

organic style

A RODALE PUBLICATION

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10 easy ways to live a healthier life

For those of us who care about our health, this is definitely an age of Too Much Information. Hospitals advertise full-body scans that can supposedly detect the tiniest speck of incipient disease deep within our bodies. Health gurus, holistic and otherwise, preach the virtues of arcane (and often untested) nutritional supplements. News reports warn us that what used to be good for us is now bad for us, or vice versa, so we'd better change our evil ways. Do we really have to work so hard to stay healthy? Whatever happened to "an apple a day"?

Well, nothing. There are still relatively simple steps we can take to safeguard our health and well-being. Here are 10 little moves that can bring you enormous health benefits. They're bite-size and sensible and backed by solid research.

1. Eat between meals.

Big health benefit: Keep your weight down—and your energy level up.

We know the typical American diet is making us all heavier—



and more prone to diseases such as diabetes. So it might seem insane to think you should eat more often. But smart snacking is an easier way to keep your weight in check than conventional dieting. Assuming that you're not grazing on Milky Way candy bars and Moon Pies, nibbling throughout the day prevents you from succumbing to the "starve and stuff" syndrome—the downfall of many a dieter. "Eating every three or four hours keeps your metabolism

revved up to its optimum rate for calorie burning," explains Molly Kimball, R.D., nutritionist at Ochsner Clinic's Elmwood Fitness Center in New Orleans. "Noshing also maintains stable blood sugar levels, so you experience fewer cravings."

The easy way to get in the habit: Eat two or three 100- to 300-calorie snacks each day. Aim for a balance of protein and carbohydrate—cheese and whole wheat crackers, peanut butter on apple slices, and yogurt with blueberries are good choices.



2. Spend time with a pet.

Big health benefit: Lower your stress.

Cultivating a closer relationship with animals—and nature in general (scientists call it *biophilia*)—can have amazing health effects: relieving stress, lowering blood pressure, and speeding recovery from illness. One Australian study of

nearly 6,000 adults found that pet owners had consistently lower blood pressure levels than nonowners. "We have an inborn attraction to nature," explains Alan Beck, Sc.D., director of the Center for the Human-Animal Bond at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. "When we're around animals, we speak more slowly and quietly, our faces relax, and our heart rates slow."

The easy way to get in the habit: Commune with nature at least once a day. Drink coffee in your garden before work, take the dog for a stroll after dinner, or put a bird feeder in your backyard. (Dr. Beck's research found that backyard bird feeders improved family dynamics.)

3. Get more sleep.

Big health benefit: Decrease your risk of heart disease.

A bad night's rest can leave you with a short temper and an even shorter attention span. But that's not all. A new 10-year analysis of more than 71,000 women found that those who routinely slept five hours a night or less had a 39 percent greater risk of heart disease than women who slept eight hours.



The easy way to get in the habit: Start by promising yourself you'll go to bed extra early one night a week. Once you get in the habit, add another night, and so on, until you're getting eight hours a night. Having trouble falling asleep? Take a warm bath before bed. Some studies suggest that once you leave the water, your body temperature drops, sending a

signal to your brain that it's time to sleep.

4. Do a yoga stretch daily.

Big health benefit: Save your wrists and hands from repetitive stress injuries.

We all know that yoga promotes relaxation and flexibility. But certain poses can help prevent, as well as treat, carpal tunnel syndrome. In this painful condition, caused by repetitive motions such as typing on a keyboard for long periods, tendons in the wrist swell and put pressure on the nerves leading from your hands to your elbows. Yoga helps by freeing up the circulation to your hands.



The easy way to get in the habit: Sit at your desk with your feet hip-width apart. Stretch your arms and fingers straight out in front of you, palms facing the floor. Keeping arms and elbows straight, slowly raise your arms over your head with palms facing forward. Hold for 15 to 30 seconds. Repeat throughout the day for a total of 5 to 10 minutes.

5. Keep a journal.

Big health benefit: Live longer.

The anxiety we carry around with us can potentially shorten our lives. A Japanese study of more than 73,000 adults found that women who report high levels of mental stress are twice as likely to suffer from a stroke or develop heart disease. Fortunately, there's a relatively easy way to provide a release valve for your anxiety: Write about what's stressing you, advises James W. Pennebaker, Ph.D., professor of psychology at the University of Texas in



Austin and a researcher on the health benefits of writing. Writing about stressful situations, says Dr. Pennebaker, allows you to organize and understand the experience better so you can move past it.

