take similar steps," says Wright. "And that can add up to big rewards."

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BODY & SPIRIT | FAMILY HEALTH

a slice of lemon, orange or cucumber in a glass of plain water or, if you miss the fizz, seltzer.

CANCER

"It is absolutely possible to avoid following in family footsteps and developing most cancers," says Lauren Bowling, M.S., a licensed genetic counselor at Loyola University Medical Center in Maywood, Illinois. "In general, 90 to 95 percent of cancer is not purely hereditary, so it's unlikely you're destined to develop cancer because a family member did." One of the most important things anyone can do to decrease his or her cancer risk is to maintain a healthy weight. This is especially true for women. "Many breast cancers are sensitive to hormones, especially estrogen, which can cause them to grow," says Bowling. "In postmenopausal women, estrogen is primarily made from excess fat, making those women who are overweight more susceptible to the disease." In addition to watching your weight, following early detection and screening guidelines and avoiding smoking and excessive alcohol can reduce your odds of any cancer. Here are other ways to cut your chances:

TAKE AN ASPIRIN A DAY.

Researchers at Oxford University in the U.K. recently published several studies that found that for middle-aged people, a daily dose of aspirin can cut the risk of developing several cancers, with effects starting after only two to three years. The researchers propose that a daily aspirin regimen may also prevent an existing, localized cancer from spreading to other parts of the body. Talk to your doctor to find out if adding aspirin to your daily regimen is recommended for you, as taking one may increase the risk of stomach bleeding and ulcers. If you

get the okay, wash down one aspirin with eight ounces of water to increase absorption in the stomach.

RETHINK RED MEAT. A new study published in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* says there's a direct link between eating red meat and a 10 to 16 percent increased risk of cancer.

On the flip side, eating healthier proteins like fish, poultry, nuts and legumes is associated with a lower risk. Researchers speculate that red meat, especially processed red meat (lunch meat or meat used in packaged foods) contains nitrates, sodium and other ingredients linked to cancer.

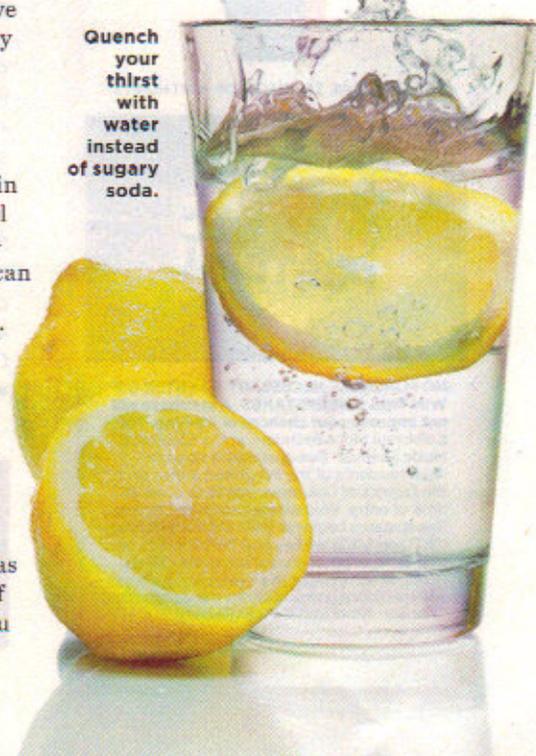
SIP ON THIS. Brew a cup of yerba mate tea, also called Mate tea. A recent University of Illinois study found that yerba mate can kill off colon cancer cells by causing them to self-destruct.

DIABETES

"Genetics is a major risk factor in the development of type 2 diabetes, but being overweight and physically inactive can also play an important role," says Constance Brown-Riggs,



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USE #94:

levels. Make the switch to brown rice, which has four times more fiber per cup than white rice. More fiber also means you'll feel full longer, and brown rice has a lower glycemic index, which translates to a much more muted effect on blood sugar.

ADD SOME SPICE TO YOUR LIFE. Several

USDA studies found a link between cinnamon intake and a decreased risk of diabetes and heart disease. To tap into cinnamon's powers, sprinkle 1/2 teaspoon on your morning oatmeal or other whole grain cereal or perk up low-fat vanilla yogurt with a sprinkle. A separate study concluded that a daily dose of about 1 teaspoon of curcumin, a component of the spice turmeric, may also prevent the development of diabetes. Turmeric is great in vegetable soups, Indian curries and chili.

THE POWER OF TEN

M.S.Ed., a registered dietitian, spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and author of *The African American Guide to Living Well With Diabetes* (Career Press). "The good news is that while genetics is a major risk factor, a diabetes diagnosis is not inevitable." Since being overweight or obese increases the risk of insulin resistance, a major contributor to type 2 diabetes, "weight loss will reduce diabetes risk by improving insulin resistance, enabling the body to use sugar and insulin more efficiently," says Brown-Riggs. Other lifestyle changes to make:

HOLD OFF ON WHITE RICE.

Eating white rice ups your chances of developing type 2 diabetes by 10 to 27 percent, according to a new Harvard study. White rice has a high glycemic index, meaning it raises your body's blood sugar



7 percent of her body weight and could see an average reduction of 4 to 6 points off her blood pressure," says John M. Flack, M.D.

Lower your bad cholesterol by more than 10 percent, further cutting your risk for heart disease.

Diminish your risk of sleep apnea because your airways will be wider, allowing you to breathe correctly. Sleep apnea has been associated with a 68 percent chance of having high blood pressure, a risk factor for stroke and heart disease.

Alleviate knee pain: One study found that women of normal height lowered their risk of osteoarthritis in their knees by half for every 11 pounds they lost.

Hoping to drop some extra pounds? Doctors say instead of trying to tackle a big weight loss goal—say, losing 20, 30 or 50 pounds—break down the task into 10-pound increments. Losing just 10 pounds can dramatically boost your overall health, says Dawn J. Leonard, M.D., medical director of the Herman & Walter Samuelson Breast Care Center at Northwest Hospital in Randallstown, Maryland. **And that's just for starters. Losing just 10 pounds can also:**

Reduce the risk of getting type 2 diabetes by 58 percent.

Lower your risk of heart disease. "If a woman weighing 150 pounds lost just 10 pounds, she would shed