

[IMAGE]

Dont Delay Start Today

Start Shaping Up for Summer Now

By Tina Beychok

We all want to look good for the summer - that glorious season of bathing suits, shorts and T-shirts. But there's plenty of time between now and then, right? Wrong!

The time to start working toward that beach-ready body is now. Summer may seem off in the distance, but the best way to start prepping for it is by starting way ahead of time. Bodybuilder.com has some good advice on how the average person can maintain their waistline and exercise regimen.

Keep a food journal. Write down everything you eat. It's amazing how many calories we take in without realizing it. You need to be aware of exactly how much you are putting in your mouth each day. You'd be surprised the number of extra calories we eat during a busy day.

Clean out the pantry and fridge. Replace those cookies and chips with healthier snacks like raw, unsalted almonds, granola, raw vegetables and high-fiber fruit such as apples and bananas to fill you up.

A weight scale with a clock embedded in its head. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark **Restock with healthier foods.** Now that you have gotten rid of the bad, it's time to replace it with the good. Here are a few recommendations:

- Brown rice, oatmeal, steel-cut oats, whole-wheat bread
- Eggs
- Canned tuna
- Lean protein such as chicken, fish and beef
- Green vegetables (peppers, broccoli, celery, green beans and cucumbers)
- Fruits (make sure they are low on the glycemic index, such as strawberries and melon) - you can ask your doctor for more information on which fruits to choose
- Non-fat cottage cheese, yogurt and milk

Good eats. You've gotten rid of the bad stuff and restocked with the good. Now what? Here's a sample menu for the day:

- *Breakfast:* Steel-cut oats, whey protein and blueberries; or egg-white omelet, whole wheat toast and melon; or oatmeal, cottage cheese and strawberries.
- *Snack One:* Protein bar; or whey protein and small piece of fruit; or cottage cheese with fruit; or yogurt with strawberries.
- *Lunch:* Grilled chicken, beef or fish, with salad and brown rice; or tuna on rye bread; or oven-roasted turkey with sweet potato and green vegetables.
- *Snack Two:* Choose one of the Snack One options (see above).
- *Dinner:* Grilled chicken or fish with salad and green vegetables.

Vitamins for fitness. Healthy food is great, but you may still need a boost. This is where vitamins come into play. A strong vitamin regimen will help boost your immune system and build healthy bones and muscles. The Department of Nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health has a comprehensive list of vitamins, what they do and the recommended daily doses at www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/vitamins.html.

Cardio counts. Obviously, eating right is only part of the equation. The other part is to get moving. Bodybuilder.com has a beginning cardio routine that almost anyone can adopt.

- Begin by walking three to five times a week (moderate pace).
- By the end of the first week, start increasing the speed or duration of the walk.
- As your pace and endurance increase, start interval training - alternating between very fast and moderate levels of walking (one minute on, followed by one minute off).
- Eventually, transition from walking to a slow jog, and alternate between the two.
- Increase the duration of the jog to five minutes of jogging, followed by one minute of walking.
- Keep increasing the amount of time you jog vs. walk, to 10 and then 15 minutes.
- When you can jog for 20 minutes at a time, start interval training again, alternating between short bursts of running (faster than jogging) and a quick recovery jog.
- Increase the length of time you run.

Strong body and a strong mind. OK, so now we are eating right and have a cardio routine. What else? The American Council on Exercise recommends starting a strength-training/resistance program. Don't try anything too intimidating at first - your goal isn't to be a hulking bodybuilder. Neither do you need to join a fancy expensive gym. Just 20 minutes of basic strength exercises two days a week will help firm and tone your whole body. Strength training also can increase your metabolism, which will cause you to burn more calories, even when resting. You can find a list of simple exercises at www.acefitness.org/getfit/freeexercise.aspx.

A granola bar broken in half. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Now you know what to do. You're ready to get that fantastic summer body. Well, not quite. Don't rush into a sudden weight-loss program. The American Council on Exercise and Cynthia Sass, a registered dietician and spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association, both caution that last-minute gym trips and crash diets are not the way to go.

Avoid fad diets. Fad diets that eliminate essential nutrients and carbohydrates only contribute to low energy and irritability. The easiest way to diet is to cut back portion sizes. For example, eat two-thirds the amount you normally would. Stock up on fruits and vegetables, which are full of fiber, fill you up and satisfy your appetite.

An inshape woman measuring her waist with a tape measure. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark

There's no such thing as spot reduction. Research has yet to demonstrate it is physiologically possible to take inches off one particular part of the body. In fact, numerous studies have resoundingly refuted this claim. No amount of crunches or leg lifts will give you those coveted "six-pack" abs. The American Council on Exercise suggests eating a low-fat diet and following an exercise program that combines aerobic activity and strength training to effectively shape your body.

Don't go overboard. As surprising as it may sound, losing too much weight too fast could actually undermine your goals. If you suddenly go from couch potato to fitness fanatic, you could increase your risk for injury. Additionally, if you shed more than two pounds a week, you're losing muscle along with fat. According to the American Dietetic Association, severely restricting your diet - by cutting more than 500 calories a day - also can defeat your weight-loss efforts. This can lead to cravings, irritability and even a slower metabolism as your body fights to hang on to fuel. And while you may have suddenly dropped all that weight, it increases your odds of packing it back on again at the end of summer.

The key element in all of this is: Don't delay. Summer may be two or three months away on the calendar, but starting now with a sensible diet and exercise routine is the safe, healthy way to have a body ready to go for fun in the sun. And besides, even if you're not planning to take a trip to the beach or lake this summer, it's important to stay active and eat right, now and throughout the year.

Tina Beychok is an associate editor of To Your Health. Direct questions and comments to editor -at- toyourhealth.com.

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