



# Implementing Lifestyle Prescriptions in Primary Care

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Healthy lifestyle behaviors contribute to the prevention, improvement, and management of chronic medical conditions. These behaviors alone, or combined with medication, are the foundation of treatment for many chronic diseases, especially hypertension and diabetes.<sup>1-3</sup>

The importance of recommending and prescribing healthy lifestyle behaviors is often overlooked or under-emphasized during patient visits.<sup>4</sup> This document discusses the use of lifestyle prescriptions in primary care and emphasizes simple strategies clinicians can use to incorporate this tool into practice.

## What Is a Lifestyle Prescription?

A lifestyle prescription is a plan that a clinician and patient develop together to target a mutually agreed upon healthy lifestyle change. For example, a lifestyle prescription can specify how specific diet or exercise interventions that are effective for treating chronic disease and reducing cardiovascular risk will be implemented.<sup>5</sup>

Behavioral recommendations that are presented as lifestyle prescriptions demonstrate to patients the importance of adopting lifestyle changes and treating them as daily, regular doses of medicine. These prescriptions have been shown to be effective for increasing physical activity, decreasing body mass index, increasing self-reported consumption of fruits and vegetables, and smoking cessation (especially if connected to cessation support).<sup>6-10</sup>

A lifestyle prescription outlines a specific, individualized plan for a recommended behavior (e.g., increasing physical activity, improving dietary choices), including how the patient will make the behavioral change. The format implies that the “type” and “dose” of the medication can be changed or adjusted over time to improve effectiveness. The prescription is meant to improve a patient’s clarity, engagement, confidence, prioritization, and commitment to making and sustaining the selected plan as part of their health management.

Figure 1. Examples of Lifestyle Prescriptions

**Rx for Health**  
Date: 5-6-2025  
Dr: Dr. Freeman  
Name: Alex Vance  
I recommend:  
 Walking  
5 days per week  
Medium intensity level  
20 minutes per day  
Will use smartphone for tracking  
Diagnosis: High blood pressure

**Rx for Health**  
Date: 5-6-2025  
Dr: Dr. Freeman  
Name: Alex Vance  
I recommend:  
 Improved Diet  
Dark green leafy vegetables  
1 cup fresh or 1/2 cup cooked  
Once daily  
Will track in food diary

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## Performing a Lifestyle History and Physical Examination

Before writing a lifestyle prescription with a patient, the clinical team should first perform a physical examination and obtain or update a patient's lifestyle history. The history should include social drivers of health, which are necessary to understand a patient's opportunities and barriers to making various choices at a given time.

A solid understanding of a patient's unique circumstances is important to the development of practical plans. For example, instructing a patient to walk regularly outside is not helpful if the patient feels it is unsafe to walk in their neighborhood or has caregiving duties that prevent them from leaving the house to walk. Directing a patient to increase their consumption of fruits and vegetables is not reasonable if they cannot access or afford them regularly.

### Lifestyle History Topics to Consider

- **Work/School:** Hours worked, activity in job, food and activity options (e.g., fitness facility).
- **Transportation:** Neighborhood walkability; reliability of transportation; work/school commute time, cost, and type.
- **Caregiving:** Obligations to household members and other loved ones.
- **Home Built Environment:** Stairs, exercise equipment, space, kitchen equipment, and housing stability.
- **Skills/Experience:** Comfort with meal preparation and activities, ability to manage one's own health and quality of life.
- **Physical Activity:** Prior/current exercise and preferences, nearby parks/exercise facilities and memberships.
- **Food:** Typical choices, convenient and affordable grocery options, and food insecurity.
- **Personal Supports for Healthy Change:** People sharing the home, other relationships, support groups, social isolation issues, and financial strain.
- **Personal Safety Issues:** Home, workplace, and neighborhood.
- **Pain or Other Physical Limitations That May Impede Physical Activity**
- **Mental Health and Substance Use:** Mental health disorders, stress, tobacco and alcohol use, and intimate partner violence.

### Lifestyle History Resources

- *Strategies for Promotion of a Healthy Lifestyle in Clinical Settings: Pillars of Ideal Cardiovascular Health: A Science Advisory From the American Heart Association:*  
[This article](#) includes tools and examples to assess dietary history, activity, tobacco and alcohol use, and sleep, and outlines practical steps for changing behavior.<sup>11</sup>
- *Social Drivers of Health Screening Forms*  
Example forms can be found on [Cardi-OH.org](#) and [AAFP.org](#).
- *Physical Activity Readiness Questionnaire (PAR-Q)*  
For patients planning to start low- to moderate-intensity exercise, a simple tool like the [PAR-Q+](#) can assess exercise risk.<sup>12</sup> In nearly all cases, the benefits from activity outweigh the risks.

