

5 steps to mental wellbeing

Evidence suggests there are 5 steps you can take to improve your mental health and wellbeing.

Trying these things could help you feel more positive and able to get the most out of life.

1. Connect with other people

Good relationships are important for your mental wellbeing. They can:

- help you to build a sense of belonging and self-worth
- give you an opportunity to share positive experiences
- provide emotional support and allow you to support others

There are lots of things you could try to help build stronger and closer relationships:

Do

- if possible, take time each day to be with your family, for example, try arranging a fixed time to eat dinner together
- arrange a day out with friends you have not seen for a while
- try switching off the TV to talk or play a game with your children, friends or family
- have lunch with a colleague
- visit a friend or family member who needs support or company
- volunteer at a local school, hospital or community group.
- make the most of technology to stay in touch with friends and family. Video-chat apps like Skype and FaceTime are useful, especially if you live far apart

Don't

- do not rely on technology or social media alone to build relationships. It's easy to get into the habit of only ever texting, messaging or emailing people

2. Be physically active

Being active is not only great for your physical health and fitness. Evidence also shows it can also improve your mental wellbeing by:

- raising your self-esteem
- helping you to set goals or challenges and achieve them
- causing chemical changes in your brain which can help to positively change your mood

Don't

- do not feel you have to spend hours in a gym. It's best to find activities you enjoy and make them a part of your life

3. Learn new skills

Research shows that learning new skills can also improve your mental wellbeing by:

- boosting self-confidence and raising self-esteem
- helping you to build a sense of purpose
- helping you to connect with others

Even if you feel like you do not have enough time, or you may not need to learn new things, there are lots of different ways to bring learning into your life.

Some of the things you could try include:

Do

- try learning to cook something new. Find out about eating a healthy, balanced diet
- try taking on a new responsibility at work, such as mentoring a junior staff member or improving your presentation skills
- work on a DIY project, such as fixing a broken bike, garden gate or something bigger. There are lots of free video tutorials online
- consider signing up for a course at a local college. You could try learning a new language or a practical skill such as plumbing
- try new hobbies that challenge you, such as writing a blog, taking up a new sport or learning to paint

Don't

- do not feel you have to learn new qualifications or sit exams if this does not interest you. It's best to find activities you enjoy and make them a part of your life

4. Give to others

Research suggests that acts of giving and kindness can help improve your mental wellbeing by:

- creating positive feelings and a sense of reward
- giving you a feeling of purpose and self-worth
- helping you connect with other people

It could be small acts of kindness towards other people, or larger ones like volunteering in your local community.

Some examples of the things you could try include:

- saying thank you to someone for something they have done for you
- asking friends, family or colleagues how they are and really listening to their answer
- spending time with friends or relatives who need support or company
- offering to help someone you know with DIY or a work project
- volunteering in your community, such as helping at a school, hospital or care home

5. Pay attention to the present moment (mindfulness)

Paying more attention to the present moment can improve your mental wellbeing. This includes your thoughts and feelings, your body and the world around you.

Some people call this awareness "mindfulness". Mindfulness can help you enjoy life more and understand yourself better. It can positively change the way you feel about life and how you approach challenges.

10 stress busters

If you're stressed, whether by your job or something more personal, the first step to feeling better is to identify the cause.

The most unhelpful thing you can do is turn to something unhealthy to help you cope, such as smoking or drinking.

Not taking control of the situation and doing nothing can make your problems worse.

Some of the keys to good stress management are building emotional strength, being in control of your situation, having a good social network, and adopting a positive outlook.

What you can do to address stress

Try these 10 stress-busting suggestions:

Be active

Exercise won't make your stress disappear, but it can reduce some of the emotional intensity that you're feeling, clearing your thoughts and letting you deal with your problems more calmly.

For more advice, read about exercise for depression.

Take control

If you think you cannot do anything about your problem, your stress can get worse.

That feeling of loss of control is one of the main causes of stress and lack of wellbeing.

The act of taking control is in itself empowering, and it's a crucial part of finding a solution that satisfies you and not someone else.

Connect with people

A good support network of colleagues, friends and family can ease your work troubles and help you see things in a different way.

The activities we do with friends can help us relax and relieve stress.

Talking things through with a friend may also help you find solutions to your problems.

Have some "me time"

Many of us work long hours, meaning we often don't spend enough time doing things we really enjoy.

It's important to take some time for socialising, relaxation or exercise.

You could try setting aside a couple of nights a week for some quality "me time" away from work.

Challenge yourself

Setting yourself goals and challenges, whether at work or outside, such as learning a new language or a new sport, can help build confidence. This may help you deal with stress.

It can also make you want to do things and be active.

Avoid unhealthy habits

Don't rely on alcohol, smoking and caffeine as your ways of coping.

They might provide temporary relief, but in the long term, these crutches won't solve your problems. They'll just create new ones.

It's best to tackle the cause of your stress.

Help other people

Evidence shows that people who help others, through activities such as volunteering or community work, often become more resilient.

If you don't have time to volunteer, try to do someone a favour every day. It can be something as small as helping someone cross the road or going on a coffee run for colleagues.

Work smarter, not harder

Working smarter means prioritising your work, concentrating on the tasks that'll make a real difference.

Leave the least important tasks to last. Accept that you will not have time for everything.

Try to be positive

Look for the positives in life, and things for which you're grateful.

Try writing down 3 things that went well, or for which you're grateful, at the end of every day.

Accept the things you can't change

Changing a difficult situation isn't always possible. Try to concentrate on the things you do have control over.

For example, if your company is making redundancies, you could focus on the things that you can control, such as looking for a new job.

Breathing exercises for stress

This calming breathing technique for stress, anxiety and panic takes just a few minutes and can be done anywhere.

You will get the most benefit if you do it regularly, as part of your daily routine.

You can do it standing up, sitting in a chair that supports your back, or lying on a bed or yoga mat on the floor.

Make yourself as comfortable as you can. If you can, loosen any clothes that restrict your breathing.

If you're lying down, place your arms a little bit away from your sides, with the palms up. Let your legs be straight, or bend your knees so your feet are flat on the floor.

If you're sitting, place your arms on the chair arms.

