

# HEALTH ACTION CAMPAIGN

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because prevention is better than cure

## Making Healthy Choices



## A Beginner's Guide

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## Why bother to change?

For some of us, thinking about the risks of an unhealthy lifestyle can be enough to prompt action. For example, understanding the risk of lung cancer might prompt some of us to quit smoking.

However, this doesn't work for everyone. If thinking about negative consequences – such as increased risk of disease – makes you anxious instead of motivated, try thinking about the simple day-to-day benefits that you'll see almost immediately if you change for the better.

The good news is that following a healthy lifestyle isn't just good for your health. It can improve how you look, your energy, your self-confidence, your happiness – and possibly even your career (with research suggesting employers are less likely to employ someone who is overweight or obese). For example:

**Eating a healthy diet** means better looking skin, hair and nails, improved bowel health and more energy.

**Quitting smoking** means you'll save money, have better smelling breath and clothing, have younger looking skin and more attractive teeth, and be able to walk and run without getting breathless.

**Drinking less alcohol** means you'll save money on alcohol and taxis, have increased energy and concentration, and be less likely to embarrass yourself on a night out.

**Getting fit** means lower stress levels, increased happiness, weight loss, better flexibility, and reduced impact from the effects of ageing.

## Turning what we know into what we do

We all know we should do more of the things that are good for us. For example, we know that exercise and a healthy diet are good for our health, while smoking and too much alcohol are bad. The challenge is often turning what we *know* into what we *do*.

Whether it's quitting smoking, eating less sugar, exercising more or losing weight, making positive changes that are sustainable isn't always as easy as it sounds. Knowing which approaches have been proven to help change our behaviour can be a good starting point. Here are some examples:

### 1. Find a personal motivation

Studies, like one on the *Drinkaware* app, have shown that behaviour change initiatives – such as health apps or counselling programmes – tend to be more effective if you are already committed to making a change. So, find a personal motivation to ensure you're the one driving the lifestyle change. You're more likely to be successful if you're already committed to making changes. Maintain a clear focus on the end goal and why it's important to you on a personal level – for instance for you, your family or your career.

### 2. Have confidence in your ability to make a change

Once you've decided you want to change something about your lifestyle, it's important to have confidence in your ability to make that change to reach the desired outcome. It's what psychologists call Self-efficacy and is a key part of the Health Belief Model. Setting goals and seeking support or guidance can really help with this.

### 3. Set SMART goals and measure success

Rome wasn't built in a day. Setting SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and with a clear Time frame) can help. You can set SMART goals for most types of health behaviour, like how much exercise you aim to take, weight you plan to lose, portions of fruit and vegetables to eat – or conversely how much you're going to reduce your consumption of alcohol, junk food or cigarettes.

You can then track your progress. Because you'll be able to see how much you've achieved as you move closer to your end goal this can help you maintain your healthy lifestyle. You can self-monitor with apps and

online tools, or simply using a notebook and pen. Reminding yourself of how far you've come can help reboot motivation if you're feeling like giving up.

#### **4. Find what works for you**

A range of behaviour change interventions can help you keep on track. These include health and fitness classes, support groups, counselling, subscribing to motivational texts and emails and using a health app. Find out which work best for you.

#### **5. Seek support from those around you**

Support from your family and friends can really help with long-term health behaviour change. So, make sure the people close to you understand that you're serious about making a change and know how they can help. Teaming up with others towards a shared goal can also be really beneficial, so consider joining a support group or finding an online community with the same goals as you.

#### **6. Be flexible to stay on track**

Effective behaviour change isn't just about eating better or walking more for a few weeks. It's also about keeping up those changes long term. One recent study explored exercising psychological flexibility as a means to achieving long term results. This means accepting and managing difficult thoughts or feelings to help you better regulate your behaviour. For example, a person on a diet might learn to be mindful and *observe* an urge to eat a chocolate cake without necessarily attempting to *get rid* of that urge. The idea is that you're able to make changes that are consistent with your chosen values (i.e. having a healthy lifestyle) even when faced with difficult thoughts, emotions, or temptations.

