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AND MORE

We're delving into all things detox and decluttering
so you can move through the season with a sense of
lightness, ease, and room to breathe.

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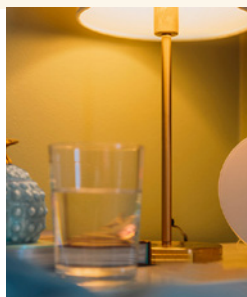
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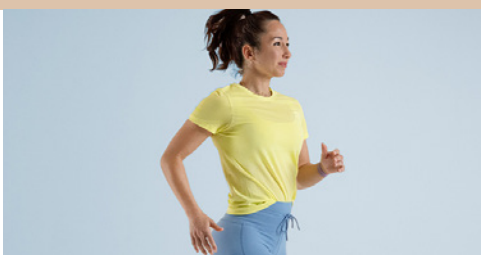
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How to Support Your Body's Natural Detox Organs

The body already knows how to clear toxins —
but you can give your detoxification system a helping hand.

BY MO PERRY

Our bodies are natural masters of detoxification. The liver, gut, and kidneys are constantly sorting helpful from harmful molecules. Toxins that would otherwise make us ill are ushered out of the body through urine, stool, mucus, and (according to some practitioners) sweat. Meanwhile, the essential building blocks of life — think oxygen and protein — are shuttled to the cells that need them.

In ideal circumstances, this elegant system hums along with no need for intervention. So, what's up with all the diets, products, and protocols claiming to help the body detox? Do we really need them?

Usually not, says Sara Jean Barrett, ND, a Minneapolis-based integrative practitioner who treats patients who have chronic health conditions. "Detoxification is a physiological process that the body carries out all the time. There's not a lot of complicated things you need to add to enable it." She notes that many detox protocols contain laxatives, which can create problems of their own by disrupting the microbiome.

Most integrative practitioners will recommend structured, supervised detox programs to address stubborn

issues, but these protocols are not the only option. There are also daily actions one can take to support the body's natural detoxification strategies. And as we encounter greater quantities of pollution, it's important to do so. "We're being exposed to so much more than we ever have been before," Barrett notes.

On an ordinary day, we might encounter industrial contaminants, like heavy metals and phthalates; agricultural toxins, such as pesticides; household toxins from rugs, paint, and cleaning supplies; toxic additives in personal-care products and cosmetics; and artificial flavors, sweeteners, and food coloring. All these add up to a hefty workload for our detoxification organs to process.

What's more, these external toxins are crowding in with the natural waste products our bodies produce on their own. "The body's detox system takes care of our hormones and all the metabolites of being alive; it breaks protein down into nitrogen," Barrett says. "Environmental exposures and things like medications or alcohol just add on top of that."

In Ayurveda, the traditional medical approach originating in India, the residue of toxins in the body is known

as "ama." This buildup occurs when the body's capacity to metabolize toxins is impaired or weak.

"The word 'ama' means partially digested," explains Bhaswati Bhattacharya, MPH, MD, PhD, a board-certified and licensed physician with advanced training in pharmacology and Ayurveda who practices integrative medicine in New York City. "The body usually sends what it can't digest out as a waste product in poop, urine, breath, or sweat. But ama, or undigested products that can become toxins, are those residues that build up in the body and prevent you from having an easy flow in life."

She likens toxic ama buildup to a hoarder's home. If a person buys dozens of rolls of paper towels and stashes them in the garage — and then buys dozens more — the whole mess, along with other unused junk, starts to rot and mold, and the space ceases to be a functioning garage.

"It's become polluted to the point where you can't sort through it. That's what can happen in the body. Items that were OK in the beginning sit there and rot or interact with another substance and transmute into something that's no longer benign," Bhattacharya says. "Disease begins."



This process is what functional-medicine practitioners refer to as our toxic load, or body burden — toxins that exceed the body's capacity to eliminate them and end up stored in our tissues, blood, and bones.

"When the toxic load increases past a certain point, detoxing gets harder," notes Institute for Functional Medicine board chair Joseph Pizzorno, ND, in his book *The Toxin Solution*.

Differing Detox Capacities

Several factors affect your individual toxic load. The first is exposure.

