Give the Gift of Health

By Janet Hackert, Regional Nutrition and Health Education Specialist
University of Missouri Extension

As the holidays approach, this is a great time to start thinking about gifts for those we care about. What better gift than the gift of good health. Although no one can infuse into another’s life the guarantee of good health, we can encourage one another toward healthier choices.

Physical Activity

One way to show we care is to find the perfect things, wrap them up and give them as gifts to loved ones. Another way is to take care of our health or theirs by being physically active.

Being physically active has a positive influence on health in a number of ways. For example, being physically active can lower the risk of heart disease and stroke, high blood pressure and cholesterol, type 2 diabetes, and colon and breast cancer. It can also help maintain a healthy weight and prevent falls. Being active can also reduce depression and maintain cognitive function in older adults.

According to the 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, adults should get at least 150 minutes per week of moderate cardiovascular activity and children 6-17 years olds should get 60 minutes or more a day of aerobic activity. Both should also be doing muscle-strengthening activities three times a week. For children and youth, this can be part of their daily hour of activity. At any age, these activities can involve a sport, exercise, or just moving for fun.

Helping oneself or a loved one meet these recommendations provides lots of great ideas for gift giving. Walking is an easy way to fit fitness in and a pedometer is one way to get motivated to walk more. They come in an assortment of styles, from simple and inexpensive ones that just count steps and clip on a waistband to elaborate ones that can be worn as a bracelet and that measure steps, heart rate, miles, location and may even have other useful features like time and a music player. There are also apps for a mobile device that go along on a walk that will map out a route for a desired distance or time.

Other gifts include exercise equipment such as weights, kettle balls, weight machine, yoga mat or exercise DVDs; or sports equipment such as soccer balls, footballs, bats, cleats, singlets, surf boards or skis. And there are lots of games that can be given that encourage physical activity, such as balls, Frisbees, jump ropes, running or sliding toys, or tossing games.

An IOU for time together to move is another option: as a walking partner, a swim pass, or a trip to a park or hiking trail.

Give the gift of health by getting physically active and encouraging loved ones to do so too.

Eating Well

Eating well is another part of a healthy lifestyle. A gift of a healthy eating option may come in the form of what is offered at a party or shared meal or what is given as a present.

Here are some suggestions for a healthier way to experience eating at holiday festivities.

Team up! Make a plan with the friend or family member who will also be attending the meal, party or other eating event and who shares your interest in good health. Strategize on how to make healthier food choices based on what can be expected. For example, choose to fill a small plate only once and munch on it throughout the time spent sharing holiday cheer, keeping the quantity eaten to a reasonable amount. Or decide together the healthier choices, like veggies and dip or whole grain crackers and cheese, and fill up on those with only a little of the high-fat, high-sugar, high-calorie options usually prevalent at such gatherings. And support one another in those choices to avoid the temptation of eating too much or too many calories.

Bring a fun, healthy choice to the meal or party. There are many delicious AND nutritious options. For example, to get closer to making half the plate vegetables and fruits as recommended by USDA’s MyPlate symbol, bring a casserole of spaghetti squash and meatballs, or veggies and a low-fat dip. Mix 1 cup fat-free yogurt, 1 cup low-fat sour cream, a packet of ranch dressing mix and top with red and green bell peppers. Or focus on fruits like sliced star fruit, kiwis and strawberries, or baked apples.

For the person on your present list who is trying to be health-conscious, make a present of something that will help the recipient make healthier choices. Perhaps a beautiful set of plates that are smaller than the usual dinner plate size to help with portion control. Or a delicate cut-glass or pottery bowl or dessert dish that could make even a smaller amount of pudding or ice cream a delightful (and small) culinary experience. Or offer the gift of a nutritious delicacy – a mix of dried fruit, an exotic whole grain, or a well-aged, tangy low-fat cheese.

Screenings

Another way to show we care for others is to take care of our own health or theirs by keeping up with screenings.

Along with eating well and being physically active, screenings are a great preventative measure. Most screenings check on diseases or conditions which, if caught early, can be more easily treated and/or managed. There are many screenings that may or may not be useful, depending on a person’s age, gender, personal and family medical history and other factors. And there are other
screenings that simply notify the individual as to what his or her medical status is.

Hypertension, or high blood pressure, is among the simplest and least invasive screenings and only takes a few minutes. Sometimes called the ‘silent killer,’ blood pressure can creep up unnoticed and have significant ill effects. It should be measured every two years, starting after age 18, and more often when it is above normal (or 120/80 mg Hg).

For all adults over 20 years of age, the Mayo Clinic recommends that, “Total cholesterol, low-density lipoprotein (LDL) and high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol, and triglyceride levels be tested every five years… If any values are elevated, more frequent monitoring is appropriate.” They also recommend that, “adults with hypertension or a body mass index (BMI) above 25 should have their fasting blood glucose level checked,” in agreement with the US Preventative Services Task Force recommendations.

To catch breast cancer early, the American Cancer Society recommends that, “women in their 20s and 30s should have a clinical breast exam as part of a periodic health exam by a health professional, at least every 3 years. After age 40, women should have a clinical breast exam every year,” along with a screening mammogram every year for as long as they are in good health.

Other screenings that may be appropriate, depending on one’s circumstances, include colorectal cancer, prostate cancer, vision, hearing and dental screenings, glaucoma testing, skin cancer and osteoporosis testing. Consult a medical professional to see who should have these screenings.

Give the gift of health by getting screened and encouraging loved ones to do so also.

For more information on giving the gift of healthy activity, healthy eating, or health screenings at Christmas, a birthday or anytime or any other topic, contact me, Janet Hackert, at 660-425-6434 or HackertJ@missouri.edu or your local University of Missouri Extension office.

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