



Six how-to's for better health

Half a dozen ways to keep your vital signs vital — and improve your health over the long term

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We know you're interested in your health. After all, you're in your doctor's office reading *Canadian Health*, right? Maybe you're in for your annual physical. Well, there's a lot you can do to make sure next year's exam is even better than this one — and to improve your long-term

health as well. Check out these non-pharmaceutical how-to's for keeping your body's motor turning over smoothly. And it won't take you long to notice that most of the measures below have multiple benefits, targeting different indicators of health and doing as much for your brain as for your body.

1 How to keep your blood pressure down

High blood pressure is the number one medical risk for death worldwide. It damages blood vessels, puts a strain on the cardiac muscle and sets the stage for heart failure, heart attacks and strokes. But don't blow a gasket: there are ways to keep your blood pressure in the safe zone.

We sought the sage advice of Dr. Norman Campbell, chair of the Canadian Hypertension Education Program (CHEP) and a professor of medicine at the University of Calgary. "Healthy people should strive to keep their blood pressure at less than 120/80 mm Hg," says Campbell. "The risk of blood vessel disease increases with blood pressure level even within the normal range. And people at the high end of normal will be hypertensive within four years."

The higher number in the 120/80 duo represents systolic pressure, the force in the arteries when the heart is contracting and its pumping chambers are exporting blood. The lower number is the diastolic pressure, when the heart is resting between beats and its storing chambers are filling with blood.

BE PHYSICALLY ACTIVE

"Try to get 30 to 60 minutes of moderate exercise a day," says Campbell. Exercising four or more times per week for more than 30 minutes a session has been seen to reduce blood pressure by 5 mm Hg to 15 mm Hg. For information on physical activity, see *Canada's Physical Activity Guide* and *Canada's Physical Activity Guide for Older Adults*.

ATTAIN AND MAINTAIN A HEALTHY WEIGHT

Even a modest reduction in poundage — as little as 10% — can dramatically decrease your chances of having a stroke or heart attack.

EAT A HEALTHY DIET

A daily regimen that is low in saturated fat and sodium and high in potassium-rich fresh fruits and vegetables is best. Consume low-fat dairy products and more whole grains and legumes. Following a regimen such as the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) Diet can reduce systolic blood pressure by more than 11 mm Hg and diastolic by more than 5 mm Hg (go to dashdiet.org). The DASH Diet is similar to the regimen suggested by *Canada's Food Guide*.

"Rather than any one component, it's probably the complex interaction between the constellation of elements in a healthy diet working together: the calcium, the fibre, the magnesium, and the lack of sodium," says Campbell. The omega-3 fatty acids found in fatty fish may help keep pressure in line, according to the American Heart Association.

The combination of diet and activity is crucial. "People can develop high blood pressure even if they aren't overweight, so while weight is part of the issue, diet and physical activity are very important in their own right," says Campbell.





CUT BACK ON SODIUM

According to Health Canada, all people should restrict their daily sodium consumption to less than 2,300 milligrams. Salt-sensitivity increases with age. "So the target amount is age-dependent: 1,500 milligrams for a middle-aged person and 1,200 milligrams for an older individual," says Campbell.

Lowering your sodium intake by 1,800 milligrams a day can lower blood pressure by 5.1/2.7 points. To cut sodium, don't add table salt to foods, and stay away from high-sodium convenience foods, commercial snacks, canned goods, pickles, condiments, seasonings and cured meats.

LIMIT YOUR ALCOHOL INTAKE

Have no more than 14 drinks a week if you are a man and nine per week if you are a woman. It is not yet clear how overindulgence in alcohol boosts blood pressure.

DON'T SMOKE

"It is likely, though not proven, that smoking raises blood pressure," says Campbell. "But if you are hypertensive and you smoke, you are at much greater risk."

SET ASIDE TIME TO RELAX

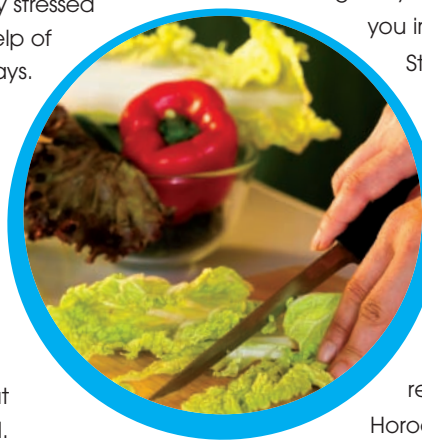
Stress can cause blood pressure to rise in the short term. "Individuals who are highly stressed on a chronic basis should seek the help of stress-management specialists," he says.

