Even though driving often is a sedentary job with many hours spent sitting behind the wheel, there are still ways drivers can proactively maintain and improve their health, experts told Intermodal Insights.

For starters, health revolves around three key areas: nutrition, exercise and sleep, said Steven Garrish, the senior vice president of safety and regulatory compliance with SleepSafe Drivers.

“Before going out on the road for work, take time to plan your work week,” he said. “Pre-pack meals that focus on balanced, nutrient dense foods that will sustain, and carry you throughout the day. Don’t drink your calories, and invest in foods that are high protein and low carb.”

Fred Marsicano, vice president of safety and compliance for ContainerPort Group, acknowledged that making healthy food choices can be difficult for drivers when their vehicle and time available sometimes prohibit them getting to establishments that offer healthier choices.

“So it is often best,” he said, “that they pack their lunch and snacks that are healthier and increase energy levels.”

Regarding exercise, Garrish acknowledged that given the nature of the job sometimes it’s tough for drivers go to a gym, but said there’s still a way to burn calories.

“Look for ways to incorporate walking, yoga, resistance band, push-ups, sit ups and other exercises that are easily done in and around the truck, or at home,” he said.

Marsicano suggested that drivers find a way to burn calories while on the job.

“During down time at shipper and consignee locations, put your safety vest on and find a safe area to take a walk,” he said.

Gary Cornelius, vice president of business development for TCW had similar advice.

“We strongly urge our driving team to make good use of the periods they have on duty,” he remarked. “They can take brisk walks or do light exercises during their 30-minute rest breaks or while they are waiting to get loaded or unloaded.”

As far as getting enough rest, Garrish said that one should ensure that the sleep environment, whether at home or on the road, is as quiet, cool and as dark as possible.

He advised when you are sleeping to “think about using ear plugs, sleeping mask, white noise, and avoiding lighted screens as much as possible. If you suspect you have risks for some form of sleep disorder [like sleep apnea] get checked out by your medical examiner right away.”
Diet, Rest, Exercise

Karl Sieber, a research health scientist with the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health agrees that a healthy diet, exercise and rest breaks are all important for driver health. “Physical activity is important to prevent development of chronic conditions, especially in a job such as truck driving with hours spent in a sedentary position,” he explained.

Sieber, who served as the lead subject matter expert on a long-haul truck driver study for NIOSH’s Division of Surveillance, Hazard Evaluations and Field Studies, said that moderate to vigorous physical activity of 30-60 minutes per day is recommended for adults for health benefits.

Healthy eating, he said, can also present challenges, but fewer for some drivers than others. “The working environment of intermodal truckers enables, for example, shopping at grocery stores for healthy food options rather than depending solely on food at truck stops, which may have limited healthy options,” he said, adding that a 2010 survey of 16 truck stops using a checklist to determine presence of healthy food options found that half lacked fresh fruit and 37% lacked fresh vegetables.

“Appropriate rest breaks are important to minimize fatigue and drowsy driving, as well as to meet FMCSA regulations,” he said.

Cornelius said that it’s even more critical that intermodal drivers work to maintain a healthy lifestyle, because having greater home time can actually be a detriment to effective rest if they’re not careful.

“One of the burdens of having greater home time as a driver is to effectively manage their rest and lifestyle between duty tours, making sure they are physically prepared for the upcoming shift,” he explained. “If not managed effectively, they may find their logs say they have hours to work, yet their bodies say they don’t. This can create a hazardous situation in which fatigue can endanger them as they perform their duties.”

Most truckers already know what they should be doing to maintain good health, but the problem is how to motivate them to do so, said Karen Philbrick, executive director of the Mineta Transportation Institute, a California-based research organization focusing on issues related to intermodal surface transportation.

“Offering health insurance, or at least offsets for employee-paid insurance, can help drivers obtain the health screenings and checkups that they may not be able to afford otherwise,” she said. “Some carriers also are offering unlimited health club visits, along with weight-loss program memberships. With the encouragement and support of carriers, truckers can become motivated to take advantage of the support systems that may help them maintain better health and fewer injuries.”