"Everyone has a different exposure level to things in our environment," Barrett says.

She notes that particular occupations, or living near industrial sites, may expose us to more toxins than our body's natural detox systems can handle. This is a risk for, among others, agricultural workers, cleaners, nail technicians, hairdressers, miners, and people who work in certain types of manufacturing — all have higher-than-average exposure to toxic chemicals.

Genes also play a critical role. "Genes dictate our individual ability to detoxify everything from drugs to chemicals to hormones," Barrett adds.

For example, a gene known as MTHFR (methylenetetrahydrofolate reductase) produces an enzyme to support methylation, a cellular process essential for detoxification. Between 30 and 40 percent of people carry variants of the MTHFR gene that correspond to slower methylation, which compromises their body's ability to eliminate toxins. (For more, see ["What Are SNPs and Why Do They Matter?"](#))

Genetics help explain why two people might react very differently to the same exposure. "Some people are more susceptible to damage to their immune system, so they will have more allergies and autoimmune problems," notes Pizzorno. "For others, their mitochondria might be more susceptible to toxins, so they will become more fatigued."

Nutritional status matters too. "Vitamins and minerals act as cofactors for most of our detox pathways, so without adequate nutrition, it can be challenging to detoxify effectively," Barrett explains.

Meet the Detox System

Integrative- and functional-medicine physicians have long emphasized the importance of reducing toxic exposures and supporting the body's detoxification systems. Get to know those systems, plus how they work and how to know when they need a helping hand.

THE GI SYSTEM

The gastrointestinal tract is where we ingest and process everything we eat. It's also the primary garbage chute for toxins; it partners with the liver to bind and flush them out through the stool. "The No. 1 way to support detoxification, outside of avoiding exposures, is with regular bowel movements," Barrett says.

"The body's detox system takes care of our hormones and all the metabolites of being alive; it breaks protein down into nitrogen. Environmental exposures and things like medications or alcohol just add on top of that."

Fiber is crucial here — particularly the soluble type found in legumes, vegetables, fruit, nuts, and seeds. Not only does fiber help prevent constipation, but it binds to toxins, cholesterol, and waste products and prevents them from being reabsorbed by the body. "If you're not having at least one well-formed bowel movement per day, you're having some reabsorption happening, and your poor liver is having to deal with things twice or more," says Barrett.

Fiber also feeds our beneficial gut flora. These microbes help break down fiber into beneficial compounds and produce short-chain fatty acids that support the intestinal lining. A healthy gut lining is crucial for nutrient absorption; it also acts as a barrier

against harmful substances. When the gut is leaky, these substances can leach into the bloodstream and increase our toxic load.

Some gut bacteria are even involved in detoxification directly. "Certain strains of *Lactobacillus* bacteria prevent the tag on estrogen [that marks it for elimination] from being removed," Barrett explains. "If those strains aren't around, that tag can get cleaved, estrogen gets reabsorbed, and the liver has to process it all over again."

Signs of GI trouble might include constipation, diarrhea, gas, bloating, or cramps. Systemic issues, such as inflammation, autoimmunity, joint pain, skin problems, migraine, and fatigue, can also be indicators of leaky gut, an imbalanced microbiome, and likely a toxic overload.

How to Support the GI System: Daily habits to support gut health include eating a whole-foods, fiber-rich diet; taking a quality probiotic supplement; eating fermented foods like kefir and sauerkraut; minimizing processed foods; managing stress; and exercising. When things are significantly out of balance, working with a functional nutritionist or doctor on a more rigorous gut-healing protocol may be in order.

LIVER

The liver plays a central role in detoxifying the body. This organ engages in a two-step process, filtering the blood and removing and neutralizing harmful substances.

These steps are often described as phase 1 and phase 2 detoxification. During phase 1, the liver releases enzymes that turn fat-soluble toxins into "intermediate" metabolites. Notably, these compounds can be more reactive or harmful than the original toxins.

During phase 2, the liver continues to process these intermediate compounds, making them water soluble so they can be sent to the gut (in bile) to exit the body in the feces, or to the kidneys (in blood) so they can be ushered out in the urine.

For the body to detoxify properly, both phases need to function optimally. If the first phase is overactive and the second sluggish, those reactive intermediate metabolites can accumulate and do damage.



