Successful New Year's resolutions: lose weight in 2009

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Editors' note: This is part one of a two part story.

The New Year brings enthusiasm and rigor to all good health intentions. Quit smoking. Lose weight. Go to bed earlier. Exercise more. Eat more fiber. Call your mother. Most of these are, after all, what the doctors recommend.

But even those with the best intentions and strongest resolve will likely find their resolutions stuck in the mud by Memorial Day, if not sooner. Healthy habits are not nearly as easy to form as bad habits such as overeating or smoking. In order to make a permanent change, one has to commit.

Commitment is sometimes easier when one understands the consequences of being non-committal. In the U.S., heart disease is the number one cause of death every year. Currently, more than 50 percent of Americans are overweight or obese. That number is set to increase, along with Americans' waistlines, and more than three-fourths of the entire nation will be obese by 2015.

Even this wonderful host nation, which currently has one of the lowest incidences of heart disease, breast cancer and colon cancer, is not immune. Unfortunately, with a McDonald's and a Starbucks on nearly every corner and smoking readily permitted, even the Japanese are showing higher rates of all three. The World Health Organization suggests that breast cancer is rapidly overtaking heart disease and becoming the biggest killer of all Asian women, due to the number of women who smoke.

Clearly, kicking unhealthy eating and tobacco use are two good goals for 2009.

Obesity is not being just a little "big around the middle." It is a heart-busting, liver-filling, aorta-twisting epidemic that results in death for almost 400,000 people a year and impacts more than six million. Extra weight doesn't just burden the body literally, it also compromises its ability to get well. As a result, obesity is poised to take over tobacco use as the number one most preventable cause of illness.

Sure, some people are "big-boned." And some of the measurements used to determine body mass don't always take this or muscle mass into account. But the amount of muscle – or bone – that the average person has does not usually tip the scales. What does tip those scales is going to bed after Jon Stewart with a late night scoop of Ben and Jerry's, only to wake up early to get the kids to school or go to work at o-dark-thirty. Then eating four times as much galley food than is necessary, leaving work when it's cold and dark without any motivation to warm up with cardio, preferring instead to warm up with a beer, greasy food and a few minutes of PS2, Facebook and Letterman before once again going to bed too late.

It's a serious problem, and one that needs to be tackled sooner rather than later. The question most people are asking is, "how?" Atkins, South Beach, Mediterranean and even blood-type specific diets all can play a part. But people need to recognize the very simple truth: to lose weight, the input has to be less than the output.

The basics have not changed. Moderation is important. Eating a variety of food adds interest and flavor to a diet. Whole grains are better than white bread. Lean meats and fish are better than prime rib. Broccoli and spinach are better than corn. A glass of wine is probably better than a soda.

Again, moderation is crucial. For example, flank steak, one of the leanest cuts of red meat, has a fantastic amount of iron and protein that is hard to replace with another single food. It's not bad; it's just not a meal to eat every day or even every week. Dark chocolate boasts heart disease fighting antioxidants that, amazingly, can lower blood pressure. But that doesn't mean it is okay to eat a bag of M&Ms in a day. It is okay to consume about a thumb-size amount, of dark chocolate a day. Finally, replace the half-caff, double mocha, easy-on-the-whip grande coffee with a cup or two of green tea, which has tremendous metabolism-boosting and cancer-fighting benefits.

In addition to making wise food choices, success in achieving this New Year's resolution lies in a few tried and true tricks. Yes, they are heard over and over again. That is because they work.

Those trying to lose weight should:

- Write down everything they eat, without exception. Long term weight loss depends on accountability and honesty.
- Eat breakfast every day. Ironically, eating this important meal helps to burn calories throughout the day.
- Watch portion size. Eat half of what the restaurant serves.
- Don't deprive the body of all cravings. That will only make the craving stronger.
- Move. Do not sit. No matter if it is 10,000 steps or 10 minutes of exercise three times per day, exercise is the only thing that will keep the weight off.
- Reward success with something other than food. Traditionally, American society celebrates with meals. Meals bring people together and fill them with warmth and acceptance. They also can make the whole family fat.

USNH Yokosuka has staff on hand ready to help beneficiaries' live healthier lifestyles. In fact, it is home to the only Navy nutritionist in Japan. Those interested in one-on-one counseling for weight loss can contact USNH Yokosuka nutritionist Lt. Amit Sood at 243-8703.

USNH Yokosuka's primary care doctors are also able to help create individualized health plans and goals. To learn more about healthy eating, go to www.mypyramid.gov, www.eatright.org or www.obesity.org.