

Not *If*, But *When*: **MOVE![®] HELPS VETERAN LEWIS BENKO BEGIN A HEALTHY, NEW LIFE**

One sentence changed Veteran Lewis Benko's life forever.

"You are looking at some serious health consequences," his concerned VA doctor told him, "and it's not a question of *if*, but *when*." Lewis had heard this warning before, but this time it was different: he'd just been prescribed insulin for his rising blood sugar.

After his appointment, Lewis went to the VAMC's Veterans Canteen looking to "medicate" himself with food. But as he approached, he realized that he needed to change his ways. "I knew I had to stop, so I walked out of the facility and went home," Lewis explains. "It was time for me to become 'proactive' in managing my health."

No More Procrastinating

Lewis now says that he "ceased procrastination" when he decided to address his poor health. He knew the impact of diabetes and did not want to suffer those consequences. So he took his first step to a healthier life by getting the information to make a big dietary change.



"I began a vegan diet," he says, "but I made the transition slowly, gradually phasing out animal products." Lewis started by using up foods he already had, slowly cleaning out his pantry—a real sacrifice on a fixed income. Later, he enrolled in the MOVE![®] Program at the Albany (NY) Stratton VAMC. "I also joined a food co-op, where I volunteered," Lewis says. "So I got a discount on food, as well as hands-on learning about better nutrition."

Transition To Health

Lewis chose to lead by example, living his life in a new, healthy way—and within 3 months, he saw positive results. With improved blood glucose control, he was able to reduce his finger-stick tests. He's also reduced his blood pressure and oral diabetes

medications by over 75 percent, and was able to stop taking his cholesterol medication. Currently, he's working to get off insulin, too.

Lewis says that exercise has played a key role in his transition. "Staff at the MOVE!® exercise clinic introduced me to all types of exercises for my ability," he says. "As I progressed, I realized that my previous back and neck injuries had been complicated by my weight." Even a day without exercise can cause his blood sugar levels to rise, so Lewis has learned to carefully monitor himself.

Never Too Late

The lifestyle changes Lewis made have given him the tools to face an additional challenge: appetite increase, and later, weight gain, caused by one of his medications. "My appetite was dangerous," he says, "but I've been able to persevere and not backslide into old habits." Lewis knows that portion control and exercise will have to increase as he ages—and that he'll have to maintain his enthusiasm—to meet his goals, but he's ready for these challenges.



Lewis believes he's fortunate to have come to a realization about his health and changed his path. "I'm thankful for VA's support and services," he explains, "as well as the guidance and motivation from MOVE!® staff." By changing his diet and becoming more physically active, Lewis is now looking forward to vital, productive golden years. "It's never too late to enjoy improved health," Lewis says. "I chose to rely not only on my doctors and medications, but also on myself. Change is possible, but the choice is up to the individual!"

[This article is an edited version of a story created by Stratton VAMC MOVE!® staff.]