These are some broad initial guidelines, based on health behaviour change research. In the rest of this guide we focus on specific examples, including:

Eating more healthily

Being more physically active

Losing weight

Looking after your mental health

Quitting smoking

Avoiding alcohol and drug abuse

## Eating more healthily



*“A healthy balanced diet is the foundation to good health.”*  
Dr Alison Tedstone, Chief Nutritionist, Public Health England

### Did you know?

There are at least 9 different families of fruit and vegetables. Each has potentially hundreds of different nutrients. So why not challenge yourself to eat as many different varieties and colours as you can?

### Find a personal motivation

There are many reasons for eating a healthy diet, so there's bound to be one that resonates with you. Maybe it's losing weight, improving your skin, or wanting to feel more energetic. Or it might be something more surprising. For example, if you're trying for a family, research suggests that healthy food can have a positive impact on your genes.

Eating well could also improve your mental health. A study published in the *Public Health Nutrition* journal revealed that people who eat healthy food are less likely to develop depression compared to those who eat little or none. So, eating healthily could have a positive effect on far more than your waistline.

## Have a positive mind-set

Remember a healthy diet is an exciting and nutritious way to give your body the fuel it needs. One study found that a positive attitude towards healthy eating was among the key predictors of a higher quality diet among supermarket shoppers.

## Set SMART goals and measure success

Depending on what's motivating your change, set yourself some measurable goals. For example, if you want to increase your fruit and veg intake, set yourself a target of "five a day" and keep track of how you're doing. Make sure you're well informed, so you know what your goals should be. Try the NHS *Eat Well* guide to get started.

## Find what works for you

There are all sorts of reasons we eat food that is bad for us. Keep a log of your triggers. For example, what makes you crave junk food or when you find yourself overeating, so you can find ways of consciously making better choices. Try new habits such as shopping for fruit and veg in local shops, so you can get excited about what's in season.

## Find support from those around you

Get your family and friends on board with your positive changes and why you're adopting them. Encourage a group of colleagues at work to bring healthy home-cooked lunches in so you can all eat together rather than heading to the nearest sandwich shop. Meet other like-minded people – try attending a cookery course or a public talk on nutrition.

## Be flexible to stay on track

Make small sustainable changes that you can stick to over time. If you don't usually eat much fruit and veg, start by introducing a little bit into your ordinary meals and choosing fresh fruit for your snacks. And remember, there's nothing wrong with a treat from time to time.

## Case study

As reported in *The Telegraph*, James Carson needed to lose weight and change his diet but he didn't believe in complicated or strict regimes, which are unsustainable in the long term. He managed to lose a significant amount of weight by simply sticking to three principles: intense exercise, eating well, and limiting alcohol.

## Being more physically active



*“I believe that if physical activity was a drug it would be classed as a wonder drug. I would encourage everyone to get up and be active.”*  
Professor Dame Sue Bailey, Chair, Academy of Medical Royal Colleges

### Did you know?

Britain is an active nation. Research from Sport England shows that 6 in 10 adults are already getting the health benefits from doing more than 150 minutes of physical activity a week.

### Find a personal motivation

The NHS advises that people who exercise regularly have a lower risk of developing many long-term (chronic) conditions, such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, stroke, and some cancers. Research shows that physical activity can also boost self-esteem, mood, sleep quality and energy, as well as reducing the risk of stress, depression and dementia.

### Have a positive mind-set

Get yourself some sportswear that makes you feel good about yourself.

Researchers in the USA have found that by simply putting on exercise gear, you are more likely to get into the right frame of mind to start exercising, and it will make your workout more effective too.

### **Set SMART goals and measure success**

According to the NHS, for any type of activity to benefit your health, you need to be moving quickly enough to raise your heart rate, breathe faster and feel warmer. Start as slowly as you need to – even walking counts as exercise. Try setting yourself daily step-count goals or aim to do a set number of exercise classes each month.

### **Find options that work for you**

Modern life offers all sorts of behaviour change options - whether it's a fitness tracker that buzzes when you've been sedentary for too long, an app that lets you measure the distance of your run, or access to free at-home workout videos. A review of published research in 2015 concluded there was modest evidence that a number of apps show promise for prompting changes in behaviour.

### **You don't have to go it alone**

In a 12-week study, medical students in regular group fitness classes had a statistically significant decrease in perceived stress and an increase in physical, mental, and emotional quality of life compared with those exercising regularly alone or not engaging in regular exercise.