LIMIT NON-STEROIDAL ANTI-INFLAMMATORY DRUGS

NSAIDs such as ASA, naproxen and ibuprofen interfere with the production of hormone-like chemicals called prostaglandins, some of which dilate blood vessels. "NSAIDs alter the balance of prostaglandins in favour of those that cause hypertension," says Campbell.

KEEP TABS ON YOUR BLOOD PRESSURE

High blood pressure often has no symptoms, so have yours checked at least once every two years by a health-care professional, and once a year if your blood pressure is at the high end of normal.



2 How to have better blood sugar levels

The world is awash in a wave of type 2 diabetes. Elevated levels of blood glucose can set the stage for type 2 diabetes and all the dangers it poses to the blood vessels, heart, nerves, eyes, skin, kidneys and extremities. Again, the key to warding off high blood sugar is lifestyle therapy.

TIP THE SCALES IN THE SAFE ZONE

Reducing your body weight by as little as 5% can lower your risk of type 2 diabetes.

GET ADEQUATE REGULAR EXERCISE

Physical exertion promotes a healthier weight, which lowers diabetes risk. It also uses up blood glucose for energy, making the body more sensitive to insulin, the pancreatic hormone that helps convert and safely store blood glucose for future fuel. In a Finnish study, even people predisposed to type 2 diabetes were able to cut their risk by 58% with moderate exercise for 30 minutes a day and a 5% to 7% reduction in body weight.

MAKE HEALTHY FOOD CHOICES

These will provide better nutrition and help you maintain a healthy weight. Try to follow *Canada's Food Guide*, making sure you include all the different food groups," says Stacey Horodezny, a registered dietitian and diabetes educator at the Trillium Health Centre in Mississauga, Ont. Limit refined carbohydrates such as sugary foods and white rice and flour. Try eating fewer processed and fried foods, while including plenty of whole grains, legumes and fresh produce in your daily fare. "Your plate should have a variety of different foods on it, and remember to look at the portion sizes," says Horodezny. "It's not just what you eat but how much." A high intake of dietary fibre from fruits and vegetables, legumes, whole grains, psyllium and oat bran can help to keep blood glucose levels on an even keel.

DON'T SMOKE

U.K. and U.S. research suggests that smoking may promote glucose intolerance, especially in young adults.

3 How to control your cholesterol



This waxy blood fat is not all bad — the body needs it for cell repair. But excessive amounts can lead to the buildup of obstructive plaques on blood vessel walls. These deposits increase the risk of strokes and heart attacks. If you want to keep your cholesterol in the safe zone — or if you need to lower it — check out these recommendations.

GET MOVING

Adequate regular exercise can help keep your lipid profile looking good. It can lower levels of the “bad” artery-clogging LDL cholesterol and raise levels of the “good” HDL cholesterol, which removes the LDL from the bloodstream.

MAINTAIN A HEALTHY WEIGHT

Losing pounds can shave crucial millimoles off your cholesterol level.

FOLLOW A REDUCED-FAT DIET

Especially cut back on the saturated fats found in fatty animal-based foods and the trans fats found in hydrogenated vegetable oils such as shortening. Trans fats are used to prolong the shelf life of commercial snack foods and baked goods. Choose low-fat dairy products, very lean meats, skin-free poultry, fresh fruits and vegetables. Include nuts, seeds, whole grains and legumes in your diet, too.

If you actually need to bring your cholesterol down, here’s advice from Dr. Dorothea Faulkner, a research dietitian at the Clinical Nutrition

and Risk Factor Modification Centre at St. Michael’s Hospital in Toronto and a co-investigator in the Multicentre Portfolio Diet Study for lowering cholesterol. “Avoid red meats and eat white-meat chicken or fish three or four times a week,” she says.

