

Small Changes Can Lead To Better Health

By Russell Ruderman

My first job in the natural foods industry seemed random. I had no previous interest in the field and didn't follow any healthy eating guidelines.

Gradually, better eating habits happened without trying, and better health came as an unexpected benefit of being around healthy food. Now, I am as healthy as I've ever been. When I see friends, customers and employees improve from eating better and caring about health, it is so gratifying. I'd like to share one such story.

Meet my friend Bernard Hamada, one of the nicest people you will ever meet. Always ready with a smile and a helping hand, Bernard has been my employee for over 10 years. About six years ago he started to experience serious health issues. He responded by learning about the role diet plays in our health and taking better care of himself through eating healthier.

Born and raised in Hilo, his diet was typical "local style" with plenty rice and soda. As years went by, he gained weight and developed diabetes, gout, pain and limited mobility. Medical care helped, but he continued to get worse. He found himself hospitalized after an emergency room visit and was released after his blood sugar was in a safe range.

Bernard began to change his diet, as recommended by his doctor and friends. Less soda, less rice, more protein and more vegetables. He saw some progress and was able to reduce his meds. His health improved, he lost weight, and he became more energetic and happier!

As is often the case, progress wasn't a straight line. At one point, he found himself in the emergency room again. His insulin was not adjusted correctly as his health improved, and he responded with renewed conviction to keep getting better.

This time, Bernard committed more fully to improving his diet, and eliminated sugary items like soda and starchy foods like rice. He found he was able to do without his medicines entirely and rely on better diet and exercise alone. (Note: It is best to work with your doctor to properly adjust medicine as your health changes.)

It took years, but Bernard's overall results were dramatic. He is now off diabetes medicine, lost 85 pounds, has more energy and is just plain happier! He walks daily, enjoys work, and has a positive outlook despite life's challenges. After seeing the benefits to his own body with his own eyes, Bernard found it easier to stick to a better diet and better life habits.

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Wherever you shop for food, and whatever your views on health and fitness, we each can profoundly improve our own health with simple choices entirely under our control. There is no need to wait, to prepare, or to buy anything. You can begin with your next meal, wherever you are with your diet now.

Few of us need actual advice on what to eat or do — you already know! What is the unhealthiest thing you eat regularly? For many, it's soda, too much rice, or candy. If you replace it with a healthier choice, maybe a salad or a high protein snack, you are on the way to a healthier life.

Likewise with exercise, sleep habits and mental stress: What habits should you change to be healthier? Maybe it's going for a walk each day, or a glass of water instead of a pastry for an evening snack. You may have setbacks, but simply return to your better choices with the next meal, and the next day, take a walk!

The wonderful thing about making small changes is you can see and feel the effects quickly. You have more energy, a more positive outlook and feel better. It is self-motivating.

If you need motivation, think of your loved ones and the things you like to do, and commit to getting better for them, if not for yourself. Good luck, and good health to you!

State Sen. Russell Ruderman is the owner of Island Naturals and represents District 2 in East Hawaii. This column was prepared by Community First, a nonprofit organization led by KTA's Barry Taniguchi and supported by a volunteer board of community leaders.