## Assessing Patient Readiness

Before considering a lifestyle prescription, clinicians should help patients consider their readiness. A patient's stage of readiness to change is behavior-specific and may alter over time depending on circumstances. This means a patient may be ready for significant changes in physical activity, or they may be ready for only small dietary changes or even none at all. The transtheoretical model (TTM) categorizes readiness for behavior change into five stages: Precontemplation, Contemplation, Preparation, Action, Maintenance (Figure 2).<sup>13,14</sup>

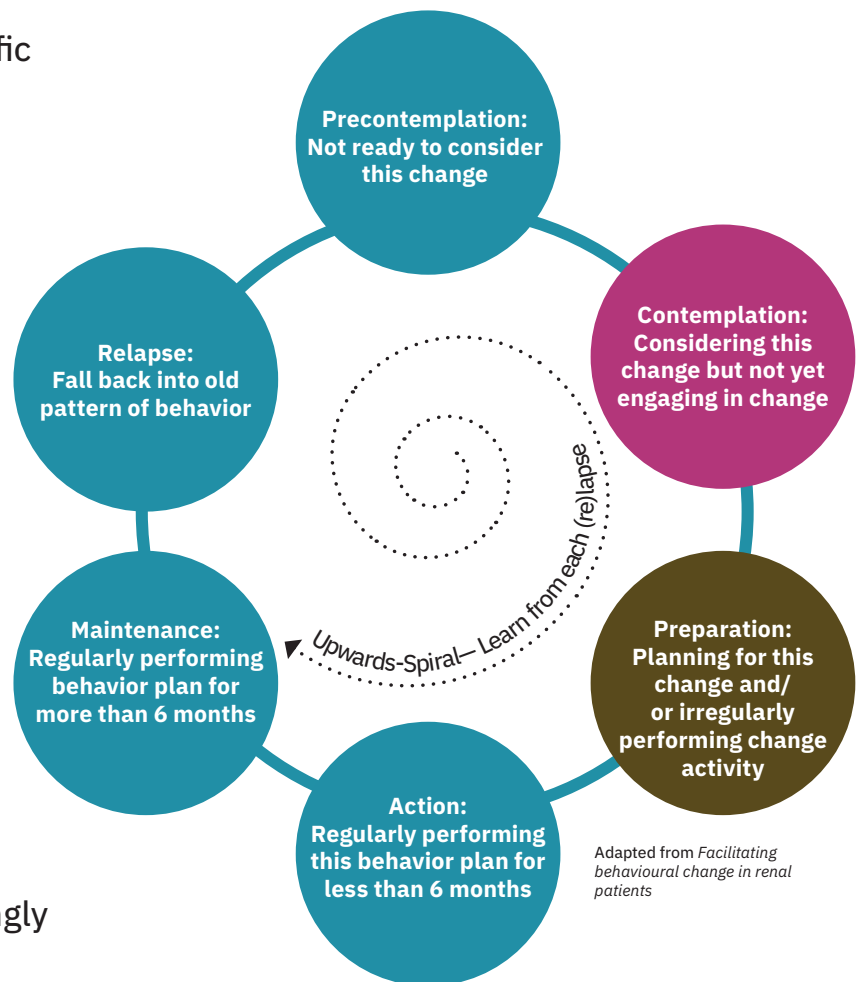
The TTM has demonstrated strong evidence for continuous and effective use to help patients change health behaviors.<sup>8</sup> A patient's current stage will help to determine whether and when to use a lifestyle prescription effectively. Lifestyle prescriptions should be strongly considered during the Contemplation, Preparation, and Relapse stages of behavior change.

Patient-centered tools, such as [motivational interviewing](#) or the 5A's approach (Ask-Assess-Advise-Assist-Arrange), foster a shared decision making process (see [Figure 3](#)).

### Other Considerations to Discern Readiness to Change:<sup>11</sup>

- **Motivation:** Patient is ready to make the type of long-term change that is effective.
- **Stress Level:** Patient is free enough of major life crises to adopt/change behaviors.
- **Psychiatric Issues:** Patient does not have significantly untreated or under-treated issues (e.g., depression, substance abuse, bulimia nervosa).
- **Medical Issues:** Patient's medical problems are stable.
- **Time Availability:** Patient can devote the necessary time for at least 13 to 26 weeks.