The rest of the time, opt for vegetable-protein meals based on legumes, whole grains, nuts and seeds. “Consuming viscous (gel-forming) fibre in foods such as barley, oats, okra, eggplant and psyllium breakfast cereal is a positive way to lower cholesterol because it actually takes cholesterol out.” It does this by entrapping bile acids in a gel in the intestines and preventing them from re-entering the bloodstream.

Triglycerides are another type of blood fat — associated with diabetes — that rises with the consumption of foods high on the Glycemic Index (i.e., those that boost blood sugar rapidly). “In some people, a high alcohol consumption will increase triglyceride levels,” says Faulkner.

BUTT OUT

Quitting smoking, along with losing weight and exercising, can raise HDL cholesterol. “On the other hand, smoking lowers HDL,” says Faulkner, “and it oxidizes harmful LDL cholesterol, making it more likely to stick to arterial walls.”

MANAGE STRESS

U.K. researchers have reported that stress can drive up cholesterol.

4 How to protect your fertility



With Canadian women postponing motherhood until well into their 30s and beyond, it’s more important than ever to take charge of your precious ability to pass on life. First, if it is feasible, plan to conceive earlier rather than later. “Don’t wait too long,” advises Dr. Roger Pierson, chair of the communications committee for the Canadian Fertility Society and a professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. “Fertility declines abruptly between the ages of 31 and 35, and the rate of miscarriage also rises quite significantly.” Still, here are a few things you can do now to increase your chances of being fertile when the right time comes.

DEAL WITH MENSTRUAL IRREGULARITIES

Check out periods that are infrequent, too light, too heavy or excessively painful. Investigate unusual facial or body hair or the receding hairline of male-pattern baldness. These may signal hormonal conditions that can interfere with fertility.

PRACTISE SAFE SEX

Even if you're taking the birth control pill, barrier contraceptives are a must to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). STIs can lead to scarring of the pelvic organs and, ultimately, to infertility. Seek medical help if you experience painful intercourse.

DON'T SMOKE

"Smoking brings environmental toxicants into your body that you can't get anywhere else," says Pierson. "These chemicals are stored in the liquid that surrounds the egg." Smoking may also adversely affect the uterus and cervix, and it can reduce the viability and function of sperm by at least 50%.

KEEP YOUR WEIGHT NORMAL

Being too fat or too thin can contribute to infertility, as fat cells produce and sequester estrogen and other hormones affecting ovulation. Both overweight and underweight women may have irregular cycles in which ovulation does not occur or occurs improperly.

HAVE REGULAR GYNAECOLOGICAL EXAMS

Preventive measures such as Pap smears, which look for abnormal cells in the cervix, protect your fertility. Any pelvic surgery should be performed carefully to avoid triggering scar tissue, which could interfere with egg retrieval by the Fallopian tubes.

PROTECT YOURSELF FROM RADIATION

If you require repeated pelvic X-rays, speak to the radiologist about the need to preserve your fertility.

MEN, HEED YOUR FERTILITY, TOO

Avoid exposure to toxic workplace chemicals. Seek medical advice for testicular pain, unusual discharge or prolonged erectile dysfunction. For more information on protecting men's fertility, go to www.canadian-health.ca and enter "men's fertility" in the search box. Or visit the website of the Canadian Fertility and Andrology Society at www.cfas.ca.

5 How to keep your mind sharp

As we mature, we store financial resources for our golden years. But what about storing cognitive reserves to keep our minds shipshape over the long haul? Don't wait until your flesh droops and your brain shrinks. The time to start fending off future mental deterioration is now. Read on for tips on how to train your brain and how a healthy body translates to a healthy mind.

MAKE LEARNING A LIFELONG QUEST

"Your brain thrives on constant stimulation," says Dr. Stéphane Bergeron, a family physician in Quebec City and the developer of the NeuroActive brain training programs (www.neuroactive.ca). Play challenging games, learn a new language or take dance lessons. Travel new routes around your city. "You must have variety," says Bergeron. "Don't feed your brain the same food every day." Learning new things creates new connections in your grey matter. "It rewires the brain and builds new pathways between different regions — it rejuvenates the brain," he says.

DON'T BE A HERMIT

Regular interaction with other people keeps brain cells lively, while being solitary can allow the brain to focus dully on one thing. "Having conversations with others forces it to address diverse and varied topics," says Bergeron.

