

JLC Issue Corner: *This is the eighth in a series of articles touching on some of the social challenges in Calgary. We'd like to give you some food for thought by showing how our JLC Healthy and Active Living initiatives fit into the bigger picture.*

A Tale of Exercise, Sport, and Fitness

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The Role of Exercise in Adult Life

Exercise is “in” these days. People of all ages in every walk of life are getting the message that regular exercise – the kind you enjoy and in amounts you can tolerate – is good for you. Mid-distance running athletes, like my 75-year-old active patient Mary, are training their bodies to perform better one way or another. Although Mary runs outside for thirty minutes at 5.0 miles an hour every morning before breakfast, there are many other ways to exercise regardless of one’s age – bicycling (stationary or mobile), gliding on a cross-country machine, walking outdoors when the weather permits (or in the mall when it does not), jogging, even ballroom dancing! However, there are many “cardio athletes” who prefer activities that allow body fat to be stripped away from the body. The downside to this ‘quick fix’ is that the muscles -- the special ingredient that keeps the body fat off – will shrink, unless there is some form of weight-training included in the exercise program.



Sport and the Urban Family

Recently, one of my patients who had several relatives diagnosed for depression and a range of various heart conditions, asked me what he, his family, and children could do to minimize their own vulnerability. After reviewing with him a list of known factors related to depression and heart attacks, he was discouraged. “The bottom line, as I see it,” he said, “is that just being alive is a struggle. Anything I wear, drink, eat, breathe or do, can apparently stress me out!” He was wrong because, while it is true that your personal lifestyle and work habits, air, water and food pollution,, excessive alcohol and tobacco use, solar radiation and a host of chemicals and certain infections can increase your risk of depression and/or heart attack, there is always something you and your family can do to help prevent it.



Being engaged in a family sport such as tennis or soccer can encourage an extensive social support system as well promote healthy, active living. Develop a buddy system among family members so that each one can call another to make sure their family buddy attends the practice sessions or games. This also provides a second support person with whom to discuss progress and goals. By the same token, the sport must not include individual behaviors that threaten to undermine positive group dynamics. Most families will have a chronic complainer or generally disruptive family member who must be dealt with early on to avoid tendencies for them to monopolize the family’s emotional health. Parents have an excellent opportunity to provide accurate information and inspire their children to be active outdoors and choose to eat well. As a result, the family that demonstrates good sportsmanship is a great role model for following a healthy lifestyle and can encourage other families to do the same.

Fitness for Children

Over the past few years there has been an abundance of literature citing the poor physical fitness status of Canadian and American children. One of the most alarming statistics comes from the National Children and Youth Fitness Study, which reported that approximately 20 percent of this nation's children and adolescents between the ages of 5 and 17 are considered obese. This figure is 50 percent higher than 25 years ago. Unfortunately, obese children have a much higher probability of becoming obese adults. It is important to get children interested and involved in exercise through sport activities (i.e. inline skating, dodge ball, martial arts and etc.). The type of exercise chosen must be enjoyable and appropriate for the size, gender, age, and fitness level of the child. The last thing a child needs is to be the smallest person in gym class who cannot finish the obstacle course which was designed to accommodate their bigger classmates. In all likelihood, the gym teacher will not say the child is out of shape, but rather advise them to see a doctor to get an asthma inhaler.



A Recipe for Active Living

The American Council on Exercise has developed a recipe for active living for urban families. Their basic ingredients include the following: 1) Participate in a variety of activities that involve repetitive movements against opposing force; 2) Use core stability training with children; 3) Tie a rope to a wall and have children pull themselves toward the wall while sitting on a piece of carpet; 4) Have teenagers alternate between push-ups and curl-ups with a medicine ball; 5) Resistance training should be just one component of a comprehensive, fitness program for seniors; 6) Have a physical activity readiness questionnaire approved by your physician before starting any form of structured exercise; 7) Exercise training programs need to be matched to the age and maturity of the individual; 8) Individuals should be taught to breathe properly during exercise. Try out the recipe and see if it pulls your family out of the 'doldrums' and makes everyone feel groovy.

Resources:

Cotton, T. and Goldstein, R. *Aerobics Instructor Manual: Adherence and Motivation*. San Diego, CA: American Council of Exercise.

Rosenfeld, Isadore. *Doctor, What Should I Eat?: Nutrition Prescriptions for Ailments in Which Diet Can Really Make a Difference*. New York: Warner Books, Inc. 2000.

Wilmore, J and D. Costill. *Physiology of Sport and Exercise: Prescription of Exercise for Health and Fitness*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics. 2000.