



3 steps to a healthier you

While everyone should be concerned about his or her health, it is particularly important for letter carriers. This is a job that requires many of us to walk long distances and lift heavy loads every day. We're exposed to extremes of heat and cold, and occasionally we need to be quick on our feet. Being in fine fettle makes all those things easier.

In addition, the career of a letter carrier may include major variations in activity levels.

A walking route may become a mounted one and vice versa. A carrier may become a union officer, drastically limiting the amount of walking time in his or her day. And new retirees who move less and don't downshift their caloric intake may find themselves packing on the pounds.

The following article addresses three health issues—diet, exercise and smoking—that letter carriers grapple with, as well as the ways that NALC can help.

Watch what you eat

Michele Strother, a member of Birmingham, AL Branch 530, is "super-passionate" about nutrition. "I was on about a dozen medications, many to manage pain from the job and a previous car accident, the repetitive motions, the standing, all of that."

Besides medicine for pain, she was taking pills for inflammation, depression, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and more.

Today, she is medication-free. "I have a picture of my medications on my Facebook page, so everyone can

see where I came from. What food can do for you. Food is my medicine," she said.

Such is her zeal that she has enrolled in a nutrition course with plans to become a health coach—and she's already getting practice at the post office. A colleague asked her, " 'Help me do my grocery list' this morning," she said with a laugh. She's already set up a Facebook page, "Simply Well With Michele," for what she calls her "wellness adventure and future business," which she plans to pursue on the side until she retires.

Strother understands that eating healthfully on a route can be difficult. "The job makes it very easy to snack," she said, adding, "it's hard to bring food that needs to be microwaved; you want something you can have on the go, and most of those are things you shouldn't be eating."

Obesity is epidemic in the United States. Nearly 40 percent of Americans are obese; add in those who are overweight and the figure comes to more than 70 percent.

The upshot: Seven out of 10 of us could stand to lose a few.

When **Chris Absure**, a member of Charleston, WV Branch 531, started with the Postal Service as a city carrier assistant (CCA) three years ago, "I was diabetic and hypertensive and a smoker," he recalls. He also weighed 325 pounds.

Absure lost a bit of weight his first year, but resolved to tackle his health issues head-on only when his doctor wanted to put him on insulin for his diabetes.

A look at how Michele Strother prepares healthy lunches she can take with her to work.

“I cut out all soda,” he said. After two weeks, he had dropped 20 pounds.

Encouraged by his progress, he enlisted the services of a professional for about six months. “I had a dietician that helped me realize I was eating more red meat and sugary cake than anything else,” he said.

He went on a low-carb diet—he aims for 50 grams of carbohydrates a day—and experimented with fruits and vegetables to find ones he liked.

Today, Absure is down to 228 pounds. He sticks to water now instead of pop; if he craves soda, he drinks the club variety (sparkling water). “Once I cut out the sodas and was drinking more water, I felt 10 times better,” he said, and he noticed that his joints felt better and that he wasn’t as sluggish.

He is surprised now to find himself craving vegetables—cucumbers and brussels sprouts are two favorites—and he often has a salad for lunch.

Now a regular carrier, he credits the “brotherhood” of CCAs with keeping him on the straight and narrow path. “I had several CCAs that would tell me, ‘Look, man, that’s not on your diet,’ ” he said.

“When the wife wasn’t around, they were around. So, I kind of had a double whammy. You have to have support,” he added.

Our food environment makes it difficult to do the right thing when it comes to eating. “Convenience” foods usually are loaded with sugar, “bad” fat, salt or all three, and the carbohydrate-heavy nature of much fast food makes it a poor choice for anything but in-a-pinch dining. A recent study in the *Lancet* medical journal found that poor diet is now responsible for more deaths worldwide than cigarette smoking. It is widely linked to heart



disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke, osteoporosis and several forms of cancer.

Bringing a healthy lunch with you is the surest safeguard against the convenience trap. This is especially true for letter carriers delivering in food deserts, those environments where fresh, healthful food is scarce. Surprisingly, many of these deserts are in urban areas.

Strother has developed an ingenious Mason jar-based system for lunches. Before work each week, she takes five jars, puts a paper towel on the bottom and fills each with leafy greens and cut-up vegetables. Every work morning, she quickly places sliced avocado and some protein (usually canned wild salmon) in a big bowl, grabs a Mason jar from the fridge and heads to work. At lunch, she dumps the Mason jar’s contents into the big bowl and—voilà—healthy lunch.

