

Try these ideas to help patients drop those quarantine pounds

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Sara Berg

Senior News Writer

Patients with chronic disease are experiencing more stress, disrupted routines, and less access to indoor exercise spaces due to stay-at-home orders across the country. Even as the nation slowly reopens, many patients with prediabetes, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, or other chronic conditions might be hesitant to get back to their normal routines.

Nutrition and fitness should not fall to the wayside, but how can physicians help their patients remain active and eat healthy during these trying times? As a strong advocate for fitness and nutrition, AMA member Clay Hays, MD, a cardiologist and president of the Mississippi State Medical Association (MSMA), provides tips for physicians looking to help their patients eat healthy and remain active during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We talk about the pandemic pounds that people have gained since they’ve basically been in quarantine for the past two months because the gyms have all been closed and they can’t get around,” said Dr. Hays, who is also vice chair of the Southeastern Delegation to the AMA. “Fortunately, now that spring has come—and summer will be here—people can get out.”

Recommend going outside for a bike ride

In Jackson, Mississippi, there are a “series of walking trails that people can go to,” said Dr. Hays, adding that physicians can recommend patients go to a nearby trail for fitness activities, but “don’t try to get in a big group together.”

“Cycling is a wonderful sport and it’s easy to social distance because you can’t put 10 people on one bike,” he said. “You can get out and ride your bike in the neighborhood. A bike is always a good idea.”

“There are a lot of things that people can do to get out, plus it makes them feel better when they get out, burn a few calories, break a little sweat,” said Dr. Hays. “They just feel better. Me too—I have to do the same thing.”

But it doesn’t have to be cycling. Patients can participate in any activity that interests them if proper safety measures are followed, such as golf, running or walking.

Read more about how patients can start—and stick with—key lifestyle changes.

Lead by example on social media

An important way to share fitness and healthy eating tips is leading by example. Physicians can use their reach on social media to share their routines and show how they are finding ways to exercise or eat better.

“That’s really important because you’re supposed to be a leader of the team,” said Dr. Hays, who found a unique way to take advantage of social media while having fun.

Dr. Hays created the hashtag “#MSMA4Fitness” and placed it on a t-shirt to inspire physicians to share their commitment to a healthy lifestyle on social media.

“These dry-fit t-shirts are given to the physicians as part of their [MSMA] membership,” he said. “We give them a free T-shirt so when they go out in the community if they’re exercising or if they’re in a 5K or something like that they set the example to go exercise.”

“Another thing I like to do is I’ll take my phone for a lot of reasons, but as I run if I see other people exercising or little kids will write stuff in the street, I’ll take pictures of these things and I’ll put them up on our Twitter page,” said Dr. Hays, adding that he does it to encourage other people to get out because “it’s a beautiful morning to exercise.”

He also uses social media to show different places that people can go to remain active around the city. It may spark someone’s interest when it is an area that they might not have known about that is safe for walking, running or biking.

Learn more about how to strengthen long-distance care for chronic disease patients, including health advice for what can be done at home.

Make it a team effort and cook together

With many restaurants closed to in-person dining, people have been making more of their own meals. Cooking at home has a host of benefits, such as a reduction in salt consumption. It allows patients—even physicians and other health professionals—to know exactly what ingredients are being used in their meal.

Dr. Hays' wife has always loved to cook and now has taken the opportunity to experiment in the kitchen.

“She’s trying all these new recipe ideas and it’s fun to do things together,” Dr. Hays said, adding that it is a “positive de-stressor.”

To add to the benefits of cooking at home, Dr. Hays recommends making it a team effort by trying new things and creating meals together. At his house, his wife has taken on the task of teaching their sons how to cook.

“My sons didn’t know anything about cooking and so it gave my wife an opportunity to teach them,” he said. “She showed them how to make some fresh steamed vegetables and they said, ‘Mom, this actually tastes pretty good.’”

“It’s a fun thing to do together,” said Dr. Hays. “It’s about creating a community and meeting with your family. It’s just a good thing.”

The AMA has developed a COVID-19 resource center as well as a physician’s guide to COVID-19 to give doctors a comprehensive place to find the latest resources and updates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization.