

To Your Health Newsletter

“Promoting Good Health Through Information”
Veterans Affairs Palo Alto Health Care System
Patient Education Newsletter • Fall 2008

Understanding Medical Language: Simple is Better

Improving Your Health Is As Easy As “Ask Me 3”

Imagine you are at the doctor’s office. After your exam, your doctor says you have “diabetic neuropathy,” “hypertension” or “coronary disease.” How do you react? Do you know what this means?

What if, instead, your doctor says you have “nerve problems,” “high blood pressure,” or “heart disease?” You may recognize these terms, but do you know how they will affect your health? Do you know how to treat them? Do you understand what changes you have to make in your life?

If your health care visits leave you with more questions than answers, you are not alone. Most people want health information that is written in plain language, and easy to understand and use. Medical words are hard for many people to understand—no matter how much education they have. Tell your doctors, nurses, pharmacists and other members of your health care team when you do not understand the information they give you. It will help you learn how to better take care of yourself and your family.

You may not be able to change the way your health care providers talk. But you can take steps to help you get the answers you need:

1. Don’t be shy—ask questions. Make a list of questions to bring with you to your doctor so you do not forget to ask them. The Partnership for Clear Health Communication at the National Patient Safety Foundation (NPSF) suggests using its “Ask Me 3” program. “Ask Me 3” suggests three simple but important questions people can ask their health care providers:

- **What is my main problem?**
- **What do I need to do?**
- **Why is it important for me to do this?**

If you can focus on getting answers to these three questions, you will have information necessary to help you actively participate in your health care. If you think of more questions after your visit, write them down and contact your doctor or health care professional to discuss them.

2. Bring a family member or friend. This person may be able to help you take notes and hear the provider’s instructions—in case you miss something.

3. Speak up. Tell your health care provider if you do not understand the information being given to you. Ask to have instructions repeated until you know what you need to do. Your health care team is there to help you and expect you to ask questions if you do not understand.

4. Repeat instructions. After your doctor or health care provider gives you instructions, repeat them back. This will help them understand what you have heard and allow them to clarify anything that needs further explanation. Make sure you’ve got the information right.

5. Ask for more information. If your provider says you have a health problem, ask where you can go for additional information after your visit—such as a web site, a hotline number or written materials. The more you know, the more you can help yourself.

For more on how to communicate better with your health care team, go to the National Patient Safety Foundation’s Partnership for Clear Health Communication Web site at www.npsf.org/askMe3. It has information on the “Ask Me 3” program and how it can help you.

From the Partnership for Clear Health Communication at the National Patient Safety Foundation

Recipe for Health

GARDEN POTATO SALAD

Low-fat cottage cheese is the secret to the dressing in this delicious low fat and saturated fat, low cholesterol, low sodium mixture of vegetables and herbs.

Ingredients:

- 3 lb (about 6 large) potatoes, boiled in jackets, peeled and cut into 1/2-inch cubes
- 1 C chopped celery
- 1/2 C sliced green onion
- 2 Tbsp chopped parsley
- 1 C low-fat cottage cheese
- 3/4 C skim milk
- 3 Tbsp lemon juice
- 2 Tbsp cider vinegar
- 1/2 tsp celery seed
- 1/2 tsp dill weed
- 1/2 tsp dry mustard
- 1/2 tsp white peppe

Directions:

1. In a large bowl, place potatoes, celery, green onion, and parsley.
2. Meanwhile, in a blender or food processor, blend cottage cheese, milk, lemon juice, vinegar, celery seed, dill weed, dry mustard, and white pepper until smooth. Chill for 1 hour.
3. Pour chilled cottage cheese mixture over vegetables; mix well. Chill at least 30 minutes before serving.

Yields: 10 servings

Serving Size: 1 cup

Each Serving Provides

Calories: 151

Total Fat: less than 1 g

Saturated Fat: less than 1 g

Cholesterol: 2 mg

Sodium: 118 mg

www.nhlbi.nih.gov

New Physical Activity Guidelines

Rosemary Gill, RN, MS, Patient Education Coordinator

The Federal Government recently published new physical activity guidelines. Panels of experts looked at a large volume of research studies about exercise and health and came up with new recommendations that are more flexible with the goal of getting more Americans to add physical activities to their daily lives.

The recommendation used to be to get at least 30 minutes of exercise most days of the week. The goal was to get about 150 minutes a week (30 minutes times 5 days). Research has shown that we can be more flexible than that. What if you want to exercise harder, but not for as long? Does that work? Turns out it does! The new guidelines let you design a physical activity program that works for your life.