One toxin that exploits an imbalance in this system is polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbon (PAH). Found in tobacco smoke, charred foods, and environmental pollutants, PAHs are converted during phase 1 into dangerous compounds called reactive epoxides. If those epoxides aren't fully neutralized in phase 2, they can bind to DNA and lead to cancer-causing mutations.

This is why Barrett recommends caution with detox protocols, which don't always support both phases.

"I sometimes see formulas that try to push a faster phase 1 without addressing phase 2," she says. "When supporting detoxification, you want to work backward from the last step."

Barrett emphasizes that the correct order for detox protocols begins with ensuring regular elimination, then supporting phase 2 liver detoxification. After you've attended to those, supporting phase 1 detoxification is appropriate.

Signs of liver congestion include fatigue, pale stools, itchy skin, and hormone imbalances. All are good reasons to work with a provider to safely support the liver in detoxing.

Meanwhile, a yellowish tint to the skin and eyes and sensations of pain and fullness around the liver (which sits in the upper-right side of the abdomen) are signs of severe liver toxicity, which requires immediate medical attention.

How to Support the Liver: One easy way to support both phases of detoxification is to eat cruciferous vegetables, such as kale, broccoli, cauliflower, radishes, and Brussels sprouts. These members of the *Brassicaceae* family contain indole-3-carbinol and sulforaphane, compounds that help the liver produce phase 1 enzymes. Sulforaphane also helps create glutathione, which binds to toxins in phase 2 to make them water soluble.

Bitter plants like dandelion greens, artichokes, and turmeric are also detox powerhouses, supporting the flow of bile and reducing liver congestion. And it's no coincidence that some of these plants are in peak season in the spring and fall, says Bhattacharya. "I tell people that when the weather changes from cold to hot or hot to cold, that's the time to do a liver cleanse. Many bitter plants pop up right at that time."

KIDNEYS

Ever noticed your urine turning neon yellow after taking a multivitamin? If so, you've witnessed your kidneys at work. Vitamin B2 (riboflavin) is a yellow, water-soluble vitamin; when the body absorbs what it needs, the kidneys ensure that the excess is excreted through the urine. Hence the dramatic color change.

This small pair of bean-shaped organs filters all your blood dozens of times per day. In addition to surplus vitamins, the kidneys clear out ammonia, urea, uric acid, creatinine, heavy metals, hormone metabolites, and excess salt.

Genetics help explain why two people might react very differently to the same exposure.

Though the kidneys regularly remove these substances from the blood, they can sometimes have trouble passing them into the urine. As a result, toxins can accumulate. When their toxic burden gets too big, the kidneys slow down. When overwhelmed, the kidneys can become toxic themselves, causing stones, infections, cysts, or tumors.

Blood flow is crucial for kidney function. Anything that impedes blood flow to the kidneys (think high blood pressure, metabolic disorders, and phosphate additives from sodas and processed foods) makes them less efficient. High blood sugar, heavy use of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), smoking, and excessive alcohol consumption can also impair kidney function.

How to Support the Kidneys: On a daily basis, you can support your kidneys with foods, herbs, and spices that benefit circulation, Pizzorno says. These include beets and beet juice, blueberries, dark chocolate, turmeric, ginger, and the herb ginkgo biloba.

Hydration is another critical pillar of kidney support, adds Barrett. Dark

urine or infrequent urination are sure signs you should up your water intake. Swelling in the legs, ankles, feet, or face is another indication that the kidneys need extra assistance.

When addressing kidney issues with interventions beyond hydration or gentle dietary support, it's crucial to work with a knowledgeable integrative practitioner, Bhattacharya says. "Tinkering with the kidneys is not a small thing."

SKIN

As one of our body's largest organs, the skin plays a key role in protecting the body from toxic exposure. The skin is also where we absorb a lot of toxins. "What you put on your skin really does matter; it contributes to the overall toxic burden," Barrett says.

Cosmetics, fragrances, and personal-care products can all contain toxins such as phthalates, parabens, sulfates, and formaldehyde-releasing preservatives. Unlike drugs, which require U.S. Food and Drug Administration approval before they can be marketed, cosmetics and personal-care products do not receive premarket approval.

