

Why smarter self-care is a win-win for doctors—and their patients

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Nutrition plays an important role in the maintenance of a person's health and well-being. While system level solutions to address physician burnout are most effective, self-care can also play a role. And a big part of self-care for physicians is eating right. By learning more about nutrition and keeping the topic front and center, physicians can take better care of themselves—and their patients.

The CME module, “Nutrition Science for Health and Longevity: What Every Physicians Needs to Know,” is enduring material and designated by the AMA for a maximum 4 *AMA PRA Category 1 Credit™*, and helps physicians begin an effective nutrition conversation with patients. The four-hour, self-paced course is developed and hosted by the Gaples Institute for Integrative Cardiology, a nonprofit focused on enhancing the role of nutrition and lifestyle in health care.

The course includes four modules that are distributed in collaboration with the AMA Ed Hub™, an online platform with high-quality CME/MOC from many trusted sources to support lifelong learning of physicians and other medical professionals. With topics relevant to you—including numerous CME modules on physician burnout—the AMA Ed Hub also offers an easy, streamlined way to find, take and track educational activities in one place, with automatic CME/MOC credit reporting for some state and specialty boards.

“Nutrition is a huge gap in physician training,” said AMA member Stephen Devries, MD, a cardiologist and executive director of the Gaples Institute in Deerfield, Illinois. “As a result, physicians tend to make decisions about their own health the same way the general public does, often based on what they read in the lay press.”

“Interestingly, recent physician training program guidelines stress the importance of a healthy diet for physician self-care and mitigation of burnout, but how can physicians make meaningful dietary changes themselves without a solid background in nutrition?” he said.

Dr. Devries shared these key tips that can help physicians—and their patients.

Skip high-caloric meals

Many physicians are stressed and don't have enough time to do what they need to do. And when it comes to eating, physicians are like many other Americans and too often choose a quick and convenient option such as fast food.

Although the donut or bag of fries might seem like an appealing distraction during a stressful day, most people find so-called “comfort food” to be distinctly uncomfortable half an hour later. However, meals made from colorful vegetables, whole grains, predominantly plant sourced proteins (beans and tofu) and fruit leave them feeling more alert and in a brighter mood throughout the day.

It's also important to think about the culture of eating in medical settings. Hospital noon conferences are often accompanied by pizza and sugar sweetened drinks, exactly the foods we urge our patient to avoid.

Learn more with the AMA about how to give patients good nutrition advice when time is short.

Practice what you preach

When physicians adopt healthy lifestyle practices, they are more likely to counsel their patients to do the same. Doctors should lead by example on healthy eating.

“As a first step, look in the mirror and work on making positive changes in your own diet, first and foremost because you deserve it,” said Dr. Devries. “But the kicker is that better self-care also translates into better patient care. You will be sharper and more available to your patients, and also more likely to counsel them to adopt healthier habits.”

Sharing how physicians overcame lifestyle related health challenges in their own lives—such as lack of time and stress—can also help advance discussions with patients.

“Most patients want to feel like their physician has a personal interest in them and nothing conveys a personal interest more than a physician or nurse who shares a bit of their own personal story and how it led to their own better health,” said Dr. Devries. “That is a great opportunity to increase trust.”

Read more about how burnout can hinder patient-physician communication.

Reconnect to sense of calling

Another factor that promotes burnout in medicine is a sense of lost professional purpose.

“Medicine has become so mechanized and algorithm-driven and electronic medical record-focused that some of the original appeal of medicine can get lost,” said Dr. Devries, adding that connecting with patients for even a “brief period of time on the topic of nutrition and lifestyle really brings physicians back to why they went into medicine in the first place.”

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