

Ten simple ways to improve your health

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We've all had those well-intentioned moments when we resolve to make sweeping lifestyle changes: Quit smoking. Lose 20 pounds. Join a gym and start exercising every day.

While we should always strive to accomplish these types of health goals, the road to better health doesn't always have to mean making huge leaps.

There are also many smaller steps you can take that will help improve your overall health and quality of life—and because they're things you can easily incorporate into your routine, they'll be easy to maintain for the long haul. Even if you have only a few minutes to spare, you can use that time to improve your well-being.

Try incorporating the following activities and strategies into your day. When these simple steps become habits, they can add up to a big positive effect on your overall health.

1. Enjoy de-stressing

Experts recommend [regular exercise](#), meditation and breathing techniques to reduce stress. But even something as simple—and enjoyable—as listening to soothing music, reading a good book, soaking in a hot tub or playing with your pet can help you relax.

That's advice you should take to heart because prolonged stress can cause or exacerbate a number of health problems, including heart disease, stroke, [high blood pressure](#), depression, ulcers, irritable bowel

syndrome, migraines and obesity.

Don't have a lot of time? Don't let that stress you out. As with exercise, even brief periods of relaxation are beneficial.

Spending even 10 minutes at a time doing something you enjoy can go a long way toward beating the stressors of everyday life. Just reading one chapter or taking your dog for a few laps around the block will help you feel calmer, more refreshed and more energized.

If you can't take a full break from whatever you're doing, try simply taking a few slow, deep breaths in that moment. When you slow down your breathing, it helps you relax. This relaxation response releases body chemicals that relieve stress and may improve immune function.

Deep breathing can also lower your [resting heart rate](#). People with lower resting heart rates are typically in better physical condition than those with higher rates.

2. Put away the salt

A saltshaker on the dining table makes it all too easy to consume excess salt, which can lead to high blood pressure. So put the shaker in a cabinet or pantry and bring it out only when you're cooking.

It's also a good idea to taste your food before you salt it. You may find it doesn't need more.

You can also try spicing up your food with lemon or lime juice, garlic, red pepper flakes, herbs or a salt-free seasoning blend. Stock your fridge and pantry with your favorite fresh and dried herbs so you'll always have them on hand to flavor your foods.

3. Get to bed earlier

Most of us don't get the seven or more hours of sleep adults need.

Over time, a shortage of shut-eye can raise your risk of a heart attack or stroke—regardless of your age, weight or exercise habits.

If you're consistently sleep-deprived, going to bed even 15 minutes earlier every night could help. Also set a regular sleep and wake schedule, and stick to it—even on days off.

4. Have a glass of red wine

Studies have shown that the powerful antioxidants found in red wine protect against heart disease, colon cancer, anxiety and depression. So unless there is a medical reason why you shouldn't imbibe, go ahead and enjoy that glass of merlot with your nightly meal—you can even toast to your good health.

But drink in moderation. Just as a small amount of red wine has health benefits, too much alcohol—even red wine—can cause a variety of health problems, including liver and kidney disease and cancer.

Women, in particular, need to be careful about alcohol consumption. They are at higher overall risk of liver problems than men, so they are more likely to experience liver problems from smaller amounts of alcohol.

For a healthy man, two drinks a day is not likely to do harm; women, on the other hand, should limit themselves to one daily alcoholic beverage.

5. Check your posture and ergonomics

Next time you're at your desk or on the phone, take a moment to think about your posture. Then straighten up your back, tuck in your stomach and put your feet flat on the floor with your legs uncrossed. You'll feel more relaxed right away.

The few seconds this takes can help you avoid back pain, one of the most common health problems in the United States and a leading cause of disability.

And if you work at a computer, look at the ergonomics of your workstation—how you fit and move in your environment—to help prevent back and neck strain, carpal tunnel syndrome, eye strain and other occupational injuries.

A few simple adjustments, such as repositioning your computer monitor, switching to a chair that provides more low back support and taking regular breaks throughout the day to do stretching exercises, can go a long way toward creating a healthier and more comfortable workspace.

6. Do a crossword puzzle

Researchers at RUSH have found that mentally challenging activities, such as reading, doing crossword puzzles or Sudoku and playing chess, may have a protective effect on your brain.

According to research studies, regularly engaging your mind may help lower your risk for the dementia associated with Alzheimer's disease.

Don't enjoy puzzles or games? Don't worry: There are other ways to maintain your brain health. Eat with your nondominant hand. Walk a new route home from work. And connect with others—staying socially engaged may also protect against dementia.

7. Weigh in

Maintaining a healthy weight can lower your risk for [heart disease](#), stroke and some types of cancer. But for women, there's another reason to keep pounds from piling on: It will decrease the risk for future pelvic floor disorders.

Pelvic floor disorders are more common in women who have delivered babies vaginally. However, a recent study found that even women who have never had a vaginal birth are at increased risk for urinary stress incontinence if they're overweight or obese.

8. Make a few dietary substitutions

- Swap white bread, rice, crackers and pasta for healthier whole grain versions.
- Use skinless chicken and turkey in your recipes instead of skin-on, and leaner cuts of other meats such as beef or pork.
- Replace one sugary drink (soda, juice, etc.) each day with a tall glass of water.
- If you get hungry between meals, snack on a handful of almonds or cashews, a piece of whole fruit, or carrot sticks dipped in hummus rather than reaching for candy bars or potato chips.

In addition, try incorporating an extra serving of nonstarchy vegetables into your daily diet.

Want a snack? Munch on a carrot instead of a cookie. Making dinner for your family? Serve broccoli or spinach as a side dish instead of mashed potatoes. Add green peas to your brown rice, or slices of red or yellow pepper to your sandwich.

It's no secret that vegetables—especially dark, leafy greens—are good for you. But there's another benefit to packing more veggies into your daily diet: They're rich in fiber and contain lots of water, so they'll leave you full and satisfied without a lot of calories and fat.

There are plenty of great recipes in cookbooks and online—including on RUSH's content hub—for tasty yet healthful veggie dishes.

9. Take the stairs

The next time you're going to a higher floor, bypass the elevator and climb the stairs instead. You'll get your blood pumping, exercise your lungs and work the muscles in your lower body.

It's a great way to add physical activity to your day without having to block out time to exercise. If you are aiming for the recommended 10,000 steps each day, taking the stairs counts toward that total.

All of these small steps can add up to a healthier you.

10. Stretch it out

Regularly stretching your muscles helps you avoid injuries, stay limber and move freely as you age.

Take a few minutes to stretch out before and after you exercise. If you aren't working out that day, take a few stretch breaks. Find a quiet space in the office where you won't be disturbed. On the go? Look for natural opportunities in your daily routine to stretch, such as getting out of your car or reaching for items on a high shelf at the store.

Stretching right before bed can also help you relieve tension and help

you get to sleep.

And balance exercises—like Tai Chi—can help dramatically reduce your risk of dangerous falls.

Looking ahead

The good news is that it's never too early—or too late—to adopt healthy habits.

When you're young, you can build the foundation for a lifetime of good health. When you're older, healthy habits can help you control any diseases you have and lower your risk of getting others in the future.

Provided by Rush University Medical Center

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