If you're sitting or standing, place both feet flat on the ground. Whatever position you're in, place your feet roughly hip-width apart.

- Let your breath flow as deep down into your belly as is comfortable, without forcing it.
- Try breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- Breathe in gently and regularly. Some people find it helpful to count steadily from 1 to 5. You may not be able to reach 5 at first.
- Then let it flow out gently, counting from 1 to 5 again, if you find this helpful.
- Keep doing this for at least 5 minutes.

Tips to help you gain weight

Do

- gain weight gradually by adding healthy calories – adults could try adding around 300 to 500 extra calories a day
- eat smaller meals more often, adding healthy snacks between meals
- add extra calories to your meals with cheese, nuts, and seeds
- have high-calorie drinks in between meals, such as milkshakes
- have a balanced diet – choose from a variety of food groups, such as fruit and vegetables, starchy carbohydrates and dairy and alternatives
- add protein to your meals with beans, pulses, fish, eggs and lean meat
- have snacks that are easy to prepare, such as yogurt or rice pudding
- build muscle with strength training or yoga – exercise can also improve your appetite

Don't

- do not rely on chocolate, cakes and sugary drinks to gain weight
- do not fill up on drinks before eating meals

Further information

Adding healthy calories

Build muscle

Strength training or yoga can help you build muscle and increase your appetite.

Things you can do to lose weight

There are lots of ways you can lose weight, from making small changes to what you eat and drink to finding more support.

If you're overweight, losing weight will give you more energy and help to reduce the risk of obesity, heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

You do not have to do everything at once, try one thing at a time and find what works for you.

Do

- get active for 150 minutes a week – you can break this up into shorter sessions
- aim to get your 5 A Day – 80g of fresh, canned or frozen fruit or vegetables count as 1 portion
- aim to lose 1 to 2lbs, or 0.5 to 1kg, a week
- read food labels – products with more green colour coding than amber and red are often a healthier option
- swap sugary drinks for water – if you do not like the taste, add slices of lemon or lime for flavour

- cut down on food that's high in sugar and fat – start by swapping sugary cereal for wholegrain alternatives
- share your weight loss plan with someone you trust – they can help motivate you when you have a bad day

Don't

- do not lose weight suddenly with diets
- do not stock unhealthy food – popcorn, fruit and rice cakes can be healthier alternatives
- do not skip meals – you might end up snacking more because you feel hungry
- do not finish your plate if you're full – you can save leftover food for the next day

Benefits of exercise

Whatever your age, there's strong scientific evidence that being physically active can help you lead a healthier and happier life.

Exercise can reduce your risk of major illnesses, such as coronary heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and cancer, and lower your risk of early death by up to 30%.

Check physical activity guidelines for:

- children (under 5 years)
- children and young people (5 to 18 years)
- adults (19 to 64 years)
- older adults (65 years and over)

Health benefits

It's essential to be physically active if you want to live a healthy and fulfilling life into old age.

People who do regular physical activity have a lower risk of:

- coronary heart disease and stroke
- type 2 diabetes
- bowel cancer
- breast cancer in women
- early death
- osteoarthritis
- hip fracture
- falls (among older adults)
- depression
- dementia, including Alzheimer's disease

Research also shows that physical activity can boost self-esteem, mood, sleep quality and energy, as well as reducing your risk of stress.

What counts?

To stay healthy, adults should try to be active every day and aim to do at least 150 minutes of physical activity over a week, through a variety of activities.

For most people, the easiest way to get moving is to make activity part of everyday life, like walking for health or cycling instead of using the car to get around. However, the more you do, the better, and taking part in activities such as sports and exercise will make you even healthier.

For any type of activity to benefit your health, you need to be moving quick enough to raise your heart rate, breathe faster and feel warmer. This level of effort is called moderate intensity activity. If you're working at a moderate intensity you should still be able to talk but you won't be able to sing the words to a song.

An activity where you have to work even harder is called vigorous intensity activity. There is substantial evidence that vigorous activity can bring health benefits over and above that of moderate activity.

You can tell when it's vigorous activity because you're breathing hard and fast, and your heart rate has gone up quite a bit. If you're working at this level, you won't be able to say more than a few words without pausing for a breath.

A modern problem

People are less active nowadays, partly because technology has made our lives easier. We drive cars or take public transport. Machines wash our clothes. We entertain ourselves in front of a TV or computer screen.

Fewer people are doing manual work, and most of us have jobs that involve little physical effort. Work, household chores, shopping and other necessary activities are far less demanding than for previous generations.

We move around less and burn off less energy than people used to. Research suggests that many adults spend more than 7 hours a day sitting down, at work, on transport or in their leisure time. People aged over 65 spend 10 hours or more each day sitting or lying down, making them the most sedentary age group.

Sedentary lifestyles

Inactivity is described by the Department of Health and Social Care as a "silent killer". Evidence is emerging that sedentary behaviour, such as sitting or lying down for long periods, is bad for your health.

Not only should you try to raise your activity levels, but you should also reduce the amount of time you and your family spend sitting down.

Common examples of sedentary behaviour include watching TV, using a computer, using the car for short journeys and sitting down to read, talk or listen to music. This type of behaviour is thought to increase your risk of developing many long-term conditions, such as heart disease, stroke and type 2 diabetes, as well as weight gain and obesity.

Crucially, you can hit your weekly activity target but still be at risk of ill health if you spend the rest of the time sitting or lying down.

There is increasing evidence that, unless you are a wheelchair user, sitting down too much can be a risk to your health

To reduce our risk of ill health from inactivity, we are advised to exercise regularly, at least 150 minutes a week, and reduce sitting time.

Studies have linked being inactive with being overweight and obese, type 2 diabetes, some types of cancer, and early death.

Sitting for long periods is thought to slow the metabolism, which affects the body's ability to regulate blood sugar, blood pressure and break down body fat.

Many adults spend around 9 hours a day sitting. This includes watching TV, using a computer, reading, doing homework, travelling by car, bus or train but does not include sleeping.

Bus drivers and astronauts

The link between illness and sitting first emerged in the 1950s, when researchers found double decker bus drivers were twice as likely to have heart attacks as their bus conductor colleagues. The drivers sat for 90 per cent of their shifts, the conductors climbed about 600 stairs each working day.

