



Here's To Your Health!

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5 Health Tips to Keep You Out of the Doctor's Office

Eat right. Stay active. De-stress. Yada yada yada. . . The mantras of the health-promotion movement are something we all know by heart. But what do they really mean to us on a practical level? And how can we apply them so that they really safeguard our health?

If anyone knows the best preventive strategies to follow, it's the doctors who see patients on a daily basis with the very health problems we're trying to avoid. So, to get the inside scoop on how to remain healthy and prevent life-compromising diseases, we consulted five physicians who have different specialties and asked them exactly what we should be doing day in and day out. Here's what an infectious disease physician, an oncologist, a psychiatrist, a cardiologist and a gastroenterologist recommend.

Neil Schachter, M.D., Infectious Disease Specialist

When it comes to warding off infectious diseases, "you do have some control," says Neil Schachter, M.D., professor of medicine at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City and author of *The Good Doctor's Guide to Colds & Flu*.



His three-part approach to disease prevention includes avoiding infection, getting a flu shot—they are safe and 90 percent effective, he says—and boosting your immunity.

"If somebody is obviously sick, keep your distance; don't hug them or shake hands," advises Dr. Schachter. Use alcohol wipes to eliminate germs a sick person may have left behind; disinfect doorknobs, phones, keyboards, pens and other items. Also, clean your hands regularly—either wash them with soap and warm water for 20 to 30 seconds or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. These actions can kill most germs that cause colds, flu and gastrointestinal illnesses. And "you can make yourself stronger and more resistant to germs and viruses," says Dr. Schachter, "by avoiding smoking and exposure to secondhand smoke; limiting your alcohol intake; engaging in a hobby or doing another relaxing activity for at least 10 to 15 minutes per day; getting the sleep you need nightly; consuming a healthy, balanced diet with lots of antioxidant-rich fruits and vegetables; maintaining a healthy weight, since being overweight depresses the immune system; and exercising regularly, which can bolster immune function."

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Are You At Risk For Sudden Death?

Heart attacks aren't just for older, overweight men with high cholesterol and high blood pressure. Doctors are seeing patients in their 40s come in with heart disease due to self-inflicted risk factors, according to Ilan Wittstein, M.D., an assistant professor at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and its Heart Institute. Middle-aged men need to be on guard. Even if you work out and eat healthy, you could still be at risk.

Beware of Risk Factors

"In half of the cases of heart attacks, the heart attack is the first time the patient finds out about heart disease," says Richard A. Stein, director of preventive cardiology at Beth Israel Medical Center and spokesperson for the American Heart Association. More than 60 percent of heart attacks have to do with simple lifestyle issues, such as diet, exercise and cigarette smoking, and easy to detect and treat medical issues such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol. "Men need to know about the risk factors that predict the majority of heart disease cases," Stein says.

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Mary B. Daly, M.D., Ph.D., Oncologist

“Up to 60 percent of cancers could be avoided if people followed some simple rules: Don’t smoke or spend time around smokers, eat a healthy diet, maintain a healthy weight and get enough exercise,” says Mary B. Daly, M.D., Ph.D., a medical oncologist and director of the population science division at the Fox Chase Cancer Center in Philadelphia. “People don’t realize how much they can do to reduce their risk of cancer.” And it doesn’t take a lot of work, she says. On the dietary front, consuming lots of fruits, vegetables and fish and minimizing your intake of high-fat foods can make a difference. So can avoiding charred meat, “which can stimulate abnormal cellular growth and has been associated with certain forms of cancer such as colon cancer,” says Dr. Daly. It’s also wise to limit your alcohol intake to no more than one drink per day for women, two for men—since higher amounts have been linked with an increased risk of breast, laryngeal, head and neck, and pancreatic cancers.

Some preventive measures do require you to go to a doctor’s office. “People tend to think of screening as a way of detecting cancer, but it is really a preventive measure,” she says. “With cervical cancer screening, skin cancer screening and colon cancer screening, we can find precancerous conditions and treat them before they turn into cancer.”

