

Maple Center's LEAF program can improve your diet, health

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Lew Hackleman describes growing up in cow country Oklahoma where fried foods and red meat were a way of life. "You were almost considered a traitor if you didn't eat a lot of beef," he said.

Now a Terre Haute resident, in the 1990s he went to see a heart specialist who diagnosed him with angina. The doctor told him to cut down on his fat consumption and to stop smoking. He brushed off the doctor's advice. "I think most people have a sense they are indestructible. My body has always recovered from things," Hackleman added. Then in the spring of 2001, he had a heart attack. "All I required was a stent in one of my coronary arteries. The one they call a widow maker. That was what woke me up. I realized if I didn't pay attention to him, I wasn't going to live very long".

It took Lew another 10 to 11 years, he said, to get to where he is today, eating a plant-based diet. "Before the heart attack, I began to feel a little slow. Then after the heart attack, I didn't do much exercise for a while. I felt ponderous. I was not heavy, but it was like walking through molasses. Things were not as easy as they used to be. It was very hard to get me out of the house for about ten years to do things. Now I look forward to doing more stuff," Hackleman said. At the ripe age of 78, you can find him walking two miles a day at a local gym and doing reps on various weightlifting machines.

Evolution of lifestyle-change programs

In 2005, the non-profit side of the Maple Center for Integrated Health was formed. It had a vision of bringing the program that Dr. Dean Ornish had created to Terre Haute. Dr. Ornish had studied and proven that a clean lifestyle that properly addressed what you ate, how you deal with stress, how active you are and how much love and support you have could clear up coronary artery disease. The cost to bring his program was too great for our community to financially sustain, so the center tried something similar.

Five years later, the Maple Center introduced the national program known as Coronary Health Improvement Program, or CHIP. It follows the same principles as Dr. Dean Ornish studied. The Maple

Center offered the program for four years. Each session lasted eight weeks, during which members met for 16 times in the evening. Participants learned how to change their diet and lifestyle to prevent diseases.

As with many affiliate programs, prices change. The Maple Center found the affiliate prices too high and took their experience and connections to create the Lifestyle Education And Food, or LEAF, program. “We can offer the program at a much lower cost and use a lot of our home-grown materials,” said Dr. Kathy Stienstra, who has a practice at The Maple Center for Integrated Health.

LEAF is offered twice a year in eight-week sessions, meeting once a week. To date, Dr. Stienstra says they have had more than 800 people come through the class like Lew Hackleman and his wife. “We did a lot of research. We saw a lot of material on medical studies on diet. The plant-based diet, seemed to make a lot of sense. There are a lot of studies that show that it is healthier. People live longer, people who have artery problems — in many cases the arteries clear up without medication, just from not eating a lot of fat. My cholesterol went down in that eight weeks. My triglycerides went down. My good cholesterol came up. I lost 10 pounds. I just felt better; there are no two ways about it,” Hackleman said.

It's in your learned genes

You have the genes you are born with, Mendelian genetics. Now science has taught us about our epigenetics that can be altered based on the lifestyle that we choose. Those genes then can get passed on to our children. “One of the classic animal studies is one where researchers took a group of male mice and fed them food that gave them diabetes and then they bred them with female mice who have been fed good food. Their offspring was fed good food. The offspring still had a higher incident of diabetes because of some of the gene marks that came from the father,” Dr. Stienstra said.

The good news is in as little as three months 500 gene expressions can change for the better by living the LEAF lifestyle. Our brains are designed to like sugar, salt and fat because if nature were our grocery store, anything that would have those things in it would be a caloric value to us. Now we live in a world of processed food that has been chemically designed to appeal to those brain receptors. We are eating with our taste buds rather than our intelligence. “It is fascinating how traumatic our environment is, which includes to a large degree our food. It is the most intimate interaction with our environment because we

are taking it into our bodies. People are waking up to say, you know one of the reasons I am not feeling well is because of what I am putting it in my body,” Dr. Stienstra said.

Now it is up to us as individuals to make a choice. The more we make healthy choices, the more retailers will provide those healthy options for us. Together we can decrease heart disease and live longer, fuller lives.

Those who missed The Maple Center for Integrated Health’s free showing of “Plant Pure Nation” at the Indiana Theater will be able to catch it on Netflix soon. LEAF alumni will also be able to see it at a future meeting date. The next LEAF class starts March 8. The cost is \$199 per person. Scholarships are available. To register, call 812-234-8733 or visit www.themaplecenter.org.