It is thought excessive sitting slows the metabolism – which affects our ability to regulate blood sugar and blood pressure, and metabolise fat – and may cause weaker muscles and bones.

Research on astronauts in the early 1970s found life in zero gravity was linked with accelerated bone and muscle loss and ageing.

Limitations with current research

Most of the evidence is based on observational studies, which have only shown an association between sitting and ill health but not a direct cause.

Under-5s

In children under 5, the advice is to limit the time they spend watching TV, travelling by car, bus or train, or being strapped into a buggy.

While this may be a challenge for busy parents, the advice reflects growing awareness that early life experiences and habits impact upon our health as adults.

Tips to reduce sitting time:

- do not leave a child in a pram or buggy, car seats or highchair for longer than 1 hour at a time
- reduce time spent in walking aids or baby bouncers
- reduce time spent in front of the TV or other screens

Children and teenagers

For children and teenagers aged 5 to 18, reducing sitting time includes anything that involves moving in and around the home, classroom or community.

Tips to reduce sitting time:

- consider ways for children and teenagers to "earn" screen time
- agree a family limit to screen time per day
- make bedrooms a TV, electronic device, laptop and phone-free zone
- set "no screen time" rules to encourage other activities
- encourage participation in house chores, such as setting the table or taking the bins out
- choose gifts such as a scooter, skateboard, ball or kite to encourage active play

Parents could lead by example by also reducing their TV time and other sitting-based tasks.

Adults

Adults aged 19 to 64 are advised to try to sit down less throughout the day, including at work, when travelling and at home.

Tips to reduce sitting time:

- stand on the train or bus
- take the stairs and walk up escalators
- set a reminder to get up every 30 minutes
- place a laptop on a box or similar to work standing
- stand or walk around while on the phone
- take a walk break every time you take a coffee or tea break
- walk to a colleague's desk instead of emailing or calling
- swap some TV time for more active tasks or hobbies

Older people

Some older people (aged 65 and over) are known to spend 9 hours or more each day sitting.

Tips to reduce sitting time:

- avoid long periods sat in front of a TV or computer
- stand up and move during TV advert breaks
- stand or walk while on the phone
- use the stairs as much as possible
- take up active hobbies such as gardening and DIY
- join in community-based activities, such as dance classes and walking groups
- take up active play with grandchildren, if you have them
- do most types of housework

Self-help tips to fight tiredness

Many cases of tiredness are due to stress, not enough sleep, poor diet and other lifestyle factors. Try these self-help tips to restore your energy levels.

If you feel you're suffering from fatigue, which is an overwhelming tiredness that isn't relieved by rest and sleep, you may have an underlying medical condition. Consult a GP for advice.

Eat often to beat tiredness

A good way to keep up your energy through the day is to eat regular meals and healthy snacks every 3 to 4 hours, rather than a large meal less often.

Get moving

You might feel that exercise is the last thing on your mind. But, in fact, regular exercise will make you feel less tired in the long run, so you'll have more energy.

Even a single 15-minute walk can give you an energy boost, and the benefits increase with more frequent physical activity.

Start with a small amount of exercise. Build it up gradually over weeks and months until you reach the recommended goal of 2 hours 30 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise, such as cycling or fast walking, every week.

Lose weight to gain energy

If your body is carrying excess weight, it can be exhausting. It also puts extra strain on your heart, which can make you tired. Lose weight and you'll feel much more energetic.

Apart from eating healthily, the best way to lose weight and keep it off is to be more active and do more exercise.

Sleep well

Many people don't get the sleep they need to stay alert through the day.

The website of the Royal College of Psychiatrists has information on sleeping well.

Tips for sleeping well include:

- going to bed and getting up in the morning at the same time every day
- avoiding naps in the day
- taking time to relax before you go to bed

Reduce stress to boost energy

Stress uses up a lot of energy. Try to introduce relaxing activities into your day. This could be:

- working out at the gym
- yoga or tai chi
- listening to music or reading

- spending time with friends

Whatever relaxes you will improve your energy.

Cut out caffeine

Caffeine is a stimulant which means it makes you feel more awake. But it can also disrupt your usual sleep rhythms, leading to problems sleeping and then daytime tiredness.

Products that caffeine is found include:

- coffee
- tea
- fizzy drinks
- energy drinks
- some painkillers and herbal remedies

The effects of caffeine on the body can last up to 7 hours, so you may want to avoid it in the evening if you are having trouble sleeping.

Drink less alcohol

Although a couple of glasses of wine in the evening can help you fall asleep, you sleep less deeply after drinking alcohol. The next day you'll be tired, even if you sleep a full 8 hours.

Cut down on alcohol before bedtime. You'll get a better night's rest and have more energy.

The NHS recommends that men and women should not regularly drink more than 14 units a week and should try to have several alcohol-free days each week.

Drink more water for better energy

Sometimes you feel tired simply because you're mildly dehydrated. A glass of water will do the trick, especially after exercise.

8 tips for healthy eating

These 8 practical tips cover the basics of healthy eating and can help you make healthier choices.

The key to a healthy diet is to eat the right amount of calories for how active you are so you balance the energy you consume with the energy you use.

If you eat or drink more than your body needs, you'll put on weight because the energy you do not use is stored as fat. If you eat and drink too little, you'll lose weight.

You should also eat a wide range of foods to make sure you're getting a balanced diet and your body is receiving all the nutrients it needs.

It's recommended that men have around 2,500 calories a day (10,500 kilojoules). Women should have around 2,000 calories a day (8,400 kilojoules).

Most adults in the UK are eating more calories than they need and should eat fewer calories.

1. Base your meals on higher fibre starchy carbohydrates

Starchy carbohydrates should make up just over a third of the food you eat. They include potatoes, bread, rice, pasta and cereals.

Choose higher fibre or wholegrain varieties, such as wholewheat pasta, brown rice or potatoes with their skins on.

They contain more fibre than white or refined starchy carbohydrates and can help you feel full for longer.

Try to include at least 1 starchy food with each main meal. Some people think starchy foods are fattening, but gram for gram the carbohydrate they contain provides fewer than half the calories of fat.