The skin may help us remove some toxins from the body via sweat, Barrett adds. "Urea and ammonia are the main waste products we excrete through our skin, but we also sweat out heavy metals, bisphenols, phthalates, and volatile organic compounds."

Although both exercise- and sauna-induced sweat contain waste products, studies show exercise-induced sweat contains even higher levels of heavy metals.

How to Support the Skin: The first step in supporting the body's detox efforts is to reduce exposure to the toxins in skincare products. Learn which ingredients to avoid, and double-check your favorite brands at third-party sites such as Skin Deep, hosted by the Environmental Working Group. These efforts are worthwhile, as skincare products are one place where we have some control over exposure.

You may also be able to increase detox by sweating more. Along with exercise and saunas, hot Epsom-salts baths can induce a good sweat. And lymphatic massage and yoga may help mobilize lymph and make toxins easier to eliminate.



“I encourage my patients to work up a full-body sweat at least twice a week,” Barrett says, noting that it’s important to shower immediately afterward to avoid reabsorbing everything you just excreted.

THE LUNGS

The lungs themselves are not directly involved in detoxification like the liver or kidneys, but they do play a role in removing some waste products from the body. When we inhale airborne dust and pollutants in our environment, the mucus in our lungs traps it. Hairlike projections called cilia then move them into the throat, where we either cough them up or swallow them and send them to the gut.

From an Ayurvedic and Traditional Chinese Medicine perspective, the lungs are also a storage site for unprocessed emotions, especially grief. “For

the lungs, the first thing you need to deal with is grief,” Bhattacharya says. “And how do you do that? You breathe.” She recommends a daily practice of pranayama — a breathing exercise said to help clear physical and emotional ama from the body.

Autumn is a notoriously challenging season for the lungs, as respiratory viruses and allergens circulate. It’s also the season symbolically associated with grief, death, and letting go. “If you get bronchitis every year in November, October is a good time to start doing something preventive and supportive for your lungs,” Bhattacharya says.

How to Support the Lungs: The first way to support the lungs is by breathing deeply more often. “Breathing is one way that we move lymph,” Barrett notes. “Having good posture and taking

nice, deep breaths helps to oxygenate our tissues and help with digestive motility because the diaphragm pushes on the intestines.”

Deep breathing also stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, putting us into the relaxed state that supports all the body’s other detoxification processes.

Additionally, you can support the lungs with herbs and spices such as licorice root, pippali, tulsi, cinnamon, and vasaka.

Yoga classes, which usually involve some pranayama or other breath work, are another good way to open the lungs and keep your energy flowing. (To learn more about how to support the lungs, check out “[Take a Deep Breath.](#)”) ●

MO PERRY IS AN EXPERIENCE LIFE CONTRIBUTING EDITOR.

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Is it Safe to Exercise Outdoors When the Air Quality Is Bad?

Athletes are particularly susceptible to the effects of air pollution. Here’s what you need to know about working out outside — as well as how to protect yourself.

BY JESSICA MIGALA

In the past, thunderstorms, heat waves, or snowstorms may have derailed your plans for training outdoors, forcing you to come up with a plan B. Now there’s another

environmental scourge to add to that list: poor air quality.

Climate change is degrading air quality across the country, due to heat, drought, and wildfires that produce

higher levels of ozone and particle pollution. Though air quality has improved overall in the past 50 years, the 2023 American Lung Association’s “State of the Air” report indicates that more than



one in three Americans currently live in places with unhealthy air.

Runners, cyclists, hikers, and other outdoor athletes are particularly susceptible to sucking in lungfuls of polluted air.

Exercising intensely outdoors simply exposes you to greater levels of pollution compared with the person who is just walking or sitting outside, says Paul Kriegler, RD, CPT, director of nutrition product development at Life Time. “Heavy exertion causes dramatic increases in ventilation rate and volumes — how much air we bring into our lungs — so anything that increases ventilation could increase exposure to any particulate substances in the air.”

