

message

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or more than a decade, I have been hosting annual conferences in Boston and Pittsburgh on the increasing connections between environmental hazards and human health. I have always directed these events specifically to women for two reasons: to raise awareness about our special vulnerabilities to these health threats and to raise consciousness about our special power as a group to defeat them.

Consistent across all the conferences is the notion that it falls to many of us as women to be the caregivers and household managers. This gives us enormous influence in what gets brought into our homes and, ultimately, what gets deposited into the environment around us.

Nowhere in our consumer-purchasing decisions are the stakes higher for our long-term health than in the choices we make about food. Among the speakers at our April conference in Pittsburgh was former professional basketball player-turned-urban farmer Will Allen, who founded the Growing Power movement on the principle that all people, regardless of economic circumstances, should have access to fresh, safe and nutritious foods.

While I learned much about nutrition from Will and other presenters, there is nothing like experiencing its benefits firsthand in the face of a major health crisis.

I opened this year's conference by sharing my trials and tribulations of the past year with breast cancer and a series of other health calamities. I did so believing that one woman's experience—my experience—might help other women navigate one of the most complex and difficult relationships we will ever have: our relationship with our own well-being.

What I have learned this past year about health is, first, how precious it is; second, how easily it can be taken away; and third, how the only person you can truly rely on each day to fight for your health is you.

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People often assume that because I am a doctor's daughter and fairly well-schooled in the ways of medicine, and because I am blessed with resources that allow access to the best health care, the most nutritious food and healthful living environments, that my well-being is assured and that I can avoid serious health issues.

But the fact is that what I experienced could happen to anybody. Certainly, none of us is immune, especially as we age. The lesson I have taken from my ordeal is this: There is no point in lamenting the things we can't control. We need to focus on the things we can control—the things that stand to make a real difference to our health.

What we choose to eat and drink for ourselves and those we love is one of those areas. Just flip through the following pages, and you'll quickly understand how empowered we can be just by taking charge of this one aspect of our lives. We've produced an entire issue of *h* magazine devoted to food as it relates to environmental issues and our health. There are stories, interviews, charts, revealing quotes, even a pullout of important lists and tips.

Good nutrition from healthful food is embedded in several other areas I highlighted at this year's conference—areas where women can exercise control to safeguard their health.

The first is being mindful of our relationship with stress. Women are used to taking on more and more of life's responsibilities with no expectation of help. As moms and wives, as caregivers for aging parents or disabled children, even as professionals—it is what we do.

While we cannot always control the stressors that life throws at us, we can be mindful of how we respond through the foods we eat, how fast we eat them, the exercise we do and the time we take each day to be whole.

The second way we can make ourselves healthier is to protect ourselves from unnecessary stressors in our environment: contaminants in our air, water, food, clothing and cosmetics. We gain our best protection when we become more informed consumers and avoid products that can harm us.

The last area I pointed to where we can make ourselves healthier is to be engaged and ask questions. Imagine how much more vulnerable women are who enter the chain grocery store, the big box department store, even a hospital, just assuming that the systems behind these operations always work perfectly and have the consumer's best interests in mind.

What I have learned this past year about health is, first, how precious it is; second, how easily it can be taken away; and third, how the only person you can truly rely on each day to fight for your health is you.

That means attending to our own stress, demanding foods and other consumer goods free of harmful contaminants, and being ready to ask tough questions and demand answers from our institutional systems—be they health care or environmental control or public health. Taking control in these areas won't guarantee us a long life, but it will almost certainly guarantee us a better quality of life while we are blessed to be on this planet.

I encourage you to read through our first food issue and make it the starting point of your individual journey to greater well-being. Remember that it is only through caring for ourselves that we gain the power to improve the health of the environment and those we love. *h*