

Gupta: Excess belly fat is not your friend

(CNN) -- We recently asked for your questions about how to live a healthy lifestyle to CNN's Dr. Sanjay Gupta.

He answers five of your questions below, reflecting the range of issues that were brought up in the many e-mails we received.

This Q&A is part of CNN's "New You" series, which airs on "American Morning" beginning September 18.

QUESTION: My question is that I work out at the gym every other day but I still can't get rid of excess fat at my belly. Any suggestions as to what I can do?
Michael Raifaisen, Kew Gardens, New York

GUPTA: You're right to want to get rid of it: That excess belly fat can raise your risk for heart disease, diabetes and even some types of cancer.

Health experts say consistent, moderate exercise by itself appears to help the body rid itself of vast amounts of deep abdominal fat -- even when your scale doesn't register a loss.

If you're at a good weight, but still have trouble losing that belly fat, make sure you're doing the right kind of exercise. While sit-ups only tighten abdominal muscles, studies show strength training can reduce belly fat. The American College of Sports Medicine agrees -- the best way to achieve a "six pack" of abs is to focus more on lowering total body fat through aerobic exercise and diet.

ACSM also says ab exercises are most effective when tailored to your individual needs. So, consult a trainer who can help you design the best program for you to lose the belly fat.

Q: I have a demanding job combined with a fair amount of stress. I am in the office about 12 hours per day and continue to work at home in the evenings. I find it extremely difficult to plan meals and especially exercise.

I find myself constantly snacking in the office. I had very good success several years ago on a "liquid" diet and have tried to redo that program with no success. I am very overweight. I am 42 years old, my height is 5'11" and I am approximately 360 lbs. I consider myself to be an "every emotion" eater, I will celebrate or console with food. I would appreciate any input you can provide.

Richard Murphy, Melrose, Massachusetts

GUPTA: Most fitness experts will tell you the "restrictive diets" -- and a liquid diet would fall into that category -- probably don't work long-term. It's always recommended that you check with your doctor before going on any diet.

A nutritionist can help you devise a balanced eating plan. It's also important to recognize strong emotions can trigger cravings for food, but you can take steps to control those cravings. By keeping a food diary, over time, you may see patterns emerge that reveal negative eating patterns and triggers to avoid. Since you like to snack, try healthier snacks -- low-fat, low-calorie foods such as fresh fruit, vegetables with fat-free dip or unbuttered popcorn.

Finally, even with your demanding schedule, it's important to exercise regularly and get adequate rest if you want to lose weight. The American Council on Exercise says you should do aerobic exercise three to four days a week. The good news is that walking is considered an aerobic exercise. And you should do it for 30 minutes a day.

While 30 uninterrupted minutes are preferable, three 10-minute bursts will do the trick too. If you burn more calories than you consume, the weight will drop.

Q: Why am I so tired all of the time? Around 3 p.m. every day I feel like I need to take a nap. I get between seven to eight hours of sleep every night.
Carol Ward, Menlo Park, California

GUPTA: The "3 p.m. crash" is not at all uncommon -- and there are ways you can boost your energy.

But first, you should rule out a medical condition. An undetected thyroid condition could be the culprit. You may want to check with your doctor to see if there's a problem. Also, ask yourself these questions:

Have you been tired for a long time -- more than six months -- even though you are getting enough rest and are not working too hard?

Are you able to do less than half of what you used to do because you feel tired?

Have you had problems that keep coming back or don't go away for six months including:

- Sore throat
- Tender or painful lymph nodes in neck or armpits
- Unexplained muscle soreness

If so, according to the American Academy of Family Physicians you may have chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS), and you need to see your doctor to get checked out.

If you're healthy, but are still experiencing afternoon lows, do a diet check. High carb, or high fat lunches can cause the crash. Be careful to eat balanced meals, with lean protein.

Also, drink up. Dehydration can cause weariness. And no skipping meals. High-protein, low-fat snacks can give you an afternoon energy boost.

Plus, go easy on the caffeine. While many of us reach for a soda or coffee to boost energy, it can end up making us feel worse as its affects wear off. Finally, get up and move. Short bursts of exercise can give you the energy you need to keep going.

Q: I am from a family of heart disease, diabetes, and high-blood pressure sufferers...so I want to be more active and healthier. I have the hardest time maintaining an exercise and diet routine and to really make these a part of my life. What do you suggest?

Joya Mosby, Memphis, Tennessee

GUPTA: Good for you, you've taken the important first step -- making it a goal to live a healthier lifestyle. Changing your habits can be tough, so look for ways to kick-start a new diet and exercise routine.

The American Heart Association provides these guidelines for helping reduce the major risk factors for heart attack -- high blood cholesterol, high blood pressure and excess body weight.

- Use up at least as many calories as you take in.
- Exercise at least 30 minutes a days. To lose weight, do enough activity to burn more calories than you eat every day.
- Eat a diet rich in vegetables and fruits.
- Choose whole-grain, high-fiber foods.
- Eat fish at least twice a week.
- Limit how much saturated fat, trans fat and cholesterol you eat.
- Cut back on beverages and foods high in calories and low in nutrition, such as soft drinks and foods with added sugar.
- Choose and prepare foods with little or no salt.

Q: I turned 40 in December and I am starting to get very worried about my bad habit of smoking.

I always ate very healthily most of my life. I stayed away from junk and ate green salads, lean meat; I work out by jogging, tennis and kick boxing. I weigh 125 at 5' 4" -- which is not bad.

If you look at me you think great shape -- except for the nasty habit of smoking. I quit many times, the longest six months. Right now I am averaging 4 to 5 cigarettes a day.

I grew up in Lebanon during the civil war -- it seems smoking was embedded in my brain at an early age and it is very hard to kick the habit for good.

Any advice on how to completely break the habit will be much appreciated. I dream of the day when I will look at a pack of cigarettes under any situation and say no thank you!

Suzanne Hamzah, Tampa, Florida

GUPTA: Well, you've taken the first step. You want to quit.. and it's important because smoking harms nearly every organ of the body, causing many diseases including heart disease and cancer.

Quitting smoking has immediate as well as long-term benefits. Consider this: According to the U.S. surgeon general, just 20 minutes after quitting your heart rate drops. A few weeks after quitting, your circulation improves and your lung function increases.

And just one to nine months after quitting, coughing and shortness of breath decrease and cilia regain normal function in the lungs, increasing the ability to handle mucus, clean the lungs, and reduce the risk of infection.

There are many reasons why it's hard for you to quit, that's because nicotine is addictive. We know that 70 percent of smokers want to quit. We also know this year, 40 percent will try, but only 5 percent will succeed.

One of the best approaches is the combined attack, such as using a nicotine patch and joining a support group.

According to the American Cancer Society, these five steps will help you quit for good.

- Get support
- Learn new skills and behaviors
- Get medication and use it correctly.
- Be prepared for relapse or difficult situations.