Humans are equipped with built-in filtering systems (from our nose hair to our lungs) to deal with junky stuff in the air, but fine particles from pollution — including from wildfire smoke — can cross into the bloodstream, triggering inflammation and impairing blood vessel function, he explains. Exposure to poor air quality could lead to an increased risk of breathing problems, lung damage, asthma attacks, heart attacks, and stroke.

Check out these tips for determining whether it’s safe to exercise in unhealthy air, how to protect yourself when you do, and how to take your workouts indoors without sacrificing the quality of your training.

How can I know if it’s safe to exercise outside?

When contemplating an outdoor workout, consider these factors:

- Do you see smoke or haze? Can you smell smoke? These are strong indications to reschedule or relocate an intense workout, says Kriegler.
- If you wear a fitness tracker that provides a performance indicator such as heart-rate variability (HRV), use that info to guide you during your workout. “Anytime I see a negative performance indication, such as lower-than-usual HRV, I pay extra close attention to how hard I push that day,” he notes.
- Zero in on how you’re feeling. If you’re feeling sluggish, if you have a headache, or if you’re struggling more

than usual, he advises, consider slowing your pace, reducing your intensity, or even stopping your workout. “The last thing you need to do is push yourself harder when the conditions are unfavorable.”

- Look at the Air Quality Index (AQI) from AirNow.gov, which offers activity guidance based on ozone and particle pollution in your ZIP code. (Many weather apps also report the AQI.) When air quality is good, the AQI will be flagged as green — meaning it’s a great day to be active outside. Yellow indicates that sensitive groups, like those with asthma, should take precautions. Red and purple denote higher levels of ozone and particle pollution, suggesting that vulnerable individuals should reduce the duration or intensity of their workout — or skip it altogether.

Can I make it safer to do an outdoor workout on a high-pollution day?

Natural environments often offer better air quality than urban and suburban areas. So, depending on where you live, you could seek out green and blue spaces — for example, in a forest or

near a lake or an ocean. Check the AQI at parks, trails, and beaches near you to see if any of them have better air quality than your immediate neighborhood.

You can also sport an N95 mask or breathe only through your nose — two methods for filtering some (though not all) particles. Both approaches are safe for most people during low-intensity activity, such as a leisurely walk or a bike ride, but they’re not ideal solutions during vigorous exercise if you’re not accustomed to them.

Wearing a facemask during high-intensity exercise may result in more-labored breathing. Though research doesn’t show that it affects oxygenation levels, difficulty breathing can result in increased rates of perceived exertion, fatigue, and even dizziness.

Nasal breathing is associated with improved blood-oxygen saturation and athletic performance, but it is a skill like any other; jumping straight into nose-only breathing during a hard workout may make you feel breathless and increase exertion rates.

If you want to adopt exercising with a mask or breathing only through your nose, get comfortable with those techniques during lighter, low-intensity efforts first. If you want to engage in a long-duration or high-intensity workout but don’t yet feel comfortable breathing through a mask or your nose, you may be better off amending your plan.

(For a body-weight workout designed to train your nasal-breathing capacity, visit [ELmag.com/nasalbreathingworkout](https://www.elmag.com/nasalbreathingworkout); to learn how to build up your tolerance for nasal breathing while running, check out [ELmag.com/nasalbreathingrunning](https://www.elmag.com/nasalbreathingrunning).)

So, if I have to switch up my training plan, what’s the best approach?

That depends on what you’re training for, where you are in your training season, and what type of workout you have planned, says running and triathlon coach Mike Thomson, CSCS, USATF, a Life Time personal trainer in Overland Park, Kan. For example, the more time you have before a competition or event,

“Heavy exertion causes dramatic increases in ventilation rate and volumes — how much air we bring into our lungs — so anything that increases ventilation could increase exposure to any particulate substances in the air.”



the more leeway you have to modify or skip a workout. When you are four to six weeks from a race or event, however, each workout becomes more important, he says.

When you've planned a hard or long workout on a poor-air-quality day, you're best off doing a cross-training or mobility workout instead to support your overall training — and moving your planned workout to the next day.

However, if poor air quality persists, move your training indoors and do your best on the treadmill or on a stationary bike, says Thomson. It's not ideal — especially for endurance and sprint training geared to a specific outdoor event — but it will support your fitness without sacrificing your health. In the long run, that's the most sustainable and beneficial approach that can still support your goals.

