



How to eat a heart healthy diet

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EXETER -- Recognizing that food and lifestyle choices have a big impact on heart health, Exeter Hospital took on the task of teaching patients how to make better decisions for their own health.

February is Heart Health Awareness month and nurse practitioner Vanessa Preble shared information about the Lifestyle Medicine Clinic, a program she developed.

“I wanted to find a way to increase awareness in our cardiac patients so that they could take control of their health,” Preble said. “I like to think of food as medicine. You go to the doctor and you are not feeling well, they might give you a pill. But each person takes their own medicine, three times a day when they eat. Learning how to make that good helpful medicine that will help your body heal you, keep you healthy is what we are all about in this class.”

Preble’s program is based on one created by Dr. Dean Ornish, author of books on reversing heart disease through lifestyle modifications. Ornish is clinical professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, and is founder and president of the Preventive Medicine Research Institute.

“There are four cruxes to Dr. Ornish’s philosophy,” Preble said. “They are to eat well, move more, stress less and love more. We know that heart disease is the number one killer in America. We know a plant-based diet can help reverse heart diseases. My program, to me, means finding methods to reduce stress, and ways for people to make mindful choices in things like the food they choose and the exercise they do.”

The Lifestyle Medicine Clinic is open to all by calling (603) 773-9992. Preble said most of the participants tend to come from referrals from Core Cardiology.

Elaine, a patient of Core Cardiology, came to the program at the recommendation of her doctors. She asked that her last name not be published.

“I have a family history of heart disease,” Elaine said. “I have some artery blockages that I wanted to stop in their tracks. We learned I have difficulty with statins (the preferred medicine) so I needed to find other ways to mitigate my risk factors. I didn’t know what to expect of this program but now I am so happy I took part; I really got a lot out of it.”

“We are very hands on,” Preble said. “We have a dietician who comes in and teaches healthy cooking and food choices. It is a plant-based diet and the message really is about getting back to basics. We teach that we should eliminate all processed foods. We look at food that is in its natural state. Is it a banana, or does it come from a box? Does it have nutrients, fiber or wasted calories that just make you feel full? We can learn to look at the health benefits of the food we eat.”

Processed food can cause inflammation in the body, Preble said. Eating better can reverse inflammation.

Elaine said participants are given a binder at the start of the classes, which they fill each week with lifestyle tips, recipes, stress management tips and exercise plans.

“There was a speaker each week,” Elaine said. “It was very hands on. I liked that and I liked having other people in the class to share challenges and successes with. It’s hard to break old habits but I am trying really hard and I am doing it.”

Preble said most insurance will cover the program. She said they get referrals from physicians and the classes are billed in much the same way as an office visit.

It is not only intended for heart patients because healthy choices can help people with other conditions such as diabetes, hypertension and obesity.

Preble said when we eat is also important.

“We need to have consistency with our meals,” Preble said. “We need to give our bodies time to rest between what we are eating. We start with breakfast, literally meaning to break fast. We plan meals out from there. People should also not eat after 7 p.m. to give the body about 12 hours to rest before they start the next day’s meals.”

Stress reduction and mindfulness are big components of the Lifestyle Medicine Clinic.

“We live in a constant state of stress,” Preble said. “We can learn to deal with that one piece at a time. Knowing stress makes our bodies work overtime and taking the time to look at it and change what we can reduces stress and makes us healthier.”

Elaine said she would recommend the program for everyone.

“It has changed the way I do everything,” she said. “I never went outside much and now I do some activity each day. I was in a rut and now I feel great, like I have a new lease on my life. I am loving it. They have follow up classes and I have attended them, too.”