

Healthy Patients, Healthy Planet

How to be green and healthy

Caring for your health and caring for the planet have many things in common. It's all about prevention, doing things that will reduce the chance of a serious problem from occurring.

In medicine we recommend many lifestyle changes that we know in the long run will help prevent illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes, cancers and strokes. These are some of the most common causes of early death and disability. We suggest actions such as healthy eating especially the intake of more fruit and vegetables, regular exercise, reduced alcohol consumption and smoking cessation.

Caring for our planet is also about prevention, doing things before catastrophic events occur. Right now there are clear signs that all is not well with the planet. Rising carbon dioxide levels and other greenhouse gases are producing changes in the climate that if left unattended, scientists believe will lead to profound changes in our environment that will have major health implications. These include extreme weather events such as heatwaves, fires, storms and floods; a change in mosquito borne (such as dengue fever, Ross River infection) and water borne (gastroenteritis from eg Salmonella or Cholera) illnesses; droughts with accompanying water scarcity and reduced food yields and affordability.

There are many things that we can do that will help both ourselves and the planet to stay healthy. These include:

1. Eating more fruit, vegetables and grain and less meat. Food production especially of meat requires substantial energy and water. In addition land degradation and waste products from animals have significant effects on the environment. Adopting such diets can reduce one's environmental impact by at least 50% as compared to eating more traditional Western diets.
2. Buying fresh, local and seasonal food reduces the energy required in processing, transport and storage. Better still, grow your own food and derive the benefits of exercise as well! Fresh fruit and vegetables have high nutritional value and taste better than their frozen counterparts.
3. Walking, cycling or using public transport to get to work. Not only will this help prevent heart disease, strokes, diabetes, some cancers and depression but it will significantly reduce air pollution from private vehicle use which not only contributes to global warming but respiratory diseases such as asthma and bronchitis. Watching less TV will give you more time to exercise and enjoy a more active lifestyle with so many benefits to your own health
4. Try and reduce household chemical use and choose green or non-toxic household products.
5. Consider local holidays especially those involving physical activities such as camping, trekking, cycling or fishing as opposed to overseas travel. Air travel is a significant contributor to greenhouse gases.

These are simple measures that everyone can take up to be healthier while at the same time helping our planet. What's more they are cheap and inexpensive actions that are likely to save you dollars. Help yourself while helping the planet, it doesn't have to cost the earth.