Today, the style in which you live probably has more effect on the quality and length of your life than anything medical doctors and other practitioners of the healing arts can do. Your health-related behavior throughout your life largely determines how much “wellness” you will enjoy and how long you will have to enjoy it.

The major causes of disability and death among adults are no longer the communicable diseases. The noncommunicable, or chronic, diseases—heart attacks, high blood pressure, diabetes, lung cancer, chronic bronchitis, emphysema, and cirrhosis of the liver—along with accidents now account for 60 to 70 percent of adult deaths. These diseases of modern life are usually linked to a person’s lifestyle habits. Being overweight, smoking, abusing alcohol, having a faulty diet, exercising and sleeping habits, and ineffectively dealing with stress contribute to such health problems.

Most of us could improve our lives by substituting healthful living for some of our poor habits. Some major studies have shown that longer life and better health are related to a few simple but basic health habits. These include eating meals and sleeping regularly, getting moderate exercise, controlling weight, not smoking, not using alcohol (or only in moderation), and reducing stress.

In short, health maintenance involves a good lifestyle. But it is not always easy to develop a good lifestyle or to change a bad one. We can take medication to control high blood pressure, but it is more difficult to change patterns of eating, sleeping, and doing physical activities and to reduce excess weight or emotional stress.

Also, health maintenance must be a lifelong process, not merely a temporary change of a few bad habits.

Fitness 7 is a series of eight programs designed to help you become more aware of your health status, risks, and needs and to encourage you to make commitments to improve your health behavior. A great deal of the success of these programs will depend on your motivation and your ability for self-discipline in making health maintenance a lifelong process.

The goals of Fitness 7 are to provide you with accurate information that will assist you in
Each week we will look at a different aspect of health behavior. One topic is nutrition. A recent survey indicated that two-thirds of all American adults recognize that they would be healthier if they made some changes in their diets. It is becoming increasingly apparent that many of the major health problems in the United States are associated with eating too much food or eating too much of the wrong types of food. Research indicates that nutrition plays an important role in the development of many major health problems, especially certain types of heart diseases, hypertension, cancer, and diabetes. This program will highlight the role of the diet and some specific nutrients in the development of chronic diseases.

Another topic is stress. Stress is a part of our daily lives. Handled well, stress is a friend that strengthens you for the next encounter. Handled poorly, or allowed to get out of hand, stress becomes an enemy that can contribute to diseases such as hypertension, ulcers, rheumatoid arthritis, and heart disease. The purpose of this program is to teach you ways to recognize and handle your stress more effectively.

Exercise will also be discussed. Exercise is important in keeping fit and improving your overall sense of well-being. Being physically fit means feeling good, looking good, and functioning well physically. Exercise is one aspect of physical fitness. The exercises in this program are for cardiovascular fitness.

Another program is on sleep. We all know that we function better and generally feel better when we get enough sleep. Refreshing sleep is a part of good health, well-being, and overall fitness. Sleep problems are discussed, including too much sleep.

Weight will be discussed in another program. At least three out of five adults are overweight. Obesity has many harmful effects on health. It increases blood cholesterol, blood pressure, and blood glucose levels. Excess weight shortens your life expectancy. However, people who lose weight, and keep it off, have practically the same life expectancy as people with normal weight.

Alcohol is another topic to be presented. In a nationwide health maintenance survey, half the adults reported drinking beer, half reported drinking wine, and half reported drinking hard liquor of some kind. And, about a fifth of all adults surveyed admitted that they or someone in their family drinks too much.

Tobacco will also be discussed. Cigarette smoking, the most harmful form of tobacco use, is our largest preventable cause of premature death, illness, and disability. In order to deal with this problem, nonsmokers as well as smokers need to understand the many aspects of cigarette smoking and must be willing to take a stand in combating this public health hazard.