

Knowing the Difference Makes the Difference: Men's Health and Men's Fitness

If you want to be the picture of men's health - that is, be on the cover of Men's Health Magazine - prepare to be ripped, or at the very least have a jawline so strong that people assume you have eight-pack abs. As a less-than-buff young man, constant images like these not only challenge my masculine identity, they make me forget there is a difference between fitness and health.

The problems with blurring the lines between health and fitness are numerous, and they're constant, not just during Men's Health Month in June. And they are generational, starting even before puberty, lasting through young adulthood, and still present for senior men. Studies have shown that men suffer mentally from not conforming to these idealized standards, and other studies have shown that men suffer physically from striving for bodies worthy of a magazine cover rather than for healthy, balanced lifestyles.

According to Dr. Todd Walter, a young male physician at Family Medicine in Landrum, that "lifestyle" is going to be different for each man.

"Men should see their physicians to discuss which health decisions are best for them," Walter says. "As a doctor, I can't tell all men, for instance, to run 30 minutes a day for exercise when some of them may be at risk for a cardiac event. Every man is different."

What's the same for all men, however, is the importance of diet, exercise, and being conscious of health-related changes as we grow and age. Dr. Walter says that these three actions are important in both fitness and wellness.

"Of course, high-performance fitness is important, but men can be fit and have high cholesterol. Men can be fit but have coronary disease, high blood pressure, pre-cancerous lesions, or other health problems," he says. "It's important to know the difference and focus on both. Both contribute to your overall health."

With lifelong societal expectations for all men's bodies, however, simply knowing the difference between fitness and wellness isn't always enough to help us achieve either one. Dr. Walter says making changes and being healthy is often a family affair.

Dr. Walter suggests that "If a diabetic starts eating healthier, then the whole the family needs to start eating healthier to help him stay on track." Making better health decisions is easier if everyone in a man's household "buys into the idea of getting healthier."

Support from loved ones is crucial in part because “some men feel invincible,” Walter says. “Men often think, ‘Well, I’m not having any problems; therefore, I don’t need to see a doctor.’ But it’s important to see a physician before you have those problems, especially for older men.”

With the month of June designated to bring attention to men’s health, it’s important to listen to health and wellness advice of your physician:

*Get routine screenings to keep a check on blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugars according to national guidelines. And consider other appropriate testing, such as for prostate and colon cancer, as well as depression screening.

*Reduce and manage your stress. Stress takes a unique toll on men’s health, affecting them both mentally and physically. Repeated stress brings severe wear and tear on the body, and research has established that it is a risk factor in the development of heart disease. Inherited stress can also increase the risk of early heart disease.

*Go against the male tendency to avoid healthcare and regular checkups. Screening tests can often find chronic diseases such as diabetes, obesity, hypertension and heart disease early when they are easier to treat. Keep a close eye on changes in your mental and physical state so you know when you may need to see a doctor.

To all the men out there, take steps now to protect your health and wellness. Being the picture of men’s health doesn’t mean having abs, pecs, and arms worthy of a photo shoot; it means dieting, exercising, and making a commitment to see your primary care physician. It means following through with wellness exams, managing stress and good habits with diet and exercise — Men’s Health Month, next month, and every single day.

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Polk Fit, Fresh and Friendly encourages men to see their family physician or primary care provider annually to keep a check on their health and wellness. To receive a directory of local physicians, call (828) 894-0972 or click on the Physicians tab at www.SaintLukesHospital.com. Also, Polk Health Center–Blue Ridge Community Health Services, located at 155 West Mills Street in Columbus Commons in Columbus, is accepting new patients. Call (828) 894-2222 to make an appointment; walk-ins are welcome.

Polk Fit, Fresh and Friendly (PF3) is a group of 80+ community members, leaders and health professionals, all working together to plan and implement effective strategies to promote wellness in our community. We welcome any individual who is interested in joining us to make our community a healthier place for all. For more information and a list of our 2016 meeting dates, please visit our website at www.polkfitfreshandfriendly.org.

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