Sudeepta Varma, M.D., Psychiatrist

“Genetics play a part in mental health, but people can do a lot to boost their mental immune systems,” says Sudeepta Varma, M.D., medical director of the World Trade Center Mental Health Program at Bellevue Hospital in New York City. Rule number one: Get enough sleep. “If you don’t get enough on a regular basis, it can lead to disruption of your body’s circadian rhythms [24-hour cycles that regulate hormone production and other biological processes], which can make you feel more stressed and can be enough to trigger or exacerbate an underlying disorder,” explains Dr. Varma. Also, it is important to consume a diet with plenty of omega-3 fatty acids (found in salmon, tuna, sardines, walnuts, canola oil and flaxseed), vitamin B-12 (found in fish, seafood, meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products) and folate (found in fortified cereals, spinach, broccoli, peanuts and orange juice), since these nutrients can help ease depression and improve brain function. Engaging in regular exercise and relaxation techniques (such as yoga, tai chi or progressive muscle relaxation) can also help relieve mild anxiety or depression. Above all, it’s important to “maintain balance and moderation in anything you do,” Dr. Varma says.

Tracy Stevens, M.D., Cardiologist

“Many people don’t take care of their heart health,” says Tracy Stevens, M.D., a cardiologist at Saint Luke’s Mid America Heart Institute in Kansas City, MO. “And the truth is, the majority of heart disease can be prevented through lifestyle changes.” The first step: Have your blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar measured. Then, ask your doctor what you should do to manage any abnormalities. Taking medication to control high blood pressure, cholesterol abnormalities and elevated blood sugar can help protect your heart. In addition, “aspirin, omega-3 capsules and statin drugs are potent anti-inflammatories,” Dr. Stevens says. So ask your doctor if you might benefit from taking one.

At home, measure your waistline: Having a waist circumference that’s 35 inches or greater is risky for women; 40 inches or greater is risky for men. “Heart disease is in our bellies,” he says. “If you have excess fat in your abdomen, you’re more likely to lay down plaque in your arteries.” It’s also wise to keep your weight in a healthy range. “I recommend at least two and a half hours of exercise a week,” says Dr. Stevens. “And don’t go more than two days without it.” Eat plenty of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and wild fish (which are rich in omega-3 fatty acids).

Other heart-protective measures include avoiding exposure to secondhand smoke and smoking. Get plenty of good-quality shut-eye, because being sleep-deprived “is correlated with high blood pressure, metabolic syndrome, and insulin resistance,” notes Dr. Stevens. And get a healthy grip on stress. “Stress can weaken the heart muscle and make plaque crack, which increases the chances of a clot forming,” he warns. Besides protecting your heart directly, reducing stress can help you feel more capable of launching other heart-healthy changes.

Paul McNeely, M.D., Gastroenterologist

“The saying that you are what you eat really is true when it comes to gastrointestinal health,” says Paul McNeely, M.D., a gastroenterologist at the Ochsner Clinic in New Orleans. As far as diet goes, avoid fast food, high-fat foods, and charred foods, since these can increase the risk of colon cancer and obesity (in the case of fatty fare). Instead, eat more fruits, vegetables and whole grains and consume plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration. “Aim to get 25 to 30 grams of dietary fiber per day from foods or supplements because fiber promotes good motility,” says Dr. McNeely. “If you have hard stools, fiber can soften them; if you have loose stools, fiber can bulk them up.” Limit your alcohol intake because consuming more than two cocktails per day can cause gastritis, heartburn, and liver damage in some people.

How you eat can also affect your GI tract. Skipping breakfast, wolfing down your food, consuming a huge dinner, and overeating in general are major no-no’s because they can cause abdominal distension and reflux.

“A lot of chronic gastrointestinal complaints such as pain, pressure and reflux get worse when weight goes up,” Dr. McNeely says, “so try to maintain an ideal body weight.” Finding ways to ease stress is also important. For one thing, “stress can cause mobility problems,” he notes. Plus, many people, when stressed, reach for aspirin or some other nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) for tension-related aches. Overuse of NSAIDs is “one of the two leading causes of ulcers,” Dr. McNeely says.

Source: Stacey Colino, *5 Docs' Health Tips, World-class medical experts tell you how to best stay out of their offices, Remedy.*



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Stress Less

Research shows that not only do you have to watch your diet, exercise, and avoid smoking and excessive alcohol to prevent a heart attack, it's imperative to be aware of your family history and to manage your stress level. According to the 2004 INTERHEART study in the *Lancet*, stress is one of three main risk factors for coronary artery disease, and is responsible for a fifth of heart attacks worldwide.