“One thing that's important is to give yourself grace,” he adds. “We get all worked up in our head that we have to do this or that. But at the end of the day, an off day or skipped workout won't change that much.”

Does exercising outdoors on a high-pollution day negate the benefits of exercise?

The short answer is that poor air quality may not actually negate the benefits of exercise, but it almost certainly impacts your training by undermining performance.

The long answer? Well, research on this topic is still developing. A meta-analysis of 25 studies, published in *Preventive Medicine* in 2020, concluded that moderate or intense exercise on high-air-pollution days may actually counteract the short-term negative effects of air pollution in healthy people (though not in more-vulnerable groups).

Paradoxically, low-intensity exercise amplifies these risks for everyone — and especially for those with preexisting conditions, such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). The researchers noted, however, that the studies examined were done under variable conditions and produced inconsistent results.

A systematic review published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, of seven studies that looked at the impact of heart health and exercising in air pollution, concluded that “the beneficial effects of outdoor PA [physical activity] are reduced when the exercise/PA is performed in an outdoor polluted environment.”

Another study concluded that high amounts of exercise in highly polluted environments is harmful for heart health, though maintaining regular physical activity outside on low- or moderate-air-quality days was more beneficial than decreasing physical activity.

Despite the as-yet-inconclusive science, it's likely that you might not feel on top of your game if you're working out on a high-pollution day — and that's a critical consideration during training.

A combination of increased inflammation and an inability to perform your best “would make trying to train ‘well’ a waste of effort, in my opinion,” says Krieger. “Some inflammation created from a proper training stimulus is good, but

potentially toxic inflammation has virtually zero upside.”

Poor air quality will certainly affect your workout, he argues. Polluted air impairs your oxygen uptake, or VO₂ max (an objective measure of the volume of oxygen that your body can utilize at any one time), so exercise may feel harder than normal.

As a result, you may find that it's more difficult to hit the speed or intensity you're aiming for, and you may notice your heart rate is higher than normal. In the short term, he says, you might experience headaches, fatigue, cough, itchy eyes, and excess mucus production after the training session.

Is there anything I can do nutritionally to support my lung health?

Eating a balanced diet can help minimize inflammation, says Krieger. This includes a good amount of protein, fiber, antioxidant-rich produce, and healthy fats, such as extra-virgin olive oil, avocado, and grassfed butter.

In addition, he recommends omega-3 fatty acids. “Optimizing omega-3 fatty acid status would also help the body respond to inflammatory stressors, like air pollution, in a healthier way and has been shown to aid respiratory function in those with chronic lung conditions, like asthma and COPD,” he says. Try to eat omega-3-rich fish, like salmon and sardines, and consider a high-quality omega-3 supplement.

Other helpful supplements that buoy respiratory health include N-acetylcysteine, L-citrulline, and beetroot powder, as well as vitamins A and D.

“If you're routinely exposed to toxins and can't change it — like you run in an urban environment with poorer air quality — these are some of the first things I'd try to make your body as resilient as possible,” he says. ●

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4 Easy Decluttering Projects

Clutter affects our mental and physical well-being. Focus on these high-traffic areas to maximize space and minimize stress.

BY JILL PATTON, FMHC

Fumbling in the dark, my hand pawed at the box of tissues and the stack of books on my nightstand, traced the base of the lamp and the container of earplugs, mistakenly grasped at the bottle of lotion, then *whack*: There went the glass of water. Lights on. Towels out. I was up in the middle of the night once again, sopping up a watery mess.

I wish my bedside table were the only cluttered area in my home.

With two work-from-home adults and a homework-afflicted teenager in our house, pretty much every horizontal surface is fair game for books and papers, miscellaneous technology, and bags and backpacks.

Clutter can disorient, distract, and drain us. One UCLA study showed that people who described their homes as cluttered displayed elevated cortisol levels compared with those who did not. Research has also suggested that cluttered spaces tend to be linked with procrastination and mindless snacking, habits that undermine both mental and physical well-being.

In short, our spaces affect us more than we know.

“Every object our eye lands on, even if it’s so fast we’re not conscious of it, has an associated thought or

feeling,” explains feng shui and decluttering expert Andrea Gerasimo.