Keep an eye on the fats you add when you're cooking or serving these types of foods because that's what increases the calorie content – for example, oil on chips, butter on bread and creamy sauces on pasta.

2. Eat lots of fruit and veg

It's recommended that you eat at least 5 portions of a variety of fruit and veg every day. They can be fresh, frozen, canned, dried or juiced.

Getting your 5 A Day is easier than it sounds. Why not chop a banana over your breakfast cereal, or swap your usual mid-morning snack for a piece of fresh fruit?

A portion of fresh, canned or frozen fruit and vegetables is 80g. A portion of dried fruit (which should be kept to mealtimes) is 30g.

A 150ml glass of fruit juice, vegetable juice or smoothie also counts as 1 portion, but limit the amount you have to no more than 1 glass a day as these drinks are sugary and can damage your teeth.

3. Eat more fish, including a portion of oily fish

Fish is a good source of protein and contains many vitamins and minerals.

Aim to eat at least 2 portions of fish a week, including at least 1 portion of oily fish.

Oily fish are high in omega-3 fats, which may help prevent heart disease.

Oily fish include:

- salmon
- trout
- herring
- sardines
- pilchards
- mackerel

Non-oily fish include:

- haddock
- plaice
- coley
- cod
- tuna
- skate
- hake

You can choose from fresh, frozen and canned, but remember that canned and smoked fish can be high in salt.

Most people should be eating more fish, but there are recommended limits for some types of fish.

4. Cut down on saturated fat and sugar

Saturated fat

You need some fat in your diet, but it's important to pay attention to the amount and type of fat you're eating.

There are 2 main types of fat: saturated and unsaturated. Too much saturated fat can increase the amount of cholesterol in the blood, which increases your risk of developing heart disease.

On average, men should have no more than 30g of saturated fat a day. On average, women should have no more than 20g of saturated fat a day.

Children under the age of 11 should have less saturated fat than adults, but a low-fat diet is not suitable for children under 5. In addition, full-fat dairy products, such as cheese, fromage frais and yoghurt, are recommended up to the age of 2 years.

Saturated fat is found in many foods, such as:

- fatty cuts of meat
- sausages
- butter
- hard cheese
- cream
- cakes
- biscuits
- lard
- pies

Try to eat less saturated fat and choose foods that contain unsaturated fats instead, such as vegetable oils and spreads, oily fish and avocados.

For a healthier choice, use a small amount of vegetable or olive oil, or reduced-fat spread instead of butter, lard or ghee.

When you're having meat, choose lean cuts and cut off any visible fat.

All types of fat are high in energy, so they should only be eaten in small amounts.

Sugar

Regularly consuming foods and drinks high in sugar increases your risk of obesity and tooth decay.

Sugary foods and drinks are often high in energy (measured in kilojoules or calories), and if consumed too often can contribute to weight gain. They can also cause tooth decay, especially if eaten between meals.

Free sugars are any sugars added to foods or drinks, or found naturally in honey, syrups and unsweetened fruit juices and smoothies.

This is the type of sugar you should be cutting down on, rather than the sugar found in fruit and milk.

Many packaged foods and drinks contain surprisingly high amounts of free sugars.

Free sugars are found in many foods, such as:

- sugary fizzy drinks
- sugary breakfast cereals
- cakes
- biscuits
- pastries and puddings
- sweets and chocolate
- alcoholic drinks

Food labels can help. Use them to check how much sugar foods contain.

More than 22.5g of total sugars per 100g means the food is high in sugar, while 5g of total sugars or less per 100g means the food is low in sugar.

5. Eat less salt: no more than 6g a day for adults

Eating too much salt can raise your blood pressure. People with high blood pressure are more likely to develop heart disease or have a stroke.

Even if you do not add salt to your food, you may still be eating too much.

About three-quarters of the salt you eat is already in the food when you buy it, such as breakfast cereals, soups, breads and sauces.

Use food labels to help you cut down. More than 1.5g of salt per 100g means the food is high in salt.

Adults and children aged 11 and over should eat no more than 6g of salt (about a teaspoonful) a day. Younger children should have even less.

6. Get active and be a healthy weight

As well as eating healthily, regular exercise may help reduce your risk of getting serious health conditions. It's also important for your overall health and wellbeing.

Read more about the benefits of exercise and physical activity guidelines for adults.

Being overweight or obese can lead to health conditions, such as type 2 diabetes, certain cancers, heart disease and stroke. Being underweight could also affect your health.

Most adults need to lose weight by eating fewer calories.

If you're trying to lose weight, aim to eat less and be more active. Eating a healthy, balanced diet can help you maintain a healthy weight.

7. Do not get thirsty

You need to drink plenty of fluids to stop you getting dehydrated. The government recommends drinking 6 to 8 glasses every day. This is in addition to the fluid you get from the food you eat.

All non-alcoholic drinks count, but water, lower fat milk and lower sugar drinks, including tea and coffee, are healthier choices.

Try to avoid sugary soft and fizzy drinks, as they're high in calories. They're also bad for your teeth.

Even unsweetened fruit juice and smoothies are high in free sugar.

Your combined total of drinks from fruit juice, vegetable juice and smoothies should not be more than 150ml a day, which is a small glass.

Remember to drink more fluids during hot weather or while exercising.

8. Do not skip breakfast

Some people skip breakfast because they think it'll help them lose weight.

But a healthy breakfast high in fibre and low in fat, sugar and salt can form part of a balanced diet, and can help you get the nutrients you need for good health.

A wholegrain lower sugar cereal with semi-skimmed milk and fruit sliced over the top is a tasty and healthier breakfast.

Water, drinks and hydration

Find out which drinks are healthier choices, and how to get enough fluids every day to stay hydrated.

Water is a healthy and cheap choice to keep you hydrated, but other drinks can also count towards your fluid intake. We also get some fluids from the foods we eat.

Not getting enough fluids can lead to dehydration.

Daily fluid intake

Most people should aim to drink enough during the day so their pee is a clear pale yellow colour.

the experts recommend that people should aim to drink 6 to 8 cups or glasses of fluid a day. This is just a guide and you may need to drink more fluids if you're:

- pregnant or breastfeeding
- in a hot environment
- physically active for long periods
- ill or recovering from illness

Water, lower-fat milk and sugar-free drinks, including tea and coffee, all count as part of your daily intake.