Here's what the new recommendations say:

- *Adults need at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity aerobic exercise a week, or at least 75 minutes of vigorous intensity aerobic activity per week.*
- *Activity sessions need to be at least 10 minutes long.*

You can also do a combination of moderate and vigorous intensity. An example of moderate intensity is a fast walk. Vigorous intensity is a jog or run.

In addition, adults need at least two days per week of muscle-strengthening exercises that work all the major muscle groups.

Don't think you can tackle 150 minutes a week? Just remember, even a little physical activity is better than none! If you have a chronic condition or a disability that makes it hard to do 150 minutes a week, still try to be as physically active as your condition allows. Most people can do some form of aerobic or muscle-strengthening exercise. More health benefits come with exercise levels above 150 minutes a week as well. So, talk with your healthcare provider about what you can do to be more physically active.

What's really in that Energy Drink?

Eileen Stein, MS, RD, CDE

The sale of so-called energy drinks, like Red Bull, Monster and Rockstar to name a few, has been a booming business in the last few years. Drinks to increase energy have been on the market since the 1960's. Red Bull kicked off the current energy drink craze in the US in 1997. By 2007, energy drinks had grown in to a \$5.4 billion dollar a year business.

The questions remain, however: What's really in the drinks? Do they really give you energy? Are they safe to drink?

Most energy drinks contain caffeine, various B vitamins, taurine (an amino acid, used in building protein), guarana, and a host of other ingredients. In addition, many (but not all) contain a significant amount of sugar.

Caffeine: Most of the energy drinks claim to contain "about as much caffeine as a cup of coffee," and in fact, most of the energy drinks contain 80 mg of caffeine per 8 ounces. The average cup of brewed coffee contains between 100-200 mg of caffeine per 8 oz. (Keep in mind, of course, that many of the drinks come in 16 oz. bottles, and would then have double the amount of caffeine.) There is some concern about how quickly the caffeine gets into the body, because usually coffee is sipped slowly and many people gulp down the energy drinks.

Sugar: Unless they are labeled "sugar free," energy drinks get their calories from sugar, in one form or another. Sugar will give you energy, but it will also raise blood sugar (especially important for diabetics). It also has a lot of calories, which can cause weight gain. The sugar free (or low carb) versions of energy drinks are sweetened with some combination of sucralose (brand name Splenda®), acesulfame potassium (brand name Sweet One®), or aspartame (brand name Nutrasweet®). These artificial sweeteners are considered safe, but many nutrition experts suggest that only small amounts should be taken.

B vitamins: Most energy drinks provide some combination of B vitamins. The B vitamins help the body change sugar into energy. The vitamins themselves do not provide any energy. If your body has enough B vitamins, any extra ones from the drinks will not be stored by your body.

Taurine: Taurine is a natural amino acid that helps keep the heart beating and muscles contracting. Even though it is found in almost every energy drink, no research shows that it helps increase energy in any way.

Guarana or Guarana seed: Guarana is another source of caffeine in energy drinks.

Other nutrients: Every energy drink has its own special blend of other ingredients. These can be things such as herbs, like ginkgo biloba (which some think increases memory) or ginseng (which some believe increases energy and decreases stress). Many also contain other amino acids besides taurine. Almost all of these additions have not been proven to increase energy.

Do They Work? Are They Safe?

There have not been many studies looking at energy drinks, but most experts agree any boost in energy comes from the combination of sugar and caffeine. Caffeine has been shown to increase alertness, as most people have experienced. However, too much caffeine can cause side effects, like anxiety or insomnia. In a few cases, too much caffeine can cause seizures. It is also a diuretic – in other words, it increases how much you urinate – so energy drinks should not be used as fluid replacements during exercise. Sugar does increase energy, but it can also cause a "crash," a big drop in energy levels shortly after the energy boost.

In small amounts, it is unlikely that energy drinks will cause any harm. However, even drinking 2 servings a day could cause problems, especially to those who are sensitive to caffeine. Remember, too, that many of the larger cans contain 2 or more servings per can. All the "extras" in energy drinks are unlikely to cause problems, as they are not present in large amounts. On the other hand, they aren't likely to help much, either.

If you want to increase your energy, rather than looking to something loaded with additives, why not try a more natural route? A medium sized piece of fruit will give you a quick boost of energy, with the added benefit of fiber and some anti-oxidants. Add in a few nuts or some low fat cheese to provide amino acids, and a glass of water for fluids, and you've got both short term energy (from the fruit sugar) and long term energy (from the protein) – and nothing added or artificial!

Tips for Healthy Living

- Be active--Walk the dog, don't just watch the dog walk.
- Try a new fruit or vegetable (ever had jicama, plantain, bok choy, starfruit or papaya?)

www.smallstep.gov

Taking an active role in your care can help prevent medication errors! Carry your medication list with you at all times!

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