

# ShowMe Health

Subject: Going Green Can Improve Your Health

**Author: Ann Hoppe, Public Information Supervisor**

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Aside from pesticide usage and a few other issues, most of us haven't worried much about the connections between health issues and the environment. For our health, we work on our waistlines and fret over our cholesterol levels. For the environment, we recycle and maybe drive a fuel-efficient car.

Public health focuses on the health of the whole population, rather than treating the health of an individual. The real answers are not going to come from individual action, but individual actions can have ripple effects.

To do your part in going green and staying healthy, here are some "green" health tips:

1. Walk or bike to work.

At a bare minimum, we're supposed to get 20 to 30 minutes of exercise most days of the week. The Institute of Medicine says that isn't really enough and recommends a full hour of moderately intense activity a day (biking and walking at a 4-mile-per-hour clip meet the moderately intense standard).

But the U.S. is a nation of drivers, not walkers or bikers, and almost every driving statistic you can think of is headed in the direction of a hotter planet. The average fuel economy of new cars has declined since 1988 because of the popularity of minivans and SUVs.

2. Go to bed early.

Americans weigh more and are sleeping less. Average daily sleep time has decreased from about nine hours a century ago to about seven now. Epidemiologic studies have identified a

correlation between short sleep and being overweight or obese. Hormones may be why: Lack of sleep depresses the levels of leptin, the hormone that tells the brain we're full, and increases ghrelin, the hormone that makes us hungry.

Meanwhile, all the lights, televisions, computers, microwave ovens and music players that help keep us up at night use electricity, most of it generated by burning coal and natural gas. Household use of electricity has increased by over 50 percent since the early 1980s. By turning in earlier, we'll dial down our appetite for kilowatts and maybe food.

### 3. Turn down the heat and the air conditioning.

Humans, like other mammals and birds, control their body temperature by continually adjusting their metabolisms. When the air is cool, metabolism revs up to produce more heat.

When it's hot, sweating and other responses also burn up extra energy. But when air temperatures are higher our metabolisms don't have to work so hard to maintain body temperature, and we burn fewer calories.

So by adjusting your thermostat, you may keep your metabolism from getting lazy and also use less of another kind of energy.

### 4. Eat fish, but the right kind.

Fish needs no introduction as a healthful food. As the main food source of long-chain omega-3s, it's good for your heart and probably your brain. But the sterling health credentials have some environmental tarnish. Some species are contaminated with pollutants - mercury and PCBs are the main concern. Stocks of others have been dangerously depleted by too much fishing. Some groups are working to steer consumers to species that are in good supply. For the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services Fish Advisory, go to [www.dhss.mo.gov/fishadvisory/](http://www.dhss.mo.gov/fishadvisory/).

### 5. Switch to energy-saving light bulbs, but don't throw them in the regular trash.

Those curlicue compact fluorescent light bulbs that you see in your favorite discount store are the real deal. They use two-thirds less energy than a regular incandescent bulb and last up to 10 times longer.

### 6. Eat local fruits and vegetables.

By all means, eat fruits and vegetables. Good health depends on it. Buy locally when you can, fewer energy is consumed the less distance the food has to travel. Shopping at farmers' markets is a good way to reduce your food mileage. You'll be even "greener" if you walk or bike there.

7. Don't take more medications than you need to.

In most cases, our bodies use only a fraction of any drug we take. The rest gets excreted but it doesn't disappear once we've flushed. Scientists are still sorting out which drugs are causing significant harm and at what levels. But there's already evidence that pharmaceuticals in wastewater adversely affect aquatic ecosystems.

All services of the Livingston County Health Center are provided on a non-discriminatory basis.