

Take stock of your health with this post-lockdown checklist

April 29 2021, by Tate Gunnerson



As more people in the United States are vaccinated against COVID-19,

and some areas experience a slowdown in virus infections, the nation is slowly starting to reopen. According to health care professionals, post-lockdown life should start with taking stock of your own health.

"It's a great time to do a (health) reboot," said Dr. Kathryn M. Rexrode, chief of the division of women's health at Brigham and Women's Hospital and an associate professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School in Boston. "We did the best to cope and get through this extraordinary year, and now we can think about how we start to heal and re-engage in our own health."

Here's how.

Know your numbers

Keep track of your blood pressure, cholesterol and A1C, which is a measure of average blood sugar over the prior three months.

While blood pressure and weight can be tracked at home, a doctor's visit may be the easiest way to get the most up-to-date measurements of total cholesterol, triglycerides and blood sugar.

"Because we've been less active in many cases and because our eating patterns have been less healthy, those things definitely could have gotten out of whack," said Dr. Donald Lloyd-Jones, a cardiologist, epidemiologist and chair of preventive medicine at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago. "Unless you get with your doctor and measure them carefully, you won't know your numbers, and you won't know what you need to address."

Schedule cancer screenings

Rexrode, a primary care doctor, urged people to schedule any necessary or overdue mammograms, pap smears, colonoscopies and other cancer screening tests, which many postponed during the pandemic.

"We may have missed opportunities to pick up cancer at an earlier stage when treatment is usually easier and less invasive than if we detect it at a later stage," she said. Most states allow residents to schedule their own screenings. "It's important to review that list and see what you're overdue for."

Indeed, in March 2020 alone, more than 800 lung cancer screening appointments at the University of Cincinnati Cancer Center were postponed because of COVID-19 restrictions, according to a recent study in the *Journal of the American College of Surgeons*. When testing resumed later that year, 29% of people had suspicious nodules versus 8% before the pandemic.

Even more people should now be screened for lung cancer after the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recently updated its recommendations for low-dose CT scans for lung cancer. The task force urges screenings in people ages 50-80 who have a 20 pack-year or more smoking history and currently smoke or have quit in the past 15 years.

A pack-year is an average of one pack of cigarettes a day per year. So, one pack per day for 20 years or two packs a day for a decade would each equal 20 pack-years.

See the dentist

An American Dental Association survey found three-quarters of respondents postponed dental checkups during the spring of 2020, and more than 12% avoided the dentist even though something was bothering them.

That may have far-reaching effects that go beyond your pearly whites.

"Chronic inflammation of the gums can introduce whole-body inflammation, and there are some links to an increase in cardiovascular disease," Rexrode said. "Taking care of your teeth is an investment for your future self."

Address mental health

Mental health also has taken a hit during the pandemic, with self-reported depression and anxiety way up. "The pandemic and the stresses and strains of isolation, the loss of jobs and, in some cases, homes have magnified the problems of mental [health](#)," said Lloyd-Jones, president-elect of the American Heart Association.

He advised people struggling with anxiety, depression or other [mental health](#) problems to reconnect with their therapist or to talk with their primary care doctor, a social worker or a social service organization in their community.

"There are many ways to start to get connected, but it's important to acknowledge you're having a problem and get involved in the care pathway," he said. "The earlier you identify a problem and get connected, the sooner we can get help for you."

Get moving

A recent study in *JAMA Network Open* of measurements from internet-connected smart scales suggests shelter-in-place orders may have impacted waistlines, with adults gaining more than half a pound every 10 days. Obesity increases the risk for heart disease, Type 2 diabetes and many cancers.

That's why it's important to get moving. Vaccinated people can safely return to the gym, Lloyd-Jones said, although he advised people to stick with facilities that enforce social distancing and wearing masks.

Or, with the weather getting warmer, he pointed out exercise is as easy as taking a walk around the block.

In addition, both Rexrode and Lloyd-Jones advise their patients to eat a diet rich in fruits and vegetables, whole grains and lean protein sources while minimizing processed items, fast food and sugary drinks.

"We need to give ourselves a pass for the last year and get back on track," Lloyd-Jones said. "When you take control of things by exercising or eating healthier, you'll start to feel better remarkably quickly."

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