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Physical therapy is an important weapon in the battle of the bulge

By Bob Cairo | Special to the Coastal Point
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Walking can be an easy, simple and free exercise option for those looking to get fit or keep in shape.

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COVID-19 has presented many challenges. Beyond the obvious, there's a real concern about weight gain. Eating out of loneliness, depression or boredom is a growing problem. Challenges from changed lifestyles, personally and for many still working, more isolation and a limitation on some exercise regimes adds to the problem. Even before COVID-19, area obesity rates were not good.

This should make you think. Nearly a third of Delawareans are obese. The data from last year's 16th annual "State of Obesity" report from the Trust for America's Health found that 33.5 percent of adults in Delaware are obese. Marylanders also have a disturbing rate of obesity, weighing in at 30.9 percent, to tie with the troubling national obesity rate.

It's nothing to cheer about in Virginia, either, where the obesity rate has been steadily rising since 2014, according to the America's Health Rankings 2019 annual report. The report found 30.9 percent of adults in Virginia were obese.

One additional data point worth noting: Childhood obesity is growing at an alarming rate in Delaware, and I'm making note of Delaware, in particular, because of this sobering news. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's annual State of Childhood Obesity report shows 16 percent of Delaware children ages 10 to 17 are obese, which is above the national average.

Obesity carries a long list of potential serious health consequences. Right off the top, obesity puts people at greater risk of suffering severe symptoms from COVID-19. Along with the risk of high blood pressure, stroke, heart disease, liver and gall bladder disease, osteoarthritis, tendonitis, sleep and respiratory problems, and an increased risk for Type 2 diabetes, it also puts people at risk of many types of cancers.

Just as concerning is it complicates many existing health conditions and has a direct impact on mobility and quality of life. And if you're overweight but don't qualify as obese, you're not clear of issues, either. Many health conditions are worsened by extra pounds, and your risk factors for many of the above conditions rise as well.

What many people don't realize is that physical therapy can make an important difference in helping people, young and old, to fight back against obesity or being overweight, generally. It makes sense when you think about it. For people who are overweight or obese, getting in shape can be painful.

Often, people who have obesity issues, for example, experience severe pain in their back, knees or even their ankles. Pain in joints are often a problem because excess weight takes a painful toll as it puts more stress on joints, which can be debilitating. This, many times, translates to discomfort just walking or going about your daily routine. If you have stairs in your house or leading off the front porch, they can be a painful challenge.

The bottom line is proper movements are affected, and being prone to so many complications adds up to a serious problem.

So, what can a physical therapist do for you? Whether you're young or old, physical therapy may hold the key. We have a number of techniques that will help you get moving in ways that won't likely cause you pain and can get you on the right path toward feeling better and getting healthier. And when it comes to young people, it's important not to ignore the problem. The idea is to help children and teens from becoming obese or overweight adults.

At the center of our efforts as physical therapists are the skills we teach to help you increase flexibility, strengthen areas of your body and push up your activity level without causing pain, overuse injuries or any of the number of problems typically caused with carrying excess weight.

A goal we can set together is to reach a point where you are doing at least 150 minutes of moderate exercise every week, which is what the American Heart Association recommends. An easy way to look at it is to break that down to about 30 minutes of exercise five days a week. And before you think, “No way,” let’s gain a little perspective.



When you’re struggling with weight and you haven’t been active, those numbers we were just talking about can seem like a lot. Here’s the deal: You might not be physically able to do that much. Maybe you can’t get to 30 minutes of exercise in a whole week when you’re starting out. That’s OK. You have to start somewhere and see how you do. What matters is that you get started and even short sessions have a purpose. They help you get your body used to more activity, and they get you on track.

The most important thing you can do is assemble the tools you need to be a success. And it isn’t hard to do that. Start with calling your doctor or that young person’s doctor and making an appointment to talk about a plan. Bring a list of medications and supplements you are taking and write down any new developments or changes to existing health conditions. Bring that information with you, so that your doctor has a current, full picture to give you the best possible direction. A supervised health program could very well be the answer.

If you are referred to a physical therapist, you can expect that your first visit will involve a complete evaluation and assessment, a review of the health information shared by your doctor and a candid, private conversation about the challenges at hand. Out of that first visit, you can expect that your physical therapist is going to create a program that works for your particular needs.

Your physical therapist may also recommend a combination of an individual program with a small group program that incorporates your program elements. Some physical therapy groups will offer that kind of program. It's something that might work for you, depending on your specific situation. Here at Tidewater, we've found that many people find it more enjoyable to be part of a group with others.

The bottom line is that I believe having a plan that has been built just for you will go a long way toward helping you meet your goals. Your physical therapist will look at all the options available to you to build that customized plan. If you can walk, it might be built into the plan as that could be something that will help you get moving toward a healthier lifestyle. Keep in mind that even walking slowly will burn some calories, because you're spending more energy. The other beauty of walking is that this low-impact exercise can be done inside or outside.

If you have limitations that mean walking is not an option, maybe a stationary bike will work for you. The point is there are options, and with the right guidance, support and supervision, they can be safely managed to help you achieve success.

I always tell my patients that my goal is to encourage them to try a healthier eating and living style, and that's my message to you, too. Stay focused on what you can do in the day at hand, not tomorrow or the next day. By staying focused on each day, it helps to avoid becoming discouraged. The more you do, the wider the door opens.

There's another important point I want to make here, and I want to be clear: I get it. Being overweight isn't fun. It makes you feel bad. Kids or adults, it doesn't matter. It's a tough challenge and it's hard to make changes, hard to get going and even harder to talk about. But you have to start somewhere, and having support that isn't judgmental in an environment that is both safe and supportive can make a big difference.

What I don't want to see is your quitting on yourself or a youngster giving up because it's emotionally painful and physically challenging. Give it a chance. Give yourself a chance. Give that young person a chance. Every medical professional and physical therapist will agree on one thing in particular: we've got your back.

This is going to be a big departure for me, as you will no doubt recognize from our many visits. This is one time when I am going to say, "One size fits all." Here's the caveat: One size fits all when it comes to my being your biggest cheerleader. You've heard me say it countless times here in the Coastal Point. And you'll hear me say it again and again: I want you to have the best quality of life, and that takes an investment on your part.

Imagine what it would be like to see that inner person come out, to feel more confident, to feel better about how you look and have a happy healthier life. Everybody deserves the best possible quality of life, so take that first step.



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