Managing Fatigue

Since intermodal truckers typically spend less time on the road than long haul drivers, it theoretically should be easier for them to maintain good health. But Garrish said that fatigue management actually affects local fleets more than OTR.

“If you think about the long workdays you experience as an intermodal driver, they not only include working behind the wheel of the truck, but also traveling to and from work every day, and supporting family activities during the nights you are at home,” he explained. “Maintaining family support, addressing sleep dysfunction issues and paying close attention to getting the adequate amount of sleep each night before you return to work are all part of a holistic approach to good trucker health as an intermodal driver.”

“Greater home time means more routine in the schedule. Use this to your advantage in the area of meal planning and exercise,” Garrish advised. “As a local or regional driver, you tend to have less time during each day for sleep. OTR drivers tend to have longer, more regimented time in the sleeper berth, without having a commute to and from work each day or family obligations each night to attend to. Watch out for fatigue challenges at the middle of your work week as the total wakefulness time adds up.”

Marsicano acknowledged that although many intermodal drivers are home daily, they usually experience long work days, and that with long work days, drivers have less time than the average worker to sleep, exercise and eat properly. One of the keys to combating
this, he said, is developing a routine.

“Intermodal drivers who have a consistent work schedule are more apt to develop daily routines where they can focus on a health and wellness,” he explained.

Despite getting home more often, intermodal drivers still have the same health risks as long-haul drivers, and that makes wellness just as big of an issue for intermodal drivers as other kinds, according to a statement on the issue provided to Intermodal Insights by Schneider.

The company says that since drivers have sedentary jobs that have been linked to obesity and leads to other health problems like heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, sleep apnea, back and shoulder pain, and depression, it can lead to disqualification of a driver’s commercial driver license if the conditions aren’t controlled.

“Intermodal drivers have lots of stooping and bending, so staying in shape will prevent injury,” Schneider said. “Rail yards are busy and filled with lots of traffic, so getting a solid night sleep will help the driver be alert and avoid accidents. Maintaining a healthy weight will make getting in and out of the truck and trailer easier.”

Sieber concurred, adding that even though drivers may have a greater home time than other types of trucking, risk factors for other chronic conditions still exist. And those conditions could be a factor in work-related mishaps.

“Although activities such as tarping or loading freight may not be involved in intermodal truck transport, musculoskeletal disorders and injuries may still be a concern from slips, trips, or falls; vibration; or ergonomic design of the cab or trailer,” he explained.

Industry Impacts

Keeping truckers well isn’t just good for the individual, it’s good for the company, as well as for the industry, experts said.

“A healthy driver is more alert, attentive and productive,” Marsicano said. “Improved driver health and wellness can contribute to a reduction in workplace injuries and crashes. Healthy drivers will have less down time related to illness, positively impacting a company’s productivity.”

Also, Sieber said, fewer injuries result in lower workers’ compensation premiums and medical claims, plus greater health can equal longer careers.

“Healthier drivers,” he said, “may stay in the job longer.”

“Healthy truckers mean less time off the job, fewer job-limiting health conditions and greater productivity,” Philbrick added. “The median age for truckers is increasing. That brings on an increased risk for injury, let alone accumulated health issues. A driver who is older and falls will not recover as quickly as a younger driver. A driver with early diabetes will only suffer increasing disability as he/she ages. At some point, a driver who smokes will not have the lung capacity to perform necessary physical activities. An obese driver could suffer from a stroke or heart attack while on the road.

“All of these issues could be prevented or at least mitigated when carriers take an active role in providing the necessary support systems to help truckers maintain their health, both emotional as well as physical,” she said.

Garrish added that the effects of good driver health can have positive industry-wide implications.

“Improving health and wellness for fleets directly impacts things like medical care costs — healthier drivers get sick less; retention — drivers live longer and are happier with an employer who takes care of them,” he said.

“The drivers all benefit from these same areas,” he said, “including a family at home that is also happy because their driver is healthy, and with them for many years to come.”