

# Healthy Living

## What you can do to keep your health

**Does what I do really affect my health?**

Very much so. All five of the major causes of death—cancer, heart disease, stroke, lung disease and injury—can be caused or prevented by things you do.

**What can I do to stay healthy?**

The following are good rules to live by:

- **Don't smoke or use tobacco.** Using tobacco is one of the most dangerous things you can do. One out of every six deaths in the United States can be blamed on smoking. More preventable illnesses are caused by tobacco than by anything else.
- **Limit how much alcohol you drink if you drink.** This means no more than two drinks a day. One drink is a can of beer (12 oz), a 4-oz glass of wine or one jigger (1 oz) of liquor.  
Too much alcohol can damage the liver and contribute to some cancers, such as throat and liver cancer. Alcohol drinking during pregnancy is the major cause of birth defects that could be prevented. Alcohol also causes deaths from car wrecks, murders and suicides.
- **Eat right.** Heart disease, some cancers, stroke, diabetes and damage to your arteries can be linked to what you eat. See the boxes on page 2 for tips on eating healthy.
- **Lose weight if you're overweight.** About one-fourth of Americans are overweight. Carrying too much weight increases your risk for high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, diabetes, heart disease, stroke, some cancers, gallbladder disease and arthritis in the weight-bearing joints (like the spine, hips or knees). A high-fiber, low-fat diet and regular exercise can help you lose weight gradually and help you keep it off.
- **Exercise.** Exercise can help prevent heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, osteoporosis, depression and, possibly, colon cancer, stroke and back injury. You'll also feel better and help keep your weight under control if you exercise regularly.  
How much exercise? Any amount is better than none. And you don't have to be an athlete to get exercise. You can make it part of your life simply by taking the stairs instead of the elevator or by taking a walk once a day.

---

### What to eat

- Two to four servings of fruits and three to five servings of vegetables a day. These foods are good sources of carbohydrates, fiber, vitamins and minerals. They're also low in fat. And these foods may help reduce your risk of several types of cancer.
- Six to 11 servings of bread, cereal, rice and pasta a day.
- Two to three servings of milk, yogurt and cheese a day. These foods are rich in calcium. Calcium helps build strong bones. It may help protect against *osteoporosis* (a bone-thinning disease) later in life. Pregnant women, women who are breastfeeding and women who are going through menopause and aren't taking estrogen need extra calcium.
- Two to three servings of meat, poultry, fish, dry beans, eggwhites or nuts a day.
- Lots of fiber. A high-fiber diet can help protect you against colon cancer, the second leading cause of death from cancer. It also helps relieve constipation and hemorrhoids. Fiber is found in whole-grain breads and cereals, fruits and vegetables.

- **Don't sunbathe or use tanning booths.** Sun exposure is linked to skin cancer, which is the most common type of cancer. So it's best to stay out of the sun altogether or to wear protective clothing and hats. Sunscreen may help protect your skin somewhat if you can't avoid being exposed to the sun's harmful rays.
- **Get enough sleep each night.** You'll feel better. Most adults need seven to eight hours of sleep each night. If you're not sleepy during the day, you're getting enough rest.

### What not to eat

- **Saturated fat.** Saturated fats include animal fats, hydrogenated vegetable fats and tropical fats (coconut and palm oil). A high-fat diet increases your risk of heart disease, breast and colon cancer, and gallbladder disease.
- **Sodium.** Sodium, found in table salt and some foods, increases blood pressure in some people. It's a good idea to keep sodium intake to 2,300 mg or less a day. To do this, don't cook with salt, avoid prepared foods that are high in sodium, and add salt sparingly, if at all, when you're eating.

