



# PREVENTION

## THE POWER OF

GOING IT ALONE CAN BE TOUGH, ESPECIALLY IF IT MEANS CHANGING THOSE (BAD) HABITS OF A LIFETIME. THE GOOD NEWS IS YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO IT ON YOUR OWN. TONI YOUNGHUSBAND REPORTS

**W**e know that prevention is better than cure. We've

read the statistics and the headlines, but as with New Year's resolutions we just don't seem to be able to stick to so many of those deals we make with ourselves about living healthily. Failed diets, abandoned exercise plans, another glass of wine with dinner – we've all been there.

But there's good news: around the globe, health authorities are recognising that tackling diseases of lifestyle requires the efforts of more than just the individual: corporates, governments, communities, local authorities and individuals alike need to work together to stop the plague of non-communicable diseases that kill 36 million people each year – that's 63% of all global deaths.

"Global health demands better models of prevention. This is critical if we are to address the rapid rise in healthcare costs while at the same time maintaining and increasing health gains," Discovery CEO Adrian Gore told the World Economic Forum (WEF) at Davos earlier this year.

So where do we start?

### Corporates

In a 2012 report titled *Globesity – The Global Fight Against Obesity*, Bank of America Merrill Lynch proposes investing in a basket of 50 stocks it sees making gains from the fight against global obesity, such as food companies entering the health and wellness market, and those selling sports apparel.

"Some academics and non-profit organisations are skeptical of the motives of the increasing number of multinational companies who seek partnerships to address non-communicable diseases. I believe that these companies' strategies and intent cannot be questioned," says Derek Yach, senior vice president of the Vitality Group.

On the local front, supermarket chains such as Pick n Pay and Woolworths have partnered with Discovery Vitality's HealthyFood initiative, a rewards-based benefit that gives shoppers a considerable incentive by offering them monthly rebates on healthy foods bought in-store (find out more on [p. xx](#)). The size of the discount had a direct impact on the amount of fruit and vegetables shoppers bought, according to research.



The mosaic up the 16th Avenue Tiled Steps in San Francisco (above) is so beautiful, you'll hardly notice the 163-step climb!

Who wouldn't want to try out bike tracks like these (left)?



**We need to redesign our environments and mindsets to be active once again**

### Local authorities

Government at local level could go the way of New York mayor Michael Bloomberg and try to ban extra-large soda containers or trans fats in food, or they could enhance a city's wellbeing by providing infrastructure that encourages more exercise – cycling lanes, parks with sports fields, and open-air gyms. Either way, there is much that local authorities can do to influence, educate and help us make healthier choices. "Strong public health interventions influence the

consumption behaviour of individuals,” states an editorial in *The Lancet*.

“The modern world is designed for physical inactivity to thrive,” Lisa MacCallum Carter, a Nike vice-president, told the WEF. “We need to redesign our environments and mindsets to be active again... building cities and communities with physically active lifestyles in mind. It needs to be conscious and deliberate, not just by individuals, but by corporations, governments, legal systems and other mechanisms that play a part shaping modern life.”

### Legislation

If your tastebuds work against you in banishing those bad guys salt and sugar, they're in for a bit of a shock. Thanks to Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi, salt is being removed from our food little by little so that, by 2019, the salt in bread will be down by 30%, in a Vienna sausage by 13%, and in a packet of crisps by 12%.

South Africans currently consume more than double the salt we need, a fact that contributes to the huge numbers of strokes and heart attacks we suffer each year. By cutting back just 0.85g of salt a day, the country could save as much as R300 million a year on hospital fees for non-fatal strokes alone, says the Medical Research Council and the Wits Rural Public Health and Health Transitions Research Unit.

Motsoaledi has also turned guns on alcohol and tobacco, proposing stricter bans on advertising and sales. Though the liquor industry contributes R19 billion to the economy each year, he says the country spends around R39 billion trying to reverse the adverse effects of alcohol, a major contributor to road accidents in SA.

New anti-tobacco laws will prohibit displays of tobacco products in shops, make all buildings smoke-free, and ban smoking within 10m of the entrances and ventilation facilities of public buildings. There will be no smoking on beaches, or at schools, stadiums, and outdoor eating and drinking areas either.