Figure 2. Transtheoretical Model (TTM) of Patient Readiness to Change

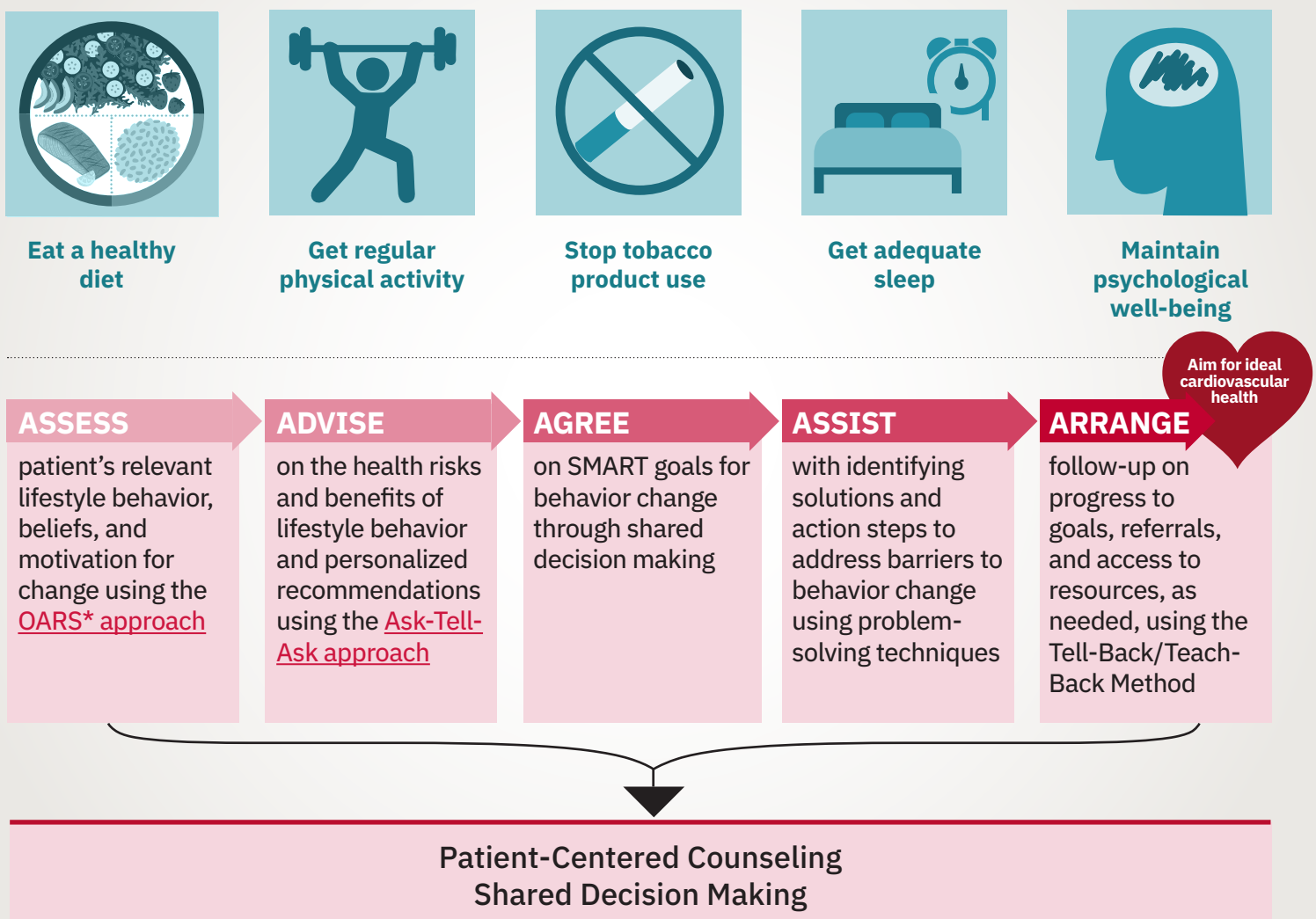


## Writing Lifestyle Prescriptions

Lifestyle prescriptions require a patient to actively follow a diet, activity, or other recommendation anywhere from several times a week to several times a day. The patient should understand the potential short- and long-term effectiveness or benefits of the “medicine” they plan to “take” for improving health, reducing risk, or managing a chronic condition. Use the 5A’s to work with the patient to develop a lifestyle prescription that fits the patient’s readiness, needs, and goals.

The SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-Base) goal format is commonly used for lifestyle behavior change.<sup>15</sup> Figure 3 illustrates how to combine the 5A’s and the SMART goal format.<sup>11</sup>

Figure 3. The 5A’s Model for Lifestyle-Related Behavior Change Counseling in Clinical Settings



CVD=cardiovascular disease.

\*OARS=Open-ended questions, Affirming, Reflective Listening, Summarizing.

Adapted from *Strategies for Promotion of a Healthy Lifestyle in Clinical Settings: Pillars of Ideal Cardiovascular Health: A Science Advisory From the American Heart Association*

The FITT (Frequency, Intensity, Time, Type) is a format for physical activity plans and the TAF (Type, Amount, Frequency) is a format for nutrition plans. Table 1 shows examples of lifestyle prescriptions using FITT and TAF.<sup>16</sup>

**Table 1. Lifestyle Prescriptions Using FITT and TAF**

Exercise		Nutrition	
Frequency	4 times each week	Type	Vegetables, such as broccoli, kale, and brussel sprouts
Intensity	Moderate to vigorous based on age (Learn more here: <a href="#">CDC Physical Activity Basics</a> )	Amount	1 serving (1/2 cup cooked, 1 cup fresh)
Time	At least 30 minutes each session	Frequency	Once daily
Type	Walking		

Adapted from *Lifestyle medicine competencies for primary care physicians*<sup>16</sup>

## Tips for Effective Design

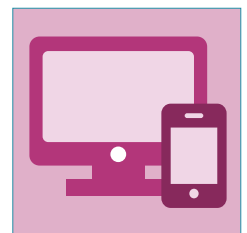
### Base prescriptions on patient’s starting place and provide them to the patient verbally and in writing.

- If the long-term goal for cardiovascular risk reduction is to reach 150 or more minutes of walking weekly over most days, use the FITT format (e.g., *Starting Monday, I will walk to the mailbox two times a day and take the stairs two times a day.*)
- If the issue is sleep hygiene, establish a SMART goal (e.g., *Starting Sunday, I will be in bed and be device-free by 10:30 PM nightly.*)



### Engage patients in tracking efforts (e.g., electronic, paper):

- For diet and activity changes, patients who track behaviors are more successful than those who do not.<sup>17-19</sup> With tracking, patients do better with consistent lifestyle “medicine” adherence and often see more clearly the relationship between their efforts and their results ([Figure 3](#)).<sup>19</sup>
- When possible, include suggestions for methods (e.g., journaling, use of stress management tools) and metrics (e.g., food intake, cigarettes smoked) for tracking behavior.



### Plan for follow-up:

- To check progress and assess for barriers, schedule timely follow-up visits or include the discussion as part of regular chronic care visits with the clinician or a team member.
- Adjust the lifestyle prescription, as necessary, as patients move between behavior change and motivation levels.
- Use the electronic medical record or add the lifestyle prescription to the medication list to ensure sustained accountability, as many patients see multiple clinicians.



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## Using an Interprofessional Team Approach

Ensuring successful adoption and implementation of a lifestyle prescription may require additional care partners.

- Registered dietitians can help patients to practically apply recommended dietary changes.
- Social workers can help to alleviate barriers, such as transportation issues, food insecurity concerns, and housing instability.
- Behavioral health specialists or community health workers can provide additional strategies to help the patient learn about and better manage unique stressors that may affect adherence.

All care team members should be aware of community and office resources to assist patients when barriers are encountered or potential opportunities are available. For example, connecting patients to local food banks or discount grocers may improve access and reduce stigma for patients who have food insecurity, and identifying community resources for exercise increases patients' awareness of safe and feasible options.

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## Supporting Patients Using Community and Office Resources

When clinicians and care team members familiarize themselves with and have lists of options available in the community, patients can consider these suggestions during the plan-making process:

- Recreation centers or low-cost gyms that patients can use to follow a regular, structured exercise plan, regardless of weather.
- Exercise videos that can be checked out of the library.
- Outdoor walks, if there is a local park or safe space in a patient's neighborhood.
- Free, internet-based exercise resources (e.g., YouTube, TikTok), apps for tracking food and activity, or electronic food and diet resources (for patients with dependable internet access and a smart phone, tablet, or TV).

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## Partners



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