### **Be flexible to stay on track**

We all have good days and bad days, so exercise regularly but don't force yourself into strict routines unless that's what works for you. Exercise should be fun. If you've got a workout planned but you're not in the mood, try to do something rather than nothing. Even a 15-minute jog or workout is better than sitting on the sofa and you'll feel more motivated and energised for the next session.

### **Case study**

Sport was non-existent in Toni's world, according to *This girl can*. She was overweight and too embarrassed to get back into running. After discovering kickboxing, Toni says she has learnt so much about herself: "I can run, I am flexible, I can do the splits and boy can I punch. Nobody cared if I had extra lumps and bumps, nobody cared that it took me longer to do ten press-ups, nobody cared that I looked like a hot mess."

## Losing weight



*“Keeping a healthy weight can help cut your risk of cancer and other serious diseases. The good news is that small changes to your lifestyle that you keep up over time can make a real difference.”*

Cancer Research UK

### Did you know?

According to the NHS, most people who need to lose weight can get health benefits from losing even a small amount (about 5%) of their weight if they keep it off.

### Find a personal motivation

Whether it's losing weight for a key life event, wanting to fit into a particular item of clothing, or to climb a set of stairs without feeling puffed out, personal motivations are important.

### The importance of positive relationships

Your relationships are important when it comes to maintaining a healthy weight. A study with 50 female participants revealed that those experiencing more stressful interpersonal tensions had higher levels of

the hormone ghrelin, which stimulates appetite, and lower levels of leptin, which suppresses appetite. Those who were experiencing higher levels of interpersonal stress also ate a higher calorie diet.

### **Set SMART goals and measure success**

One study found that self-monitoring activities such as self-weigh-in, daily steps, high-intensity activity, and persistent food logging were significant predictors of weight loss during a 6-month intervention. Try the NHS *Losing Weight: Getting Started* guide if you're not sure where to start with weight loss and goal setting.

### **Find options that work for you**

Find accessible ways to stay on track. A UK study of 128 overweight volunteers published in 2017 showed that participants using the smartphone app (My Meal Mate) lost more weight than those using a website or paper diary, and stuck to the trial for longer. And *Good Housekeeping* has a useful guide to portion size. Vegetables should be the size of your hand, with your fingers wide open, Fruit and carbs the size of your fist (or a tennis ball), Protein the size of your cupped palm, and Fat (like butter) the size of your fingertip.

### **Find support from people around you**

Weight loss can take patience, time and dedication but research suggests people are more likely to achieve their weight loss goals and sustain them over time, with the support of family and friends.

### **Choose healthy eating rather than fad diets**

In a 2014 research paper entitled *Can we say what diet is best for health?* researchers compared the medical evidence for and against every mainstream diet. The paper concluded that diets constituting rigid principles and strict food groups are not effective. The weight of evidence strongly suggests that eating natural, nourishing food is the best thing you can do to be healthy, prevent disease and lose weight.

### **Case study**

The NHS reports that Stephanie lost 9.2kg (1.4st) on the NHS 12-week weight loss plan. She says the plan helped her to develop healthier habits such as eating healthily, having smaller portions and exercising regularly.

## Looking after your mental health



*“In classrooms, in workplaces, around the dinner table, between friends even between strangers. People are now really talking about their own wellbeing and looking to help those around them.”*

Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex

### Did you know?

Research for *Mind* has found that 1 in 3 people (31%) feel “less alone” following news coverage of mental health – a rise of 22% since 2016.

### Find a personal motivation

Are you stressed at work? Do you find yourself snapping at family members? Are you susceptible to low moods? Like other areas of our health, our mental health can be improved by changing the way we do and think about things. According to the World Health Organisation, mental wellbeing is a key resource for learning, productivity, participation and inclusion. So, it makes sense to look after it.

### Sleep and mindfulness can both help

Getting a good night’s sleep is one of the most important things we can

do to stay positive. A recent study with 204 college students showed that higher sleep regularity was significantly related to higher morning and evening happiness, healthiness and calmness during the week.

Practicing mindfulness can also help. A review of studies of the effects of mindfulness concluded that it brings positive psychological effects, including increased subjective well-being, reduced psychological symptoms and emotional reactivity and improved behavioural regulation.