When our eyes perceive clutter and disorganization, we can feel overwhelmed. When we routinely spend time searching for everyday

When our eyes perceive clutter and disorganization, we can feel overwhelmed.

When we routinely spend time searching for everyday items like phones or keys, it adds to mental fatigue.

items like phones or keys, it adds to mental fatigue. And when the clutter carries emotional weight, as with memorabilia or eternally unfinished projects, we can feel stuck in place.

“When we don’t feel good mentally, we’re in a poor position to take action,” explains residential organizer Katie Tracy, author of *Behind the Closed Door: The Mental Stress of Physical Stuff*. “It’s not just that the physical space impacts us mentally. It’s also that our mental space impacts how well we can maintain systems or create change in that space. It’s cyclical.”

Mindset Over Matter

If you’re constantly digging through piles and moving stacks around to get to what you need, your stuff may have more control over you than you have over it.

“Once clutter [starts] impeding you from living a healthy, efficient, and beautiful life — then it’s a problem,” says Laura Benko, author of *The Holistic Home: Feng Shui for Mind, Body, Spirit, Space*.

There’s no single right way to declutter, but most experts agree that it’s important to start small and let go of the idea that any space will be clutter-free forever. “Think



of decluttering as a process, not a project,” advises Tracy.

“The last thing you want to do is decide you’re going to do all of it,” adds Gerasimo, who suggests beginning with a single drawer — or even your wallet. “The gratification of that, even if it’s the only space in the house that’s clear, is powerful.”

In the spirit of starting small, we’ve asked experts for decluttering guidance in four modest spaces in the home. They showed us how a little decluttering can have a big impact when you focus on the areas you use the most.

THE BEDSIDE TABLE

The nightstand is the command center of the bedroom: We want everything within arm’s reach after we’re tucked in. While sleep experts recommend using our beds only for sleep and sex, many of us use them for multiple purposes, including reading, working, studying, and even eating. “When we treat our bed like a workplace, then it tends to collect more,” says Benko.

Why decluttering matters: The bedside table is one of the last things we see before we fall asleep and one of the first things we see when we wake up. That’s one reason it has an outsized impact on how we feel. “We’re highly impressionable to the imagery in our bedroom,” Benko explains. “So be mindful of the messages that surround you while you rest and restore.”

Think of things that usually occupy the nightstand: books you haven’t read yet, maybe the spreadsheet for tomorrow’s meeting. It might be littered with used tissues and other detritus. Benko argues these items are all loaded with symbolism that can interfere with sleep, so clearing this surface can contribute to a better night’s rest.

How to declutter: A perfectly clear surface isn’t necessarily the goal. For some people, a small stack of books may be more inspirational than stressful. The main objective is simply to relocate any objects you don’t use nightly to a more appropriate location.

The same goes if your bedside table has a drawer — limit what you store there to things you use on a nightly

basis, like earplugs, an eye mask, and moisturizer. Clear out any extra power cords, pens, and other random items that may have found their way in. Once this space is decluttered, it can be relatively easy to keep clean. As part of your morning or evening routine, take 30 to 60 seconds to put things away and reset your space.

If miscellany does creep back in, you can create systems to contain it. I told Gerasimo about the two years’ worth of dead AAA batteries from my clip-on book light rolling around in my nightstand drawer. She suggested putting a snack-size Ziploc in the drawer that holds no more than a half dozen depleted batteries at a time; when that’s full, it’s time to recycle them.

How to defend with beauty: Benko recommends placing a natural object on your nightstand to discourage clutter and set the energetic stage for restful sleep. “A crystal or a simple flower arrangement will [suggest] a connection to something bigger than you, something that is universally connective.”

THE HOME-OFFICE DESK

Bills to pay. Receipts to file. Appointment reminders, report cards, grocery lists. If there’s a vaguely important piece of paper in the house, the home-office desk draws stuff to it with the force of a rip tide. And even with

the mostly digital nature of office work, the biggest desk can still feel too small for active paper files and office supplies.

Why decluttering matters: The home-office desk serves as a de facto to-do list for our lives, so it feels especially overwhelming when it’s a mess. If we also work from home, that feeling may be compounded. A recent study from DePaul University found office clutter predicts emotional exhaustion and stress.