“Mason jars are magical,” she said. “Everything’s crispy and good a week later.”

In its 2015-2020 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) out-

lines the following aspects of healthy eating:

The shoulds—A diet should contain a variety of vegetables and fruits; fat-free or low-fat dairy products; proteins, including seafood, lean meats and poultry, eggs, beans, soy products, nuts and seeds; and healthy oils such as olive, canola, etc., and those that are present naturally in avocados, nuts and seeds.

The should-nots—Healthy eating is as much about what you don’t put in your mouth as what you do. The USDA suggests limiting sugar and saturated fat to less than 10 percent each of your daily caloric intake [which should range from 1,200 to 2,500 calories a day, depending on height and weight]; and limiting sodium to less than 2,300 milligrams a day.

Processed foods, such as white bread and white rice, and sugary drinks such as soda and fruit juice, also should be avoided.

If you have a weight problem and are ready to tackle it, one first step is to meet with your doctor or a dietician



Even for carriers with walking routes, stretching and other flexibility exercises can help maintain their range of motion.

to create a weight-loss plan. The NALC Health Benefit Plan (HBP) also offers the following programs to help put you on the path:

- **Weight Talk**—A personal coaching program designed to achieve measurable, sustainable weight loss. It offers regular phone-based coaching sessions with a dedicated coach. Participants set realistic weight goals and, through multiple small behavior changes, learn how to achieve and maintain a healthy weight for the rest of their lives.
- **The Childhood Weight Management Resource Center**—an online resource where members can access articles on food, nutrition, exercise and fitness specifically geared to children. Also included are recipes, meal suggestions and a Body Mass Index (BMI) chart designed for children and adolescents 2 through 20.
- **Healthy Rewards program**—Discounts are offered on weight management and nutrition, fitness clubs, magazine subscriptions and healthy lifestyle products. Call 800-558-9443 or visit mycigna.com.

Get moving

Letter carriers generally get a fair amount of exercise, especially those on a walking route. That sounds great—but read on.

The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) warns that sitting too

much is a health hazard *even if* you're already getting the recommended amount of exercise. In ACSM's fact sheet on reducing sedentary behaviors, it says "there is a strong relationship between sitting and all-health causes of mortality, even if people are meeting the minimum physical activity guidelines. Thus, physical activity does not cancel out the ill effects of too much sitting."

So, if you have a vigorous walking route but go home and plop down in front of the television, you're not doing yourself any favors.

In addition, even if you're on a walking route and reducing chair time, "cardiorespiratory" activity such as walking is but one of the four types of exercise that the ACSM recommends. The others are resistance (weight lifting), flexibility (stretching) and neuromotor (tai chi, yoga).

Generally, we all need to move more, and in different ways.

Strother believes more could be done to teach carriers how to stay injury-free. She says that while USPS teaches simple things like bending with your legs and not your back, there is not a lot of instruction on ergonomics, the study of how workers move in the workplace. "We work out the same muscles all day, every day, to fatigue. The reasons there are carriers on light duty is because of the job. They don't teach people to stretch. Five minutes of stretching before casing in the morning would save the Postal Service millions of dollars.

"When you go to a physical therapist, they don't say, 'Run a mile.' They tell you, 'Let's tone [the muscles] up, get them ready, and maybe you won't have an injury.'"

"I think if we spent a little more time considering the motions and what we're doing," injuries would decrease, she said.

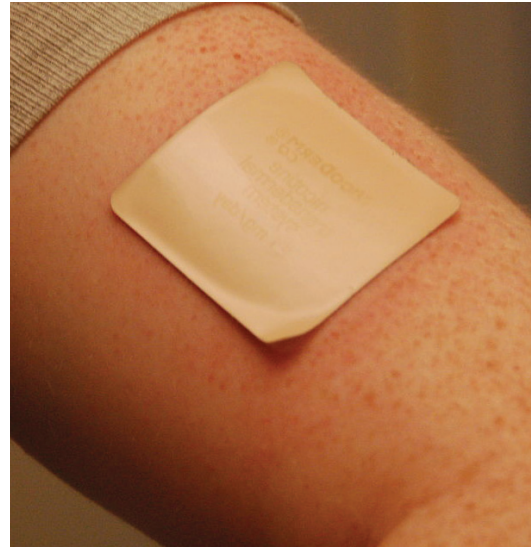
Remember, the Wellness Program through the HBP offers discounts on fitness club memberships and healthy lifestyle products. To take advantage of this perk, visit mycigna.com—it's easy to register if you haven't already. Once logged in, click the "see details" link on the "Get Fit for Just \$25 A Month" field to lead you to the page where you enter your ZIP code to find a participating gym near you. There are more than 10,000 fitness centers around the country that honor the program.