### **Set SMART goals and measure success**

Make a list of the things you want to do more of and the things you want to do less of, then set yourself some goals. If you're not sure what affects your mood, try keeping a log so you can see which activities – such as time with friends or vigorous exercise – have a positive impact and which negatively affect your mood. Try the *Mental Health Foundation's* “how to look after your mental health” guide to get started.

### **Find options that work for you**

According to the World Health Organisation, the incidence of depression can be reduced by 15-35% when prevention is offered. If you are worried about your mental health, seek help from your GP or find out more on *Mind's* mental health A-Z. If you're simply looking to keep your mind healthy, getting plenty of sleep, exercise and nourishing food can make a positive contribution.

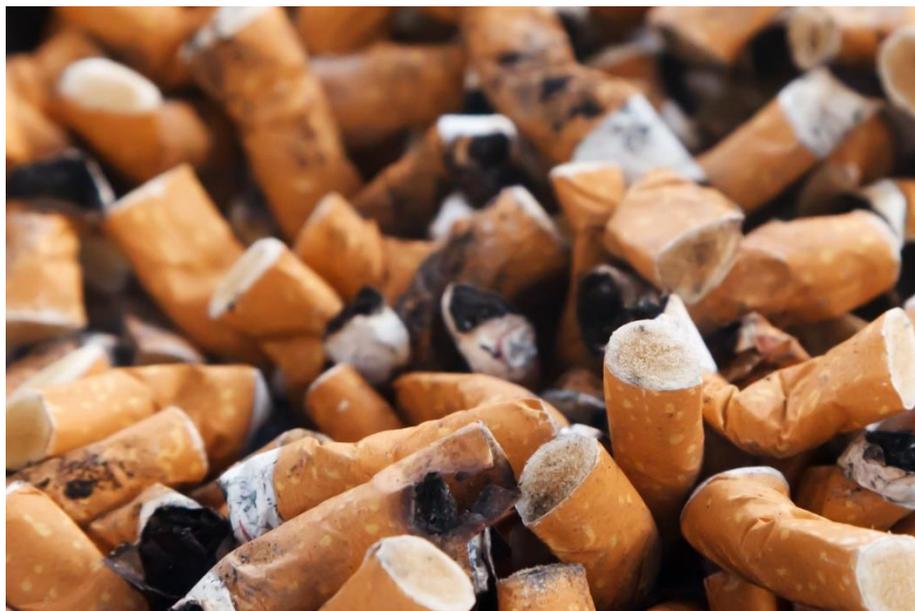
### **Find support from those around you**

According to the Mental Health Foundation, people who are more socially connected to family, friends, or their community are happier, physically healthier and live longer, with fewer mental health problems than people who are less well connected. There's a lot of truth to the proverb “a problem shared is a problem halved.” If you find opening up to family and friends difficult, you could benefit from talking therapies instead. According to the NHS, talking therapies may have the same effect or even be more effective than medication.

### **Be flexible to stay on track**

We all have good and bad days. So, while it's important to take note of how you're feeling, we can't all be happy all the time. That means flexibility is important. If you're feeling low or having a bad day, try do something small to improve your mood like intense physical exercise, a long walk, or a chat with a friend.

## Quitting smoking



*"Quitting smoking has given me new self-confidence. And you can have that feeling as well. All you have to do is stop smoking. Trust me, it's the best thing you'll ever do."*

Dr Max Pemberton, NHS Doctor, journalist and author

### **Did you know?**

If you smoke 10 a day, after one month of giving up you'll have saved at least £46, and after six months you'll have banked £275.

### **Find a personal motivation**

There are countless reasons to quit smoking, but it's important to find what resonates best with you. According to the NHS, you won't be waiting long to see benefits. After just 20 minutes smoke free, your pulse returns to normal. After only 48 hours, carbon monoxide will be eliminated from your body and your lungs will start to clear out mucus and other smoking debris. After a year, your risk of heart disease is halved compared with a person who is still smoking.

### **Have confidence in your ability to make a change**

A study into motivating and helping smokers to quit concluded that the most important aspect to stopping smoking is maintaining the motivation to make multiple attempts, if that's what it takes. The study says that in theory, even if you find yourself needing to quit multiple times, each time is like practicing a new skill – the probability of successfully quitting increases with each try.