---

### What's a serving

Fruits	1 medium piece of fresh fruit 1/2 cup chopped or canned fruit 3/4 cup fruit juice 1/4 cup dried fruit
Vegetables	1 cup raw, leafy vegetables 1/2 cup other vegetables, cooked or raw 3/4 cup vegetable juice
Grains	1 slice of bread or a small roll 1/2 bagel or English muffin 1 oz cold cereal 1/2 cup cooked cereal, rice or pasta 3 or 4 small or 2 large crackers
Dairy	1 cup milk or yogurt 1 1/2 oz natural cheese 2 oz processed cheese
Proteins	2 to 3 oz cooked lean meat, poultry or fish; 1/2 cup cooked dried beans, 1 eggwhite or 2 tablespoons peanut butter equal 1 oz meat

- **Practice safer sex if you're having sex.** The safest sex is between two people who are only having sex with one another and who don't have a sexually transmitted disease (STD) or share needles to inject drugs. Sharing needles would put you at higher risk for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection, which causes AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome).

If you're at all uncertain about your partner, you can help decrease your risk of catching an STD by using latex condoms and a spermicide (sperm-killer). If you're concerned you may be at risk of having an STD, see your doctor about being tested.

- **Learn to handle or reduce the stress in your life.** Stress may cause health problems or make them worse. Health problems that may be related to stress include fatigue, headaches, heartburn, upset stomach and even heart attack.

Problems from stress may be reduced by avoiding things that cause stress and by learning to cope with the stress you can't avoid. Ways to cope with stress include exercising, learning relaxation techniques and talking with others about what's bothering you.

- 
- **Get help for depression.** Talk to your doctor if you have signs of depression. These signs include fatigue, feeling sad or hopeless, eating or sleeping too much or too little, trouble concentrating, or thoughts of suicide. Depression can be treated with counseling and medicine.
  - **Control your blood cholesterol level.** Periodic testing is recommended for men aged 35-65 and for women aged 45-65. You may need to start having your cholesterol level checked sooner or more often if you have a family history of heart disease or high blood cholesterol, or if your cholesterol level is high. You can help keep your level down by eating right, such as by reducing how much fat you eat, and by exercising.
  - **Control high blood pressure.** How? Have it checked at least once every two years. If it starts to rise, lose weight, exercise, eat less sodium, drink less alcohol, don't smoke and take medicine if your doctor prescribes it. High blood pressure increases your risk for heart disease, stroke and kidney disease.
  - **Keep your shots up to date.** Adults need a tetanus-diphtheria booster every 10 years. Ask your doctor if you need shots that protect against measles, mumps and rubella, pneumonia, influenza or hepatitis B.
  - **Take care of your breasts.** Breast cancer is the second most common cause of death for women, second to lung cancer.

Examine your breasts every month beginning when you're about 20. Talk to your doctor about how to check your breasts.

Have your doctor check your breasts every year or two beginning when you're 30. Also talk to your doctor about when you need a screening test called *mammography*. Most women should have one every one to two years after age 50. Some women should start having them earlier.
  - **Get regular Pap smears and pelvic exams.** Cancer of the *cervix* (the opening of the womb) in women can be detected by regular Pap smears and pelvic exams.

Start having them when you begin having sex or by the time you reach age 18. You'll need them once a year at first, until you've had at least three normal Pap smears in a row. After this, you should have them at least every three years, unless your doctor thinks you need them more often.

---

## Should I have a yearly physical?

Health screenings are replacing the yearly physical. Instead of every person getting the same exams and tests, only the appropriate ones are given.

Your family doctor will customize your care to suit you. In determining what tests and exams are right for you, your doctor will consider the recommendations of various groups, such as the American Academy of Family Physicians, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, the National Cancer Institute and others.

Your doctor will also consider your age, your personal and family medical history, your health habits, your risks for disease and what you can do to reduce those risks, and concerns you have about your health.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.



*The American Academy of Family Physicians, one of the nation's largest medical specialty groups, is committed to promoting and maintaining high standards for family doctors—the doctors who give ongoing, comprehensive care to people of all ages.*

© 1994, 1996 American Academy of Family Physicians  
8880 Ward Parkway, Kansas City, MO 64114-2797  
<http://www.aafp.org>



Permission is granted to reproduce this material for nonprofit educational uses. Written permission is required for all other uses, including electronic uses.

This health education material has been favorably reviewed by the American Academy of Family Physicians Foundation.