The City of Cape Town's investment in healthy infrastructure at Sea Point promenade is paying dividends



## There is ample evidence to show that bans work

“There is ample evidence to show that bans work,” says Peter Ucko, director of the National Council Against Smoking. “Banning smoking in public places reduces exposure to secondhand smoke, which is an obvious health benefit; banning it in workplaces makes smoking less convenient, so more people quit.”

He says bans on tobacco displays will help quitters by removing the temptation they're faced with every time they shop. “Anti-tobacco legislation has made healthy choices easy and unhealthy choices difficult.”





In just two years, Brian Berkman thwarted years of unhealthy living and pulled his life back from the brink of surgery



### How I did it

Two years ago, prominent Cape Town restaurant critic Brian Berkman (45) was taking 22 pills a day to stay alive – pills to control his type-2 diabetes, his high blood pressure, and the inflammation and gastric reflux that plagued his every waking hour. He weighed 153kg. “I found movement painful, and I wasn’t happy.”

Many diets were tried; all failed. When a surgeon suggested bariatric surgery (the aim of which is to restrict the size of the stomach), Brian joined a support group and consulted several health professionals, including a dietitian. “I was truly terrified at the thought of surgery, and determined to lose as much weight as I could to reduce the risks. I used the fear to motivate myself to follow the meal plan exactly, and I hired a biokineticist to strengthen my cardiovascular system.”

By the time the date for surgery dawned, Brian had lost 20kg. “I felt like I’d dodged a bullet by not having the surgery, so I stuck to my health plan instead.”

To date he has lost 70kg. “I know this sounds dramatic, but I feel as if I’ve been reborn. To discover not only that I enjoy being fit, but that I am athletic, was a revelation. When I think that I have totally reversed serious medical conditions, I feel I can achieve anything I set my mind to. I’m also much less stressed than I ever was.”

### Brian’s tips for making the right moves

- **Start slowly.** During my first year I only worked out in the pool.
- **Get support,** but don’t use lack of support as an excuse. I made myself sick; only I could make myself better.
- **Know why** you want to lose weight, then find a plan and stick to it, giving yourself a year or two to achieve your goal.
- **Find an exercise you enjoy.** I enjoy walking up the mountain behind our house, and running on the beach. I’m motivated by my newfound fitness, and by the fear that I will get fat and unhealthy again.
- **Communicate.** As a restaurant critic, I announced publicly that I planned to stop writing about food, and explained why. *You can read more about Brian at [brianberkman.com](http://brianberkman.com)*

### In the workplace

The diets and exercise plans we follow religiously at home are often derailed at the office. Employers can help.

- Institute yearly wellness days – offering free medical checks may alert staff to health problems, and remind others to change bad habits. Companies benefit too, says Gore. “Well-designed programmes have a positive impact on productivity, competitiveness and economic growth. This is relevant when one takes into account the staggering cost of healthcare for economies.”
- Offer subsidised on-site exercise; counselling; and incentivised ‘quit’ programmes for smokers, drug users and alcoholics;
- Provide continuing health education via e-newsletters or bulletin boards, and put work into improving your canteen offerings.

## 1.5 billion adults aged 20 or older are overweight, with a body mass index greater than 25

### What can you do?

Like it or not, shifting blame isn’t going to shift those extra kilos. Healthy living is collaborative, and that means that we too need to go the extra mile.

- Given the significant savings on medical bills offered by staying healthy, a good place to start is to have regular check-ups: consider going for pap smears, prostate exams, mammograms, and tests for blood pressure, cholesterol and HIV, among others.
- If you don’t feel you’re a ‘natural’ when it comes to exercise, think of signing up for events or classes that offer incentives like Vitality points. Cape Town pensioner Melody Daniel took up swimming because of the gym subsidy – and her serious heart condition has been reversed. Prebashni Reddy’s decision to undergo a health assessment for Vitality points highlighted a serious cholesterol problem. “This shocked me into action,” says Prebashni, who embarked on an exercise programme and went on to climb Mount Kilimanjaro. ☺