Children

The best drinks to give children are water and milk. Children can have pasteurised whole or semi-skimmed cows' milk, or goats' or sheep's milk, as a main drink from the age of 1.

Children should avoid sugary fizzy drinks, squash and juice drinks completely. Children who drink a lot of sugary drinks are more likely to become overweight. The added sugar in these drinks can also damage teeth.

Tips to help you stay hydrated with healthier drinks

Do

- drink regularly throughout the day
- swap sugary drinks for diet, sugar-free or no added sugar drinks
- adults can choose lower fat milk, such as semi-skimmed, 1% fat or skimmed milk and unsweetened plant-based drinks
- limit fruit juice and smoothies to a maximum of one small glass (150ml) a day and drink with a meal, as they're high in sugar
- check nutrition labels on drinks – look for drinks with green or amber colour-coded labels
- drink extra fluids if you've been sweating from physical activity, or if you're unwell – water is the best way to replace lost fluids
- dilute squash drinks or cordials well to reduce the sugar content
- drink caffeine in moderation – some people are more sensitive to caffeine than others, depending on how much they drink and how often. Check the label for drinks that are high in caffeine.
- if you don't like the taste of water, try sparkling water, no added sugar squash, or add a slice of lemon or lime

Don't

- do not have drinks that are high in sugar too often – they're higher in calories and the sugar can damage your teeth
- do not have more than 200mg of caffeine a day if you're pregnant – this could increase the risk of miscarriage or low birth weight

Further information

Cut down on sugar

- Read more about cutting down on sugar in your diet
- Look for healthier drink swaps

Pregnancy

As well as limiting caffeine to 200mg per day,

Why 5 A Day?

Fruit and vegetables are part of a healthy, balanced diet and can help you stay healthy. It's important that you eat enough of them.

Evidence shows there are significant health benefits to getting at least 5 portions of a variety of fruit and vegetables every day. That's 5 portions of fruit and veg in total, not 5 portions of each. A portion of fruit or vegetables is 80g.

The 5 A Day campaign is based on advice from the World Health Organization (WHO), which recommends eating a minimum of 400g of fruit and vegetables a day to lower the risk of serious health problems, such as heart disease, stroke and some types of cancer.

5 reasons for eating 5 a day

1. Fruit and vegetables are a good source of vitamins and minerals, including folate, vitamin C and potassium.
2. They're an excellent source of dietary fibre, which can help to maintain a healthy gut and prevent constipation and other digestion problems. A diet high in fibre can also reduce your risk of bowel cancer.
3. They can help to reduce your risk of heart disease, stroke and some types of cancer.
4. Fruit and vegetables contribute to a healthy, balanced diet.
5. Fruit and vegetables taste delicious and there's so much variety to choose from.

Fruit and vegetables are also usually low in fat and calories (provided you do not fry them or roast them in lots of oil). That's why eating them can help you maintain a healthy weight and keep your heart healthy.

your 5 portions should include a variety of fruit and vegetables. This is because different fruits and vegetables contain different combinations of fibre, vitamins, minerals and other nutrients.

Almost all fruit and vegetables count towards your 5 A Day. They can be fresh, frozen, canned, dried or juiced. Potatoes, yams and cassava do not count because they mainly contribute starch to the diet.

5 lifestyle tips for a healthy tummy

Digestive problems and stomach upsets can be prevented, relieved and even banished by simple lifestyle changes.

Beat stress to ease tummy troubles

You may have noticed a feeling of unease in your stomach during times of stress. That's because anxiety and worry can upset the delicate balance of digestion.

In some people, stress slows down digestion, causing bloating, pain and constipation, while in others it speeds it up, causing diarrhoea and frequent trips to the loo. Some people lose their appetite completely.

Stress can also worsen digestive conditions like stomach ulcers and irritable bowel syndrome.

Managing and reducing stress can help with your digestion.

Stop smoking to prevent reflux

Smoking can weaken the muscle that controls the lower end of the food pipe and allow acid from the stomach to travel in the wrong direction back up, a process known as reflux.

Reflux causes the symptoms of heartburn, and can bring on or aggravate stomach ulcers and inflammatory conditions of the bowel.

Smoking is also an important risk factor for stomach cancer.

Eat properly to help your digestion

Follow some basic rules for good eating habits to prevent problems:

- Do not rush your food. Take the time to eat slowly and chew each mouthful well.
- Do not overeat. Reduce the size of your portions at mealtimes, or try eating 4 to 5 small meals instead of 3 large ones.
- Eat regularly and try not to skip meals.
- Avoid eating a big meal just before you go to bed. Eat your last meal at least 2 to 3 hours before lying down.
- Make sure you have plenty of water to drink.

Lose excess weight to beat heartburn

If you're overweight, your tummy fat puts pressure on your stomach and can cause heartburn.

Losing weight may relieve digestive symptoms like heartburn and other acid-related stomach complaints.

Binge drinking causes acid-related digestive disorders

Moderate drinking will not hurt your digestive system, but binge drinking increases acid production in your stomach, and can cause heartburn and aggravate other digestive disorders.

Binge drinking is defined as drinking too much in a single session.

Tips on cutting down Alcohol

If you regularly drink more than 14 units of alcohol a week, try these simple tips to help you cut down.

14 units is equivalent to 6 pints of average-strength beer or 6 medium glasses of wine.

Simple tips for cutting down

Make a plan

Before you start drinking, set a limit on how much you're going to drink.

Set a budget

Only take a fixed amount of money to spend on alcohol.

Let them know

If you let your friends and family know you're cutting down and it's important to you, you could get support from them.

Take it a day at a time

Cut back a little each day. That way, every day you do is a success.

Make it a smaller one

You can still enjoy a drink, but go for smaller sizes. Try bottled beer instead of pints, or a small glass of wine instead of a large one.

Have a lower-strength drink

Cut down the alcohol by swapping strong beers or wines for ones with a lower strength (ABV in %). You'll find this information on the bottle.