BE ACTIVE PHYSICALLY

Aerobic exercise in particular seems to increase vital blood flow and oxygen delivery to the brain, which in turn makes your memory work better, says Bergeron.

DON'T CARRY EXCESS WEIGHT

Be especially concerned about weight lodged around the belly. Studies have noted links between expanding waistlines and shrinking brains.

FILL UP ON FRUITS, VEGETABLES AND FISH

Antioxidant-rich fruits and vegetables and green tea may protect the brain from the chronic damage caused by rogue oxygen molecules called oxygen free radicals. According to Dr. Howard Chertkow, a professor in the department of neurology and



neurosurgery at McGill University in Montreal, people who consume fruit juice containing antioxidants called polyphenols at least three times a week have a lower risk of dementia. Other research has noted that people who consume the anti-inflammatory omega-3 fatty acids in fatty fish have a lower incidence. Studies in India have suggested that the curry spice turmeric may protect the brain against the inflammation associated with mental decline.

THREE TO KEEP IN THRALL

Tame your blood pressure, blood cholesterol and blood sugar. Lowering blood pressure and cholesterol will improve cardiovascular health and blood flow to the head. "High

blood glucose levels can impair the performance of the brain's neurons," says Bergeron. Keeping blood sugar in check can help prevent chronic damage to blood vessels, including those leading to and in the brain, thereby lowering dementia risk.

DON'T SMOKE

It's a no-brainer that the thousands of toxins in cigarette smoke are ultimately bad for brain cells. A large Dutch study reported that smokers are more at risk for Alzheimer's disease.

REDUCE LONG-TERM STRESS

Chronic high levels of the stress hormone cortisol can impair cognitive function.

6 How to keep lost weight lost

If it's easier to make money than to save it over the long term, for many dieters, it's also easier to lose weight than to keep it off. As you've no doubt noted, all of the above health strategies include maintaining a healthy weight, so in pursuit of weight-maintenance advice, we spoke with Dr. Yoni Freedhoff, director of the Bariatric Medical Institute in Ottawa, which has helped 4,500 patients with weight reduction since 2004.



TAKE IN ENOUGH CALORIES

Meals should have a minimum of 300 calories and snacks at least 150 calories. "A 50-calorie Baby Bel won't alleviate hunger," he says.

PLAY UP PROTEIN

Protein is satiating and slows the speed at which carbohydrates are absorbed from the stomach. "It helps you to feel fuller and, therefore, have fewer cravings," he says.

LOVE THE WAY YOU LOSE IT

"The best guarantee for maintaining lost weight is to make sure you lost it living a life you enjoyed," says Freedhoff. "Often, people will take ridiculous approaches to losing weight and feel miserable the entire time — then magically expect to figure out a new life that will keep it off." Sustainability is ultimately more important than speed and amount of loss. "I would rather see someone lose half as much as she wanted and take 10 times longer than undergo rapid weight loss and then regain it rapidly — perhaps exceeding the amount lost," he says. Even a modest weight loss can improve blood pressure, blood glucose and blood cholesterol levels.

EAT BEFORE YOU NEED TO

Forget the flawed old advice about waiting until you're hungry to eat. "Eat pre-emptively," says Freedhoff, which means having meals or snacks every two or three hours. "If you go to the supermarket hungry, you will shop more. And if you sit down to a meal hungry, you'll shop more from your fridge, your plate or — worst-case scenario — a menu." In Freedhoff's approach, "the willpower or mindset to keep weight off is actually the absence of hunger."

MANAGE YOUR CALORIES

You can't balance your budget without knowing the price tag on the items you buy, so why expect to balance your energy intake unless you know how many calories you're eating? "Knowing what you consume is a crucial component of weight maintenance," says Freedhoff. His most successful patients keep complete and accurate food diaries and carry over the knowledge acquired during their slimming programs to the maintenance phase.

TREAT YOURSELF

Food is not always just for nutrition — it's also for comfort and celebration. You should not engage in a lifelong guilt-ridden battle with food, Freedhoff says. "Some days, the healthiest lives we can enjoy will include more calories and less exercise. Becoming extreme to try to correct occasional indulgences can lead to all-or-nothing thinking, which, for most folks, ultimately ends up as a whole lot of nothing."