## **Set SMART goals and measure success**

The biggest measure of success is to stop smoking and stay smoke free. One study claims that reducing cigarettes slowly and going cold turkey are both effective - but what is important with both approaches is to set a firm date to become tobacco free. There are other goals you can set yourself to stay motivated, like doing a particular form of exercise without getting out of breath.

## **Find interventions that work for you**

Speak to your GP about available support for quitting smoking. You may choose a combination of medication such as nicotine gum or patches, alongside therapies such as attending a counselling group or receiving support on the phone. One review examined 18 different studies exploring the effectiveness of support offered via a mobile phone in smoking cessation, physical activity, diet and alcohol reduction. It concluded that support offered via text message increases rates of smoking cessation.

## **Seek support**

The NHS claims that people are up to four times more likely to quit smoking successfully with the support of a local stop smoking service. They also advise that quitting will be easier if you spend time with smoke-free friends. For some people, the likelihood of quitting successfully might be heightened by finding group sessions with other people trying to quit. An American study with 965 participants in Baltimore City concluded that providing cessation services in community settings and involving the community in every aspect of the intervention improves retention and achieves better smoking cessation outcomes.

## **Be flexible to stay on track**

Life can throw up some challenges, but it's generally recognised that positive changes can have a knock-on positive effect elsewhere. A nine-year, nationwide survey of more than 5,000 middle-aged people in Japan showed a clear association between stopping smoking and positive changes in marital status, job status and other health behaviours. If your quit attempts aren't working, try making a change elsewhere then try again.

## **Case study:**

Dr Max Pemberton, a British medical doctor, journalist and author, works full-time as a psychiatrist for the NHS. He couldn't give up smoking, despite knowing exactly what it was doing to his health. He developed and tested a CBT programme to help him think differently about smoking and finally quit the habit for good.

## Avoiding Alcohol and Drug Abuse



*“Twenty first century living can be hard but using alcohol to help cope with its pressures, particularly for people who already struggling, for whatever reason, to keep their heads above water is not the solution.”*  
Elaine Hindal, Chief Executive of Drinkaware

### Did you know?

A survey of nearly 9,000 adults, carried out by Public Health England and Drinkaware in 2018, found that four out of five people were now drinking within than the government's 14 unit-a-week guidelines.

### Find a personal motivation

If you're trying to tackle an addiction or simply reduce your drinking day-to-day, think about the positive impact it will have on your friends and family. Alcohol Research UK found the physical and mental health of family members and their quality of life are positively influenced when a loved one is in recovery, but are equally susceptible to reversals during a relapse.

### Have a positive mind-set

Whether you have an addiction or would simply like to reduce how often you drink casually, it's important to feel positive about your next steps. The NHS advises that addiction is a treatable condition. Whatever the addiction, there are lots of ways you can seek help.

### **Set SMART goals and measure success**

Whatever it is you want to cut back on, tap into your competitive streak and set yourself some goals. In a trial with 128 young, male adults, all of whom were heavy drinkers but weren't necessarily committed to cutting back, setting initial, ambitious goals led to further ambitious goals, which ultimately contributed to lower levels of drinking.

### **Be committed to making a change**

There are lots of interventions and tools to help people tackle addiction or over-consumption of alcohol and drugs. Find an intervention that works for you but remember it's more likely to work if you're committed to making a change.

### **Find peer support**

Some people with addictions find it helpful to have support from other people with similar conditions or circumstances relating to substance abuse, past or present. Whether you're recovering from addiction or you just want to cut back for health reasons, sometimes just having family and friends who are understanding can work wonders. If someone tells you you're boring for not drinking or taking drugs, they probably don't have your best interests at heart.

### **Be flexible to stay on track**

If you're looking to reduce how much alcohol you consume day-to-day, try giving up for just one month to see how you get on. It might inspire you to give up completely, or significantly reduce how much you drink in subsequent months. Alcohol Concern reports that of registered participants in "Dry January", 62% had better sleep and more energy, whilst 49% lost weight.

### **Case study:**

The New Statesman reports that Hannah Smith gave up alcohol two years ago after deciding that drinking was draining her time, money and energy in exchange for supposed fun she could barely remember.