Stay hydrated

Have a glass of water before you have alcohol and alternate alcoholic drinks with water or other non-alcoholic drinks.

Take a break

Have several drink-free days each week.

Benefits of cutting down

The immediate effects of cutting down include:

- feeling better in the mornings
- being less tired during the day
- better looking skin
- feeling more energetic

- better weight management

Long-term benefits include:

Mood

There's a strong link between heavy drinking and depression, and hangovers often make you feel anxious and low. If you already feel anxious or sad, drinking can make this worse, so cutting down may put you in a better mood generally.

Sleep

Drinking can affect your sleep. Although it can help some people fall asleep quickly, it can disrupt your sleep patterns and stop you sleeping deeply. So cutting down on alcohol should help you feel more rested when you wake up.

Behaviour

Drinking can affect your judgement and behaviour. You may behave irrationally or aggressively when you're drunk. Memory loss can be a problem during drinking and in the long term for regular heavy drinkers.

Heart

Long-term heavy drinking can lead to your heart becoming enlarged. This is a serious condition that cannot be completely reversed, but stopping drinking can stop it getting worse.

Immune system

Regular drinking can affect your body's ability to fight infections. Heavy drinkers tend to catch more infectious diseases.

The risks of drinking too much

Regularly drinking more than 14 units of alcohol a week risks damaging your health.

The number of units in a drink is based on the size of the drink and its alcohol strength.

New evidence around the health harms from regular drinking has emerged in recent years.

There's now a better understanding of the link between drinking and some illnesses, including a range of cancers.

The previously held position that some level of alcohol was good for the heart has been revised.

It's now thought that the evidence on a protective effect from moderate drinking is less strong than previously thought.

Low-risk drinking advice

To keep health risks from alcohol to a low level if you drink most weeks:

- men and women are advised not to drink more than 14 units a week on a regular basis
- spread your drinking over 3 or more days if you regularly drink as much as 14 units a week

- if you want to cut down, try to have several drink-free days each week

If you're pregnant or think you could become pregnant, the safest approach is not to drink alcohol at all to keep risks to your baby to a minimum.

No "safe" drinking level

If you drink less than 14 units a week, this is considered low-risk drinking.

It's called "low risk" rather than "safe" because there's no safe drinking level.

The type of illnesses you can develop after 10 to 20 years of regularly drinking more than 14 units a week include:

- mouth cancer, throat cancer and breast cancer
- stroke
- heart disease
- liver disease
- brain damage
- damage to the nervous system

There's also evidence that regular drinking at high-risk levels can make your mental health worse.

Research has found strong links between alcohol misuse and self-harming, including suicide.

The effects of alcohol on your health will depend on how much you drink. The less you drink, the lower the health risks.

"Single session" drinking

Drinking too much too quickly on any single occasion can increase your risk of:

- accidents resulting in injury, causing death in some cases
- misjudging risky situations
- losing self-control, like having unprotected sex or getting involved in violence

To reduce your health risks on any single session:

- limit how much you drink
- drink more slowly
- drink with food
- alternate with water or non-alcoholic drinks

Stopping smoking for your mental health

We all know that quitting smoking improves physical health.

But it can also boost your mental health and wellbeing: it can improve mood and help relieve stress, anxiety and depression.

Smoking, anxiety and mood

Most smokers say they want to stop, but some continue because smoking seems to relieve stress and anxiety.

It's a common belief that smoking helps you relax. But smoking actually increases anxiety and tension.

Adults with depression are much more likely to smoke than adults without depression.

Why it feels like smoking helps us relax

Smoking cigarettes interferes with certain chemicals in the brain.

When smokers haven't had a cigarette for a while, the craving for another one makes them feel irritable and anxious.

These feelings can be temporarily relieved when they light up a cigarette. So smokers associate the improved mood with smoking.

In fact, it's the effects of smoking itself that's likely to have caused the anxiety in the first place.

Cutting out smoking does improve mood and reduces anxiety.

The mental health benefits of quitting smoking

When people stop smoking, studies show:

- anxiety, depression and stress levels are lower
- quality of life and positive mood improve
- the dosage of some medicines used to treat mental health problems can be reduced

Smokers with mental health problems

People with mental health problems, including anxiety, depression or schizophrenia:

- are much more likely to smoke than the general population
- tend to smoke more heavily
- die on average 10 to 20 years earlier than those who don't experience mental health problems – smoking plays a major role in this difference in life expectancy
- need higher doses of some antipsychotic medicines and antidepressants because smoking interferes with the way these medicines work

Stopping smoking can be as effective as antidepressants

People with mental health problems are likely to feel much calmer and more positive, and have a better quality of life, after giving up smoking.

Evidence suggests the beneficial effect of stopping smoking on symptoms of anxiety and depression can equal that of taking antidepressants.

Tips to Stop Smoking

- 1. Set a Quit Date**
 - Choose a specific day within the next two weeks and commit to it.
- 2. Identify Triggers**
 - Notice situations, people, or feelings that make you crave a cigarette. Plan alternatives.
- 3. Seek Support**
 - Tell family, friends, or coworkers you plan to quit.
 - Join support groups or hotlines.
- 4. Use Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT) if Needed**
 - Patches, gum, lozenges, inhalers, or nasal sprays can reduce cravings.
- 5. Consider Medication**
 - Prescription drugs like bupropion or varenicline can help, consult your doctor first.
- 6. Stay Busy**
 - Exercise, hobbies, or chewing sugar-free gum can distract you from cravings.
- 7. Avoid Triggers**
 - Stay away from situations where you usually smoke, at least in early days.
- 8. Practice Stress Management**
 - Deep breathing, meditation, yoga, or short walks help handle stress instead of smoking.
- 9. Track Progress & Reward Yourself**
 - Celebrate milestones (1 day, 1 week, 1 month) and use the money saved for a treat.
- 10. Don't Give Up After a Slip**
 - If you smoke once, don't consider it a failure. Learn from it and continue your quit plan.

Risks of Smoking (Bullet Points)

- **Cancer:** Increases risk of lung, throat, mouth, esophagus, bladder, and many other cancers.
- **Heart Disease:** Leads to coronary artery disease, heart attack, stroke.
- **Respiratory Issues:** Causes chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), emphysema, and chronic bronchitis.