Thank you for not smoking

It is common knowledge that quitting smoking will improve your short- and long-term health. The good news is, more and more smokers are doing just that. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the percentage of adults who smoke dropped from 20.9 percent in 2005 to 15.5 percent in 2016.

But that is still 15.5 percent too many, and the importance of quitting if you presently smoke cannot be overstated. Consider these grim statistics from the CDC's "Health Effects of Smoking" fact sheet:

Quitting smoking can be difficult, but some things can help, including nicotine patches.



cope with cravings at no additional cost to you as part of your health benefit plan.

Feeling good

“I want everybody to feel good. And to know it’s as simple as food is amazing to me,” aspiring health coach Strother said. When people approach her for advice, her first instruction is to “get off the sugar.”

“I used to be known for my Girl Scout cookie addiction,” she said. Two years ago, she recalls eating a case and a half in one season. (A case of cookies is 12 boxes.)

A while later she went to the orthopedic doctor and said, “My joints are killing me.” Her doctor asked her what she thought it was, if she had done anything different. She knew immediately—it was the cookies.

“It was 100 percent self-inflicted,” Strother said. “That’s kind of when I started” getting into the study of nutrition, she added. “I got off sugar and could see a difference...The science is clear” on sugar’s harmful effects.

“I want people to know it’s possible. It’s not just people you see on TV. It’s not even willpower; just force yourself to do it until it’s easy.

“I don’t think about donuts anymore,” she said; a Snickers bar tastes like “pain and inflammation.”

Today, Strother craves what’s good for her: Kale.

“Once you feel good you don’t want ever to feel bad anymore. It’s not worth it,” she said. **PR**

- More than 10 times as many U.S. citizens have died prematurely from cigarette smoking than have died in all the wars fought by the United States.
- Smoking causes about 90 percent (or 9 out of 10) of all lung cancer deaths. More women die from lung cancer each year than from breast cancer.
- Smoking causes about 80 percent (or 8 out of 10) of all deaths from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

Chuck Goushian, president of Camden, NJ Merged Branch 540, recently decided to quit his pack-and-a-half daily habit after 40 years. “I had to quit. I was not feeling as well as I should have and figured it was time to get it right,” he said.

He wrote about his experience in his Branch Item in the April issue of *The Postal Record*. “Thanks to the NALC Health Benefit Plan, it only cost me a \$20 co-pay to see my doctor and he wrote me the prescription,” he wrote. “Then, when I got the prescription [Chantix] filled at the pharmacy, it cost me zero dollars! I knew our health plan was serious when it comes to its smoking cessation program, but as it also turns out, we have a great health plan and a prescription plan that’s tough to beat.”

His “Quit Day” was March 12, and when we caught up with him later in the month, he was doing well. But the first few days were tough. “While I was going through the nicotine withdrawal, apparently I was not very pleasant to be around,” he said wryly. “But the cravings I get now, they’re just thoughts. The physical aspect is gone.” He credits the Chantix for that.

Amazingly, West Virginia carrier Absure quit smoking at the same time he was changing his eating habits.

“The first week was the hardest,” he said. After that, “the cravings went away.” It was the habit of smoking that took a bit more mental energy. “I was about a pack a day. The first month I had to get used to going outside on break. I had to kind of prepare myself before I got off work, saying ‘OK, I don’t need to do this,’ ” he said.

Absure happens to live in the state with the highest percentage of smokers in the country. When asked if it was difficult to be around smokers in his family while he was quitting, he said that yes, it was hard in a way, but in another way it helped, because he could see all the health issues they grappled with. “I need to do something before it gets to that point,” he remembers thinking.

Going to a doctor and getting a prescription for smoking-cessation medication is one way to address the problem. The HBP offers another: the Quit for Life smoking cessation program, a collaboration between the American Cancer Society and Optum that has benefited more than 1 million tobacco users. Those who enroll can expect:

- **A printed, stage-appropriate quit guide**—“Stage” refers to pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation or maintenance. Most tobacco users fall somewhere on this continuum.
- **Text2Quit**—text messages personalized to each participant’s quit plan.
- **Web Coach**—a members-only site where you can track your progress and connect with others trying to quit.
- **Patches or gum**—up to eight weeks of nicotine patches or gum to help