The easy way to get in the habit: "We recommend that people dealing with a problem write about their thoughts and feelings for a minimum of 20 minutes for three days," says Dr. Pennebaker. Buy a pretty journal or plain old notebook, and don't edit yourself. Just let it out.

6. Wash your hands.

Big health benefit: Get fewer colds and other infections.

Hand washing is the single best way to prevent the transmission of infection, whether you're talking food-borne illnesses or the flu, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But you don't need to use antibacterial soap. In fact, doing so may spur the breeding of



antibiotic-resistant "super bugs." A recent study showed that bugs grew resistant not only to the soap's active ingredient, triclosan, but also to 13 of 17 other antibiotic drugs tested.

The easy way to get in the habit: Wash your hands before eating, after handling food, after visiting the bathroom, and when you're around sick people. Scrub for at least 15 seconds with

regular soap and water, making sure to wash between your fingers and under your fingernails. Don't worry about the temperature of the water; it's the friction of scrubbing that removes germs.

7. Eat more dairy.

Big health benefit: Lose weight more easily.

Strange, but definitely true: Add dairy to your diet, and you'll find it easier to take off weight—and keep it off. The reason? Calcium. According to nutritionist Michael Zemel, Ph.D., of the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, who has been studying calcium's effect on metabolism for years, calcium signals the body's fat cells to burn the day's calories instead of storing them as fat.



The easy way to get in the habit:

Shoot for three or four servings per day of milk, yogurt, or cheese. (Cottage cheese, cream cheese, sour cream, and, unfortunately, ice cream are not good sources of calcium.) What about calcium supplements? Dr. Zemel has studied those, too, and found that while they do

help dieters lose weight, they're not nearly as effective.

8. Eat nuts.

Big health benefit: Lower your risk for heart disease and cancer.

In a recent study, adults who substituted about 2 ounces of almonds per day in an overall healthy diet lowered their LDL ("bad") cholesterol by nearly 10 percent



after a month. Walnuts are a source of omega-3 fatty acids, which not only can reduce heart disease risk but also may help prevent depression. And peanuts contain a substance called *beta-sitosterol* that, in lab studies, inhibited breast and colon cancers.

The easy way to get in the habit: Eat some nuts daily. Sprinkle them on salads, yogurt, or ice cream. Add them to pasta dishes. Or eat them unadorned.

9. Seek a little sun.

Big health benefit: Build stronger bones. Even if you're getting enough dietary cal-

Balance your hormones. Stay in control. Naturally.

From adolescence on, our estrogen levels have a familiar cycle. However, at some point in every woman's life they start to fluctuate and decline, causing symptoms associated with menopause such as hot flashes, night sweats and mood swings. But what nature takes away, it can also replace. Asian and Latin women consuming bean and soy-based diets have a fraction of the symptoms that American women describe. These diets contain plant estrogens, called isoflavones, that mimic a woman's own estrogen in the body. Made from red clover isoflavones, a daily Promensil tablet adds 40mg of safe, natural plant estrogens to your diet. Relieving those annoying symptoms while also supporting bone health and without weight gain.



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cium, you also need vitamin D to transport it into your bones. Sunlight helps our bodies manufacture vitamin D. A recent Swedish study found that people who spent three hours a week outdoors had higher blood levels of vitamin D and calcium and thicker bones than people who stayed indoors.

The easy way to get in the

habit: We are *not* encouraging you to cultivate a deep tan, which ages your skin and can lead to cancer. But a little sunshine can do you a world of good. Get outside for 10 minutes a day and you'll get the equivalent of 400 IU of vitamin D—enough to boost your bone strength without frying your skin. Or take a multivitamin with 400 IU of vitamin D instead, suggests Beth Kitchin,



M.S., R.D., patient educator at the University of Alabama at Birmingham's Osteoporosis Prevention and Treatment Clinic.

10. Take a buddy when you go to the doctor.

Big health benefit: Lower your chance of a medical mishap.

Medical mistakes do happen—a lot: Nearly 8.1 million American households report experiencing medical problems due to such errors as taking medications incorrectly. One common cause of these errors is faulty patient-doctor communication, according to a report from the Commonwealth Fund. To improve interactions with your doctor, consider taking a trusted friend or family member to your appointments. In a recent University of

Colorado study that analyzed about 1,300 patient visits, researchers found that bringing a companion positively influenced three out of four medical visits. Even if the tag-along stayed in the waiting room, subjects said the other person's presence helped them remember their physician's advice and instructions.



The easy way to get in the habit: Ask your significant other or a close friend to accompany you to important medical exams and promise to return the favor on his or her next doctor visit. *



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