- **Reduced Immunity:** Makes you more prone to infections like pneumonia and flu.
- **Pregnancy Risks:** Causes low birth weight, premature birth, miscarriage, and complications.
- **Poor Circulation:** Can lead to peripheral artery disease (PAD), cold extremities, and delayed wound healing.
- **Dental Problems:** Stains teeth, causes gum disease, tooth loss, and bad breath.
- **Skin & Aging:** Accelerates wrinkles, dry skin, and early aging.
- **Reduced Physical Fitness:** Lowers oxygen delivery to muscles; reduces stamina and lung capacity.
- **Mental Health Impacts:** Linked to higher stress and anxiety levels in long term.

Why is it difficult for me to maintain concentration and focus?

Some people have an underlying condition called attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) that causes them to become easily distracted and interferes with their ability to pay attention. But many other factors can affect concentration and focus. Your age, your health, sleep deprivation, the environment, and your emotions all play a part.

Lifestyle habits often play an important role as well. For instance:

Multitasking. The ping-pong effect of switching focus back and forth between tasks takes a greater toll on brain power than focusing only on one task at a time.

Digital distractions. People are constantly bombarded with texts, emails, Slack messages, and smartphone notifications. The daily tsunami of digital distractions can challenge the brain's attention-regulating neural networks.

Alcohol. Excessive drinking can slow brain activity and impair concentration.

Stress. Emotional stress weakens the ability of the brain's prefrontal cortex to carry out its many functions, which include attention and working memory.

Medications. Some over-the-counter and prescription medications have side effects that affect attention and focus. Drugs that can cause these problems include:

- sleep aids, allergy medications, and cold and flu preparations containing diphenhydramine
- anti-anxiety medications
- anticholinergic medications, including some antidepressants, antihistamines, anti-Parkinson's drugs, and bladder control medications
- anticonvulsant medications
- cardiovascular drugs and beta blockers
- corticosteroids

- narcotic pain medications
- prescription sedatives and sleep medications.

How can I improve my concentration and focus?

Everyone's brain is wired differently, and some people struggle with concentration and focus more than others. People should see their doctor if they notice sudden changes in their ability to concentrate — for example, if they have trouble finishing routine tasks and chores, regularly misplace essential items, or make frequent poor decisions. These symptoms may be due to an underlying condition that needs medical care, like heart disease, depression, anxiety, or dementia.

Lifestyle changes to improve concentration and focus

Making certain lifestyle changes can help many people improve their concentration and stay focused. For example:

Do more aerobic exercise. Aim for 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise per week. Examples include running, brisk walking, or swimming. Aerobic exercise increases blood flow to the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for focus and concentration.

Get enough sleep. Aim for seven to nine hours of sleep nightly. Try to go to bed around the same time each night and wake up at the same time each morning. Consult your doctor about any medical issues that interfere with your sleep, such as obstructive sleep apnea, restless legs syndrome, frequent nighttime bathroom trips, menopausal night sweats, or joint pain.

Eat healthier. Plant-based diets like the Mediterranean diet that emphasize eating more fruits, vegetables, and high-fiber foods while avoiding simple sugars have been shown to support brain health.

Review your medications. If you are having trouble with concentration and focus, ask your doctor if a medication you are taking could be contributing to the problem.

Habits and strategies to improve concentration and focus

Adopting certain habits and strategies also may help. For instance:

Work in blocks of time. Working in small chunks of time, with rest periods in between, can help with focus since attention tends to wane after a certain period. How long you can maintain focus depends on the person. Experiment with a time frame that works for you.

Avoid multitasking. Do one task at a time until it's completed, then move on to the next.

Remove distractions. Turn off the TV, set up website blockers, turn off the smartphone, or adjust the settings to block calls and notifications during certain hours.

Engage your brain. Practice activities that require focus and concentration, preferably ones that require a high level of attention. Try learning a new skill like learning to play a musical instrument or studying a new language.

Practice mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness is about focusing attention on the present moment. Practicing mindfulness has been shown to rewire the brain to strengthen concentration. For a few minutes each day, sit still, close your eyes, and focus on your breathing and the sounds and sensations around you.

Stay social. Loneliness can lead to depression, anxiety, stress, and interfere with focus and attention, so stay socially engaged with friends or family to keep your mind active and sharp.

Lifestyle & Health Questions with Answers

1. Why can't I sleep properly at night?

Answer: Poor sleep can be due to stress, irregular schedules, caffeine, screens, or anxiety.

Tip: Maintain a sleep routine, avoid screens 1 hour before bed, and practice deep breathing.

2. Why do I feel stressed all the time?

Answer: Stress may come from workload, personal issues, or lack of rest. **Tip:** Take breaks, exercise daily, and practice mindfulness or journaling.

3. Why am I getting angry easily?

Answer: Causes include poor sleep, high stress, or hormonal changes. **Tip:** Pause before reacting, track triggers, sleep well, and meditate.

4. Why can't I climb stairs without getting tired?

Answer: Low fitness, poor lung capacity, or dehydration may be reasons. **Tip:** Take short walks, hydrate, and gradually increase activity.

5. Why do I feel short of breath during normal activities?

Answer: Causes include low fitness, anxiety, allergies, or poor air quality. **Tip:** Practice slow breathing exercises, improve posture, and increase activity gradually.

6. Why am I losing appetite?

Answer: Stress, poor sleep, dehydration, or digestive issues can reduce appetite. **Tip:** Eat small, frequent meals, stay hydrated, and include fruits and vegetables.

7. Why am I not feeling sleepy at night?

Answer: Could be late caffeine, long naps, stress, or screen use before bed. **Tip:** Reduce caffeine, avoid long naps, and keep a bedtime routine.

8. Why do I feel tired even after small activities?

Answer: Fatigue may be due to dehydration, lack of sleep, poor nutrition, or low fitness. **Tip:** Drink water, eat protein, walk daily, and sleep 7–9 hours.

9. How can I reduce my sugar intake?

Answer: Avoid sugary drinks, read labels, use fruits for sweetness, and gradually reduce desserts.

