Ditch the diet and focus on lifestyle changes

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By SARAH COX

On June 16, the Food and Drug Administration issued a ban of artificial trans fats in the nation’s food supply to be carried out over the next three years because of health risks that could result in heart disease. While it is estimated that the ban will cost the food industry $6.2 billion over 20 years, transitioning to healthier fats will benefit by lowering health care costs — a savings of $140 billion, CNN reported.

While the health risks associated with being overweight come as no surprise to Americans, what may be alarming is the scarcity of qualified candidates for the U.S. military, according to Major Gen. Allen Batschelet, in charge of U.S. Army Recruiting Command.

“The obesity issue is the most troubling because the trend is going in the wrong direction,” he told CNN in April. “We think by 2020 it could be as high as 50 percent, which mean only 2 in 10 would qualify to join the Army.”

It looks like the United States needs to go on a diet.

Realistic expectations

That’s not the answer, according to Dr. Glenn Kent, Ph.D., a health psychologist and assistant professor at Jefferson College of Health Sciences in Roanoke. What needs to be changed is lifestyle, he said. Kent explained that to him, diet means how much and when one eats.

“If you go on a diet, that definition changes. That’s more of a prescription, and there’s more thought behind it. There are a lot of rules that go along with being on a diet — things you have to check off.”

Kent said that one of the biggest mistakes people make is setting unrealistic expectations when they go on diets. Yes, most people could stand to lose weight, he said, but the idea that “great things are going to happen … is not the outcome. Ninety-five percent of people gain the weight back.”

When dieting, rules must be followed, and rules take one’s freedom away. Rules, he said, are external motivators.

It’s better to have internal motivators. People who are intrinsically motivated tend to be more successful, and that takes changing behavior and emotions. While any diet, if one sticks to it, will cause weight loss, the problem is sticking to it long term. Additionally, said Kent, diets that eliminate food groups are
restrictive — again, they take away freedom.

There are diets that eliminate carbohydrates, that promote grapefruit, that cut out fruit, etc. But, as Kent pointed out, every healthy culture has one thing in common — the people move.

Kent said he prefers to call exercise “movement … and how you move is up to you. You can take the stairs, go on a walk, park farther away, carry your own groceries or garden. We sit at our desks, our posture suffers and we are less active. Sitting now is the new smoking,” he said.

Kent said that one of the first steps to living a healthy lifestyle is surrounding yourself with those whom you want to emulate. Instead of hanging with people who drink beer and watch sports from the vantage of their sofa, hang out with those who like to walk, bike or hike, for example.

“In order to do that, you have to be ready to want to spend time with them, so your emotions have to be ready,” he said.

Dr. Kenneth Luckay, DO, and his wife, Melinda Luckay, a nurse practitioner with a specialty in psychiatry and mental health, established the Roanoke Center for Medical Weight Loss 20 years ago. They see adults, ranging from those who want to lose a “vanity 5 pounds to ‘I have to lose 200 pounds or I’m going to die’” explained Melinda Luckay. She said their approach to clients is a holistic one, and began that way out of a concern from seeing patients in a family practice struggling with medical issues stemming from being overweight.

Melinda Luckay said being overweight is multi-factorial and involves behavior, the environmental, and, sometimes, medication. That includes medicine prescribed because of health issues stemming from being overweight.

“It is a dual-edged sword, and not a matter of not trying hard enough or being lazy,” she said.

Many patients who have kept their weight off, five years out, have a common routine. They walk briskly 60 minutes a day, keep a food log, get a good night’s sleep and follow up with their health care provider.

“It is fascinating that none of this really costs anything, but you have to do them all, every day,” Luckay said.

She said she views diets the same way that Kent does.

“They are not real life. Any diet is good as long as it’s going to enhance your adherence to it, she said.”

Pick the right diet

If you’re going to diet, figure out what kind of diet appeals to you.

Don Mankie, a registered dietician who works in the Carilion Clinic Children’s Hospital but also sees adults through the departments of Cardiovascular, Diabetes, Infectious Disease, Sports Nutrition and Wellness Nutrition, said different diets work for different people.

One person he knows loves the paleo diet, which reduces grains and cuts out all dairy, but another
woman said it made her sick. If you’re going to diet, don’t pick a diet that makes you miserable. You’re not going to stick with it.

“Patients have to understand that weight loss is just the beginning,” he said. He suggested cutting way down on processed foods and fast foods. But he also takes a look at people’s lifestyles.

So many parents both work, their children are in day care and/or sports, and they shop for food through a fast food window. He suggested enrolling support — very similar to Kent’s suggestion of surrounding yourself with those whose mindset is healthy living.

Mankie offers this advice: Don’t skip meals; diet pills are not “magic pills” and have to be taken in conjunction with seeing a health care provider. What works is connecting with a professional, checking in weekly, eating lots of fruits and vegetables, exercising 30 to 60 minutes every day and keeping records that will keep you committed.

His tips for successful health management include support, creating a plan that is realistic, keeping a record, time meals to be about every three hours, exercising consistently and eating your calories (don’t drink them). He also suggested rewards that avoid eating, such as calling a friend, taking a bath or a nap, listening to music, meditating or completing a project.

A healthy grocery shopping list that he shares with clients includes 3 to 5 cups of fruit each day; the same quantity of vegetables; 6 to 8 ounces of meats and seafood high in protein; 2 to 3 cups of dairy; 6 to 8 ounces of grains; and snacks such as nuts and seeds, whole grain crackers and low-fat popcorn.