

Establishing Your Health Baseline

Healthy living involves much more than just controlling your weight

BY CHRISTOPHER TOMLIN

In July 2008, the Cincinnati Reds traded veteran outfielder Ken Griffey Jr. to the Chicago White Sox. During the years before this monumental move, local sports call-in shows, message boards and interoffice chatter about the slugger seemed to be consistent: Why can't he get healthy? Why is he always hurt? What's wrong with him?

Junior was 38 years old at the time of the trade, well up in years for a major league ballplayer. It's a valid argument that the injuries that plagued him were natural ones for any individual running, diving and sliding 163 days of the year.

And in case you haven't noticed, you might not be exactly in the same shape you were in high school. All of us — yes, beloved baseball heroes included — feel the strain as our bodies naturally age.

As we get older, certain words begin to creep into our glossary. Diastolic. Hypertension. Triglyceride. Once the terminologies of our parents and grandparents, these words slowly and inconveniently become our own.

"As we progress further into life," says Doug Hall, a personal trainer for Urban Active Fitness, "we start to more and more realize that it's not all about the way we look but what's going on internally."

Hall is one of those rare fitness authorities who places overall health above spectacular abs. He decries those who focus solely on the physical and stresses a rounded regime for overall health both inside and out.

"Too many times people focus on the scale, and that gives a false sense of security," Hall says. "I see a lot of 'I just need to do some cardio' or 'I just need to eat better.' That's totally false. There are way more factors involved in great health."

Creating a baseline of personal health allows an individual to gain a comprehensive portrait of one's health at any given time. Consider it the same as taking inventory.

A solid outline of the factors that keep overall good health consistent can be presented through a close and watchful eye over weight, body mass index, blood pressure, cholesterol and diet. An influx of additional weight is, of course, normally the first thing that tips off an individual to an increasingly out-of-shape status.

"An overweight person is putting a lot of stress on his or her internal organs," says Hall, whose employer, Urban Active, currently is hosting a "Biggest Winner" contest for patrons who achieve large percentages of decreased weight

in 2009. "A lot of people blame problems that come with being overweight on being older. We're a society that likes to see numbers. Like weight loss, it's something you can point to as a result."

Dr. Timothy Freeman of Alliance Primary Care in Cincinnati says that weight can be heavily affected as well by mental status.

"In general, our culture is high-pressure, which is detrimental in the long run," Freeman says. "I'd say a good 50 percent of the people I see every day have a weight issue connected to a psychological issue of some sort, like depression or low self-esteem."

Freeman's unofficial gauge for finding a target weight is 100 pounds for 5 feet of height plus 6 pounds for every additional inch.

"For optimal weight," he says, "it's good to stay within 30 pounds of the target. Obviously the closer the better."

Similarly, assessment of one's body mass index (BMI) uses an equation to establish a target weight. These body mass indexes, helpfully, can be calculated through several online widgets — the National Heart, Blood and Lung Institute at www.nhlbi.com, for instance, has one such calculator. Experts consider optimum numbers to be between 23.5 and 24.9 for men and between 22.0 and 23.4 for women.

"More body mass means you're forcing your bones and joints to support more weight," Freeman says. "As you age, more weight can lead to problems in the hips, knees and lower back and can even predispose you more toward eventual arthritis."

Studies have additionally shown that an increased BMI in women can become a potential risk factor for breast cancer.

When it comes to cholesterol, Freeman says he doesn't pay as much attention to the total sum as the sum of its parts, which gauge specifically both "good" cholesterol (HDL) and "bad" cholesterol (LDL). HDL levels optimally should sit at 45 or above, while LDL should be constrained to less than 130.

"Exercise has been proven to raise levels of HDL, as have foods that contain Omega-3, such as fish or fish oil supple-



PHOTO: THOMAS E. SMITH

Getting in shape at Urban Active.

ments," Freeman says. "A good rule of thumb for keeping cholesterol levels where they should be is a 30 percent fat diet."

Salt is a key component in curbing high blood pressure, Freeman says.

"If you try to stop eating salt, after a while your body stops realizing it's not getting it," he says. "Less than 130/80 is a good benchmark for good blood pressure, and once again stress levels can be a factor there too."

Hall argues, above all, that finding a regime that works for you — with manageable goals — is the key to keeping all the factors of good health in check.

"You didn't get out of shape in one day, so you can't get back in shape in one day," he says. "It happens slowly over a period of time. The only thing you can truly control is your mindset. It's not just body. It's body, mind and spirit." ©

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