Stress played a vary important role in what may have caused the heart attack of Ken Lay, the founder of Enron Corp, says Wittstein. Convicted of conspiracy and fraud, Lay faced 25 to 40 years in prison before his untimely death. “If we look at medical literature over time, we find many good examples of how stress can have a profound affect on the heart,” says Wittstein, who co-authored last year’s study on “broken heart syndrome” in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. “We can’t prove that heart attacks can be caused by stress, but we know that people who are under higher stress, have a greater risk of developing heart disease,” Whittstein adds.

Release the Pressure

But it's possible to lessen your risk of heart disease by using calming stress management techniques, say these experts. Duke University Medical researchers conducted a study with 107 patients who had a history of heart problems. To lower the risk of future heart attacks, researchers divided the patients into three treatment groups; a third of the group exercised, another third received standard care, and the last third learned stress management techniques through 4 months of therapy and training. The stress management group fared the best with a 74 percent reduction in cardiac events over the 5-year analysis.

Stress management techniques can include getting therapy, or be as simple as taking up yoga, practicing tai chi or using meditation techniques for five minutes every day. "It's proven that relaxation techniques lower blood pressure and improve bloodflow," Dr. Wittsetin says.

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Modify your lifestyle. Below we provide you with risk factors to be aware of and simple modifications you can make to your lifestyle today to lessen the probability of a heart attack down the road.

Starting in your mid-to-late 30's, take measures to prevent heart disease by doing the following:

- 1. Be aware of major risk factors:** Hypertension, high cholesterol, cigarette smoking, having a family history of heart disease, and diabetes are all major risk factors that could increase your probability of having a heart attack.
- 2. Make a lifestyle change:** Think of the things that are in your power to change, like improving your diet, getting exercise, and quitting smoking. Eat seven to nine fruits and vegetables each day, says Dr. Stein, who recommends the Dash Diet, a Mediterranean, fruit-and-vegetable-based diet that can be downloaded online. Get at least 2 hours of moderately intensive exercise each week, recommends Dr. Stein.
- 3. Make an appointment to be evaluated:** If you have a family history of heart attacks, or you think you're at risk, spend 45-minutes to an hour with a preventive cardiologist at your local hospital. The evaluation and blood test will reveal your HDL and LDL cholesterol, triglycerides, fasting lipid profile, blood pressure, and family history. "Don't wait until you are in your 50s to get a formal assessment," Dr. Wittstein says. From this checkup, the doctor will be able to determine if you need to have a non-invasive scan of your heart to look for problems, or if you need to be prescribed medication like statins.
- 4. Don't deny cardiac symptoms:** If you're experiencing "shortness of breath or chest pains from exertion, get to the hospital right away," warns Dr. Stein, who had a friend die from a heart attack last year, after experiencing chest pains while riding his bike.
- 5. Use medication:** "If a physician recommends it, get started on medication, like statins, that can help you modify your risk factor," Dr. Wittstein says. If you have a family history or believe you are at risk, also take a 81-160 mg aspirin tablet each day as a precaution. "For a 40-year-old man with a strong family history of heart attacks, a baby aspirin would be reasonable," he says.

Extra: If you're under high stress, take up meditation, yoga, tai chi, or practice any other relaxation technique for five minutes every day. "Exercise can relieve a lot of stress for people," Wittstein says. "People who exercise on a regular basis, are less likely to have heart disease or die from a heart attack later in life."

Source: Jamie Bellavance, *Are You at Risk for Sudden Death? Why being young and fit may not protect you from a heart attack*, Menshealth.com.

Dumbbell swing

With feet shoulder-width apart, hold a dumbbell at arm's length with both hands. Squat and bring it between your legs, so your forearms touch your inner thighs. Then, as you straighten your knees and back, swing it up to slightly above your eyes. Lower it to the start position and repeat. Do 10 reps.

Corkscrew

Assume a squat position, holding a dumbbell with both hands at arm's length to the right of your right ankle. Push to a standing position, keeping your arms extended and rotating your torso as you bring the dumbbell above your opposite ear. Then lower it. That's 1 rep. Perform 10 on each side.

Row and twist

Hold a dumbbell in your right hand. Bending at your waist, assume a bent-over row position -- right arm perpendicular to the floor, your left leg staggered forward, and your right leg back. Pull the dumbbell to your chest and rotate your shoulders to the right. Do 10 reps. Switch hands and repeat on the other side.

Squat and press

With your feet wider than shoulder-width apart and toes pointed slightly out, hold a dumbbell with both hands, arms extended downward. Squat (don't bend at the waist) until it touches the floor. In one movement, stand up as you bring it up to your chest and then over your head with arms extended. Do 10 reps.

