



The numbers are in: about 30.9 percent of our South Carolina residents are obese, and this extra weight increases their risk for heart disease, diabetes, several forms of cancer, and other serious medical conditions. While obesity rates may not be news to many of us, we're bringing this issue up now because March is the annual National Nutrition Month. But forget what month it is. The point is it's a reminder to all of us to eat healthy and exercise regularly.

We all have an idea of how important a combination of balanced diet and physical activity is for our health. Unfortunately, judging by the number of obese and overweight people in our area and across the country, far too many of us don't practice good dietary and lifestyle habits. Studies show that many Americans flat out ignore health and fitness guidelines. A few years ago, a study by AC Nielsen market research group reported that, even though we are aware of consequences of eating too many foods rich in artery-clogging fat, a staggering 60 million of us continue to consume fast food at least twice a week.

On the fitness front, the findings are alarming as well: last year, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that only two in 10 Americans get the recommended levels of exercise - at least 30 minutes of brisk activity on most days of the week. In the South Atlantic region where Beaufort SC is located, the numbers are closer to 1.5 in 10. More than a quarter of the population does not exercise at all. Put these numbers together and you will understand why we need to raise awareness of the importance of making good diet and fitness choices for better health and longer life.

Here are my suggestions for keeping your weight and health in check:

1. Be aware of how harmful certain foods and ingredients are. For example, too much saturated fat (often found in deep fried foods), sugar and salt, as well as processed meats and refined grains, are neither healthy nor nutritious. This kind of diet, if consumed regularly, will not only pile on pounds, but also lead to obesity-related illnesses, such as colon cancer, heart disease, and diabetes.

2. Get in the habit of eating fresh, fruits and vegetables, lean protein, and organic dairy products every day, and practice portion control. Remember, even if you eat mostly healthy foods, big portions and second servings may add on extra calories.

3. Exercise! The combination of a sensible diet and a regular exercise program is the best way to lose or maintain your weight, build up cardio endurance, strengthen your muscles, improve balance and flexibility, and get many other benefits that will boost your physical and mental health.

Ask your trainer for guidance and advice on how to achieve all these health and fitness goals through exercise and nutrition.