

Online health and wealth challenge to begin Sunday

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

Just in time for warm spring weather and more time spent outdoors, the Cooperative Extension system is launching an online Small Steps to Health and Wealth (SSHW) Challenge called “Spring 2011 SSHW Challenge.”

This free five-week program, open to anyone who enrolls online, will be held from Sunday, April 10, through Saturday, May 14. Prizes will be awarded to participants who report the highest point totals.

To sign up for the SSHW Challenge, follow the “Challenges” link on the Small Steps to Health and Wealth website at <http://njaes.rutgers.edu/sshw> . Set up a user name and password and download a simple one-page user’s guide with instructions about how to proceed. Enroll in the Challenge titled “Spring 2011 SSHW Challenge.”

The SSHW Challenge is part of Small Steps to Health and Wealth, a national Cooperative Extension program developed to motivate Americans to take action to simultaneously improve their health and personal finances.

SSHW was built around a framework of 25 research-based behavior change strategies. The challenge was originally developed in a “paper and pencil” format with printed worksheets and is now available online.

It has been well documented that when people monitor their behavior and measure how they’re doing, they are often inspired to do better and achieve positive results. Participants in an SSHW Challenge are “on their honor” to report their activities accurately. If they “cheat” on reporting their points, they are only cheating themselves by not following the recommended daily practices.

The SSHW Challenge is based on the performance of ten recommended practices on a daily basis: five that involve health and nutrition and five that involve financial management. Ten points are given for performing each one for a maximum of 700 points per week and 3,500 points for the entire challenge.

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“The Challenge is a great way to convert ambitious personal goals, like losing weight and saving money, into daily action steps,” notes Dr. Barbara O’Neill, Extension Specialist in Financial Resource Management for Rutgers Cooperative Extension.

The five daily health and nutrition practices are: eat at least four cups of fruits and vegetables; get at least 30 minutes of exercise; drink water or unsweetened beverages instead of sugar-sweetened beverages; walk 10,000 or more steps with a pedometer; and learn something new about health and nutrition.

The five daily financial management practices included in the SSHW Challenge are: save a \$1 bill (or more) and/or pocket change; invest \$5 or more per day (including automated retirement savings plan deposits); track money spent throughout the day; eat lunch prepared at home; and learn something new about personal finance.

The latter activity, for both health and personal finances, can be accomplished by visiting websites, attending seminars or by reading, listening to or viewing media reports.

Spring 2011 SSHW Challenge participants will also have an opportunity, if they choose, to replace one daily health activity and one daily personal finance activity with unique daily personal challenges of their own. “Providing some adaptation of the traditional SSHW Challenge format will make the Challenge more ‘personal’ for participants and give them an opportunity to practice new behaviors if they are already doing all of the 10 pre-selected activities,” explained Dr. O’Neill.

As participants enter their personal data, they will see their point totals for each day of the week and for each of the 10 activities described above. They’ll also see a bar graph that compares their personal progress to the average scores of everyone else participating in the Challenge. Daily motivational messages will also be provided to participants. Paper tracking forms can be downloaded to keep track of daily activities until they are entered online.

Doing even one of the 10 recommended daily practices is a great way to get started on the path to better health and improved financial security.

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The more SSHW Challenge activities that are performed by participants, the better. To sign up for “Spring 2011 SSHW Challenge” visit the SSHW website at <http://njaes.rutgers.edu/sshw/> .