10. How can I manage stress naturally?

Answer: Meditation, deep breathing, journaling, exercise, and hobbies help reduce stress.

11. How much water should I drink daily?

Answer: Aim for 6–8 glasses (1.5–2 liters) per day, more if active or in hot weather.

12. What is a healthy diet for general wellness?

Answer: Include fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean protein, and healthy fats. Limit processed foods and sugar.

13. How often should I exercise?

Answer: Aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate activity per week, plus strength training twice a week.

14. Why am I gaining weight despite eating little?

Answer: Could be due to poor sleep, stress, thyroid issues, or low activity. Tip: Track food, move regularly, and sleep well.

15. How can I improve my focus and concentration?

Answer: Sleep well, stay hydrated, reduce multitasking, take short breaks, and practice mindfulness.

16. How can I manage anger better?

Answer: Pause, breathe deeply, identify triggers, journal, and practice relaxation exercises.

17. Why do I feel anxious for no reason?

Answer: Anxiety can be caused by stress, sleep deprivation, or lifestyle imbalance. Tip: Deep breathing, exercise, and talking to someone can help.

18. How can I boost my immunity naturally?

Answer: Eat a balanced diet, sleep 7–9 hours, exercise regularly, stay hydrated, and reduce stress.

19. Why do I feel bloated after meals?

Answer: Could be overeating, swallowing air, food intolerances, or low fiber. Tip: Eat slowly, avoid fizzy drinks, and monitor triggers.

20. How can I improve my heart health?

Answer: Exercise regularly, eat fruits/vegetables, reduce salt, avoid smoking, and manage stress.

21. How can I stay active while working from home?

Answer: Take standing breaks, short walks, stretch every hour, and do home exercises.

22. Why do I feel dizzy sometimes?

Answer: Dehydration, low blood sugar, sudden posture changes, or fatigue. Tip: Drink water, eat regularly, and stand slowly.

23. Why do I have headaches frequently?

Answer: Causes include dehydration, stress, poor posture, eye strain, or lack of sleep. Tip: Hydrate, rest eyes, reduce stress, and check lighting.

24. How can I sleep better during stress?

Answer: Keep a consistent bedtime, avoid screens, meditate, and do light stretching before bed.

25. How can I reduce my caffeine intake?

Answer: Gradually replace coffee with herbal tea, reduce sugar drinks, and avoid caffeine late in the day.

26. How can I improve my digestion?

Answer: Eat fiber-rich foods, drink water, avoid overeating, and exercise daily.

27. Why do I feel tired in the morning even after sleeping?

Answer: Causes include poor sleep quality, sleep disorders, stress, or irregular schedule. Tip: Sleep consistently, avoid screens, and manage stress.

28. How can I reduce back pain from sitting long hours?

Answer: Use proper posture, take breaks, stretch, and strengthen core muscles.

29. How can I reduce bloating and gas?

Answer: Avoid carbonated drinks, eat slowly, monitor food triggers, and stay active.

30. How can I develop a healthy daily routine?

Answer: Set regular sleep and meal times, include exercise, take breaks, and practice mindfulness.

31. Why do I feel hungry all the time?

Answer: Could be due to high sugar intake, skipping meals, dehydration, or low protein. Tip: Eat balanced meals, drink water, include protein and fiber.

32. Why do I crave junk food so often?

Answer: Stress, habit, or nutrient deficiencies can trigger cravings. Tip: Replace with healthy snacks, plan meals, and manage stress.

33. How can I stop snacking at night?

Answer: Avoid skipping meals, drink water, brush teeth after dinner, and keep healthy snacks handy.

34. Why do I feel bloated after eating certain foods?

Answer: Possible food intolerance, overeating, or swallowing air. Tip: Eat slowly, track triggers, and limit fizzy drinks.

35. How can I increase my energy levels during the day?

Answer: Sleep 7–9 hours, eat balanced meals, stay hydrated, and move every hour.

36. Why do I get headaches after screen time?

Answer: Eye strain, poor posture, dehydration, or stress. Tip: Follow the 20-20-20 rule, hydrate, and maintain posture.

37. Why do I feel cold all the time?

Answer: Low iron, low body fat, poor circulation, or thyroid issues. Tip: Eat iron-rich foods, stay active, and layer clothing.

38. How can I improve my posture?

Answer: Strengthen core muscles, stretch regularly, adjust workstation, and take breaks from sitting.

39. Why do I feel tired after eating?

Answer: Large meals, high carb intake, dehydration, or low activity. Tip: Eat smaller meals, stay hydrated, and move a bit after eating.

40. How can I reduce stress at work?

Answer: Take short breaks, prioritize tasks, practice deep breathing, and maintain work-life balance.

41. Why do I get mood swings easily?

Answer: Causes include stress, poor sleep, hormonal changes, or diet. Tip: Sleep well, eat balanced meals, exercise, and track triggers.

42. How can I improve my concentration?

Answer: Sleep well, take breaks, stay hydrated, reduce multitasking, and practice mindfulness.

43. Why do I feel thirsty all the time?

Answer: Could be dehydration, high salt intake, or medical conditions. Tip: Drink water regularly and reduce salty foods.

44. How can I reduce sugar cravings?

Answer: Eat protein-rich snacks, drink water, gradually reduce sugary foods, and manage stress.

45. Why do I feel anxious before sleeping?

Answer: Stress, caffeine, screen exposure, or irregular schedules. Tip: Reduce screens, practice relaxation, and maintain sleep routine.

46. How can I reduce fatigue during the day?

Answer: Sleep enough, stay hydrated, eat balanced meals, and move regularly.

47. Why do I feel dizzy when standing up quickly?

Answer: Low blood pressure, dehydration, or poor circulation. Tip: Stand slowly, hydrate, and eat regularly.

48. How can I stop biting my nails or picking skin?

Answer: Keep hands busy, practice stress-relief techniques, and keep nails trimmed.

49. Why do I get muscle cramps sometimes?

Answer: Causes include dehydration, low electrolytes, or overuse. Tip: Stretch, hydrate, and include minerals like potassium and magnesium in diet.

50. How can I improve my mental clarity?

Answer: Sleep well, eat nutrient-rich foods, exercise regularly, and practice mindfulness.