

HEALTH

Firing on all cylinders

Want to be tough? Keep up your health maintenance schedule

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Special Contributor

Imagine never changing the oil in your automobile, never rotating the tires, never replacing worn-out hoses and belts, and ignoring a knocking engine. Then imagine how far you'd get before needing a tow truck.

Maintenance is the most important thing you can do to increase the performance and life span of a vehicle. The same goes for the human body.

Here are three things a man can do to improve his health.

Rotate the macho attitude

From that first fall on the playground, boys are told to take it like a man. A few years later, there they are, playing the sport of their choice, suffering through injuries to win one for the team. Be tough and fearless, they're told. Only sissies cry.

By the time they reach college, many young men have developed a tough-guy mentality, internalizing their feelings and ignoring mental and physical pain.

Could this mindset be one reason men are slower than women to consult doctors?

Dr. Gary Malone, chief of behavioral medicine at Baylor All Saints Medical Center at Fort Worth, believes there's a connection.

"As the male psyche develops, the persona of being a macho person is something that, internally, feels good, and actually works well most of the time. But this psychology often prevents a man from doing reasonable self-care.

"The way I see it, there's no honor in dropping dead from colon cancer because you didn't want to get a colonoscopy."

Reversing deep-rooted attitudes isn't easy, though, and most men still want to be seen as tough.

Not a problem, according to Thomas Van Hoose, a clinical assistant professor of psychiatry at UT Southwestern Medical Center. Instead of the macho mentality working against them, men can use it to their advantage with health

care, Dr. Van Hoose says. It's the old "take the bull by the horns" approach.

The key is to make sure that men feel like an essential part of their families.

"When men feel genuinely valued and cared about, when their sense of purpose is well-defined, men can, and will, do almost anything possible to maintain that value in their families."

Follow manufacturer's recommendations

"Men would never do to their cars what they do to their bodies," says registered dietitian Dee Rollins, who runs the Lifestyle Weight Management Center at Baylor Regional Medical Center at Grapevine. "The reason men are in such bad shape is because they don't understand what they're doing to their bodies. Once they understand, they're wonderful."

So what does Dr. Rollins recommend?

No diets. "Men say, 'Make me healthy, and give me a diet,' but I can't give them a diet," she says. "Diets don't work long term. Men have to change their lifestyle. We teach them how to eat healthy."

Healthy eating not only brings out the best performance in your body, it also can reduce your risk of disease, says registered dietitian Jo Ann Carson, professor of clinical nutrition at UT Southwestern. "Diseases like high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, these can be managed with some specific nutritional strategy. By eating a diet of moderate portions of lean meat, whole grains and nuts, with plenty of fruits and vegetables, even a genetic health risk can be lessened."

Adequate sleep is vital.

Men need eight hours a night, but they seldom achieve that. A

lack of sleep throws the body's chemistry off and can lead to excess weight.

Got stress? Too much stress results in high levels of cortisol in the bloodstream, which has been shown to increase abdominal fat. This is associated with health problems.

Portion control is crucial. If it fits in the palm of your hand, Dr. Rollins says, it's a good amount.

Watch what you eat. Anything that was in the Garden of Eden is perfect. Go easy on butter. Choose high fiber. Avoid simple carbs such as candies, cookies and cakes. Opt for fruit. Monitor the sauces you pour over meat; they're loaded with salt. Small changes can make a big difference.

Don't skip meals, especially breakfast.

"Skipping meals makes you ravenous," Dr. Rollins says.

Finally, exercise. It's the most important rule, Dr. Rollins says, because exercise "handles sleep problems, lowers stress, and people who exercise don't mess up their eating because they've put too much effort into caring for their body. Start by taking the stairs instead of the elevator, or parking farther from the door."

Get regular inspections

Your automobile may seem to be purring like a pampered cat, but it still needs yearly inspections, and so do men. Most health threats facing men are preventable, and annual checkups and screenings can detect problems early.

Dr. Sharon Reimold, clinical chief of cardiology at UT Southwestern, says that, from a preventive cardiology standpoint, men should be seen by age 30 so appropriate therapies for weight or cholesterol can be started. She also recommends that aspirin, as a daily preventive agent for heart attacks, be taken by most men, starting at age 40.

At the end of the day, if men want to fire on all cylinders where their bodies are concerned, it's within their power.

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♣ **Links:** Learn about the top 10 health threats for men. Good news: They're mostly preventable.

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