

Cynthia Perez

A Healthier Diet Has Made All the Difference

Cynthia Perez's nutritious eating habits won her the "Biggest Loser" title at work – and have given her a new outlook on life.

Like many of us, Cynthia Perez had made New Year's resolutions to lose weight before, only to have her good intentions give way to old habits. After vowing one more time to make changes in the New Year, Cynthia went to see her doctor last January because she was having heart palpitations. She weighed about 175 pounds, at least 30 pounds more than was healthy for her height, and her doctor said her weight was likely the reason that her heart felt like it was fluttering at least a few times a week. "My doctor said losing weight would be the best thing I could do, because in the last few years I'd gained quite a bit," Cynthia remembered. "She showed me the chart, but I didn't really need to see it – I knew."

Soon after that visit, Cynthia, an 1199SEIU member for eight years and an operating room scheduler at Lutheran Medical Center in Brooklyn, saw a flyer at the medical center for a "Biggest Loser" contest. The weight loss contest was open to all hospital employees and would award a pair of cash prizes to the man and woman who lost the highest percentage of their body weight over a 10-week period. Lutheran's "Biggest Loser" contest is a good example of how institutions can promote incentive-based wellness programs, and the National Benefit Fund – in partnership with the Union and League of Voluntary Hospitals and Homes – will be awarding up to ten institutions \$4,500 a year to further these types of efforts. The partnership will soon be expanding its awards program to include Greater New York facilities as well.

Cynthia decided to enter the "Biggest Loser" contest, figuring it would be added motivation to stick to her new diet, and that the \$400 prize could come in handy to pay off some bills. Among her first changes, she replaced soda and sugary fruit juices with water and began ordering a different breakfast at her local coffee shop. "I used to eat ham, egg and cheese on a roll almost every morning," she said. "Now I have egg whites with ketchup, that's it."

By the time the "Biggest Loser" contest got under way in February, Cynthia was nearly two months into her new diet and was down to 161 pounds, which she thought would hurt her chances of winning the competition. But after 10 weeks, she went for the final weigh-in and found she had dropped another 7 percent of her body weight, finishing the contest at 150 pounds. To her surprise, she was the "Biggest

Loser" among the 56 women who participated. As planned, she paid off some bills with the prize money, but she also redoubled her efforts to keep eating healthier meals, both at work and at home. Too often in the past, she said, she'd dropped weight for a short period of time, only to put it back on. With warmer weather arriving late in April when the contest ended, Cynthia also began getting outside and exercising more often, and she's kept up a fairly regular routine of walking at least a few times a week.

"It's tough in the fall because I am in school to become a nurse, and my class schedule makes it harder to find the time to exercise," she said. "But I'll stay with it as best as I can and I'm definitely going to keep eating the healthy foods."



Do you have a healthy story to share?

We're always looking for the opportunity to spotlight members who are taking positive steps to protect their health. If you would like to share your healthy story in an upcoming issue of *For Your Benefit*, please contact the Funds at Communications@1199Funds.org.

How Changing Her Diet Changed Cynthia's Life

When Cynthia's doctor referred her to a nutritionist, she began to really think about the food she and her family were eating. The nutritionist has helped her learn what foods to watch out for, whether she's eating out, shopping for groceries or cooking dinner at her home in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. Her husband, Rafael, has also joined the effort, and together they make sure to read food labels closely and limit sugar, sodium and other unhealthy ingredients. As someone whose family has a history of hypertension and diabetes and as the mother of two children, Cynthia said she was also motivated to change her diet and stay healthy so she can see her children, Jasmine and Justin, raise families of their own. The family now eats lots of fruits, vegetables, chicken, fish, whole grains and whole-wheat bread, and her nutritious diet has done more than just help her drop more than 30 pounds. "Losing the weight has changed so many things for me," she said. "I feel better, my clothes fit better, I have more energy and I'm more able to be the person I want to be, personally and professionally."

