

women's health and wellness



Many readers of this column work out regularly. We run, bike, practice yoga, play tennis, golf, or walk. Earlier, men and women didn't "work out." In humankind's early years, people were completely occupied raising their children, providing shelter for their families, and striving to get enough to eat. As society advanced to the farming phase, they got enough exercise through their various farming activities. However, as humankind moved into cities and found work in more sedentary endeavors, getting physical exercise and staying healthy became a central consideration. We profile women who brought new ideas about health and wellness to the forefront: Catharine Beecher, Lydia Pinkham, Jean Nidetch and Judi Sheppard Missett. We also share one item that was the bane of many women that absolutely did NOT contribute to their health and wellness – CORSETS!!

Catharine Beecher founded several women's colleges in the Midwest and was a strong advocate for physical education for women. She believed that corsets not only made the type of exercise that she advocated impossible, but actually deformed women's bodies. She campaigned for a school curriculum that included calisthenics. She produced drawings of appropriate exercises, and wrote a textbook. Her 1857 book was titled *Physiology and*



Calisthenics for Schools and Families. She actually designed two varieties of exercises: one for schools and one for exercise halls. Some of her light exercises included weights.

Beecher developed a system of calisthenics for women structured around 26 lessons in physiology and 2 courses in calisthenics. As promoted by Beecher, calisthenics were intended solely for women, but the activities were eventually accepted for both sexes. She wrote:

When physical education takes the proper place in our schools, young girls will be trained in the class-rooms to move head, hands and arms gracefully; to sit, to stand, and to walk properly, and to pursue calisthenics exercises for physical development as a regular school duty as much as their studies.

The corsets that she campaigned against had been incorporated into the attire of middle and upper class women. Getting dressed could take over two hours and required the help of an assistant. Much of this time was devoted to 7-10 pounds of underwear: corsets. Women's waists were nipped in at least four inches from their natural size of 24 to 42 inches by tightening metal and whalebone stays and laces and exerting anywhere from 25-80 pounds of pressure per square inch on the body. Corsets permanently altered the location of women's organs, such as stomachs and livers, and compressed their ribs. Little girls were not allowed to develop normally, as they began to wear corsets at age five. Corsets were worn by women from the mid-1500s until the early 1900s. Fortunately for today's women, the corset had gone out of style in the U.S. by the 1920s!

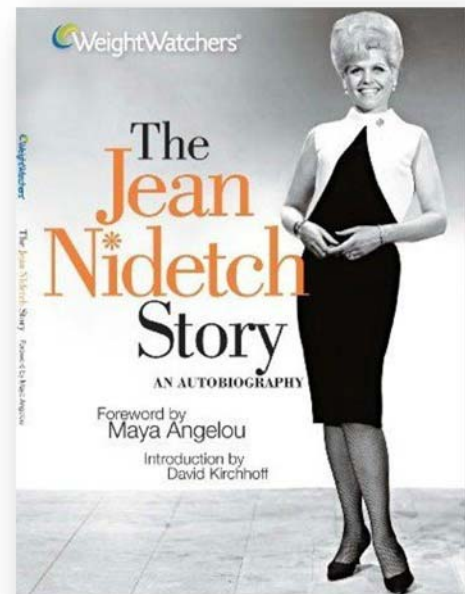
Called an innovator in the health field and the first female to be known nationally because of her product, **Lydia Estes Pinkham** made "Pink Pills" for women to help with their well-being due to "female complaints" that they were often uncomfortable discussing with their doctors. The pills, a patent medicine vegetable compound that Pinkham began selling in 1875, were almost 20% alcohol which she said acted as a preservative. She also became an advice columnist by responding to letters from women who had no idea how their bodies functioned. In addition to her "medicines", she





prescribed cleanliness, a balanced diet, rest, and other basics of modern health that were not necessarily followed in the nineteenth century. Her first principle was the ancient one of “first, do no harm”; a principle not followed by most of the physicians of the day. Her philosophy came a century earlier than the “wellness” campaigns of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Jean Nidetch, self-described as an overweight housewife obsessed with eating cookies who had been fat since childhood and had tried many dieting regimes, was 5’7” tall and 214 pounds when she chose to try something new. In 1961, she decided to combine a sensible diet with group support meetings after she solicited several fat friends to go on a diet with her and to meet for weekly check-ins. Within two months, 40 women were meeting to talk about their progress and keep each other accountable for what they ate. Nidetch achieved great success; by October 1962 she had lost 72 pounds, and attracted, by word-of-mouth, hundreds of people who wanted to join the group. She then decided to share her success. In 1963, she incorporated Weight Watchers, developed rules for members, recruited group leaders, and watched her business thrive. By 1968, Weight Watchers operated franchises nationwide and completed a sold-out initial public offering. Today, Weight Watchers has expanded worldwide, helping millions lose weight and offering meal plans and cookbooks. Nidetch retired as Weight Watchers’ spokesperson in 1984.



Judi Sheppard Missett turned her love of dance into a worldwide dance exercise phenomenon. While teaching traditional jazz dance classes in Chicago in the late 1960s, Missett turned her students away from the mirror and created a special “just for fun” class. This marked the beginning of Jazzercise. Five years after she and her family moved to Southern California, she began training new instructors. Today, more than 7,800 instructors teach Jazzercise. Missett continues to choreograph



new routines every 10 weeks, teach classes each week, and star in new DVD products and cable programs.

Jazzercise also acts upon Missett's philosophy of giving back by raising money for a wide range of charities and teaching fitness to school districts. Jazzercise is committed to helping people understand and value the importance of health and fitness.

We hope that knowing more about these women, you will be inspired to stay in shape, watch your diet and add more exercise to your life! And celebrate with us that, thank goodness, we don't have to wear those corsets anymore!

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Charlotte S. Waisman, PhD, is a national champion and advocate for women as a professor and keynote speaker. As an executive coach, Waisman coauthored *50 Activities for Developing Leaders* and *The Leadership Training Activity Book*. She is a principal with a consulting company specializing in leadership and workforce excellence initiatives.

Jill S. Tietjen, PE, is an author, speaker and an electrical engineer. Her books include the *Setting the Record Straight* series. Tietjen is a top historian on scientific and technical women. She is President/CEO of *Technically Speaking*, a consulting company that specializes in improving career opportunities for women in technology.

Write to us at jill@herstoryatimeline.com and charlotte@herstoryatimeline.com and tell us your stories.

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