On the flip side, its centrality means that decluttering the desk can be especially rewarding. “In feng shui, the desk represents your vocational path,” says Benko. “From an energetic point of view, you want to give yourself a boost wherever you can.”

How to declutter: Experts recommend starting with a clean slate. Take everything off your desk for a week and place it nearby. During that week, identify the items you use daily. Anything you don’t use gets a new home on a nearby shelf or in a drawer.

When you’re choosing what to keep, respect your natural work tendencies. If you’re a paper person, there’s no need to force yourself to go completely digital, says Tracy. Simply create filing systems that reflect the action-oriented nature of your paper.

“When we think about categories of paper, our tendency is to put a noun to them: *These are my bills, these are my appointments*,” she notes. “Think instead in verbs. *What action do I have to take?* So, ‘bills’ becomes ‘to pay.’ Messages and follow-up reminders become ‘to call.’ That way, you’re grouping the same types of actions together.”

Another way to cut down on visual clutter: Keep track of to-do items on your calendar instead of posting reminders around your desk. “Sometimes you don’t have time to wrap your head around a complex topic such as home insurance and go down all the paths of inquiry and consideration,” says Gerasimo. “But you can schedule a time to deal with it later so you can quiet your mind and attend to the things you need to do now.”

As you develop the systems that work best for you, consistency is key.

If you’re constantly digging through piles and moving stacks around to get to what you need, your stuff may have more control over you than you have over it.



“Once a week, reset,” suggests Tracy. Take a few minutes at the end of each week to put your desk back in order. And if the piles do return, don’t be too hard on yourself. Just clear everything off again and start fresh.

How to defend with beauty: Placing a houseplant or a small statue on your desk not only discourages clutter; it gives your eye something pleasant to land on while you’re working, suggests Gerasimo. “This gives your desk visual structure and creates more mental ease.”

THE MEDICINE CABINET

Items in a medicine cabinet (or bathroom drawer or shelf) have a way of proliferating. “We think, *Well, this is a medicine-y, first aid-y, bathroom-y kind of thing, so I guess I’ll just throw it in the medicine cabinet because I don’t know where else to put it*,” says certified organizer and life coach Sara Skillen. Next thing we know, the space is stuffed — and good luck finding the tweezers.

Why decluttering matters: Some toiletries, grooming supplies, and medications will be in daily rotation, while others get used only occasionally. A well-organized medicine cabinet will keep them separate, helping to ensure you don’t accidentally take the wrong medication or buy more tubes of hair gel or toothpaste than you need.

How to declutter: Many items in a medicine cabinet are consumable, so start by weeding out expired items along with those no longer in their prime. Pull out first aid and medical supplies that you aren’t currently using and store them together in a separate space.

Next, find duplicates of products and put the spares in an “overstock” container. When you run out of something, shop your overstock stash first. Consolidate half-filled bottles when possible, and if you have just a bit of lotion or soap left in a container, Gerasimo suggests, decant it into a small jar to make it easier to use up.

Finally, wipe down the shelves and arrange the remaining items for convenience. “Keep your daily

self-care items [like your toothbrush and toothpaste] in the area that’s easiest to reach,” she says. Place more occasional-use things — nail clippers, tweezers, razor — higher up. That way you won’t have to push aside the nail clippers twice a day just to get to your toothbrush.

How to defend with beauty: “Let something beautiful hold the mundane,” advises Benko. For example, rather than leaving cotton swabs in their plastic clamshell, transfer them to a pretty glass jar. Seeing something a little bit lovely every time you open the medicine cabinet can be surprisingly satisfying.

There’s no single
right way to
declutter, but
most experts
agree that it’s
important to
start small and
let go of the idea
that any space
will be clutter-
free forever.

THE KITCHEN TABLE/ISLAND

The kitchen is where we congregate. It’s where we cook meals while kids do homework, where some of us sort the mail and pay the bills, and where the lighting is best for projects, puzzles, and games.

It’s also where we dump our stuff. “When people come home, they’re tired, and they often don’t pause and take the extra steps to put the bags away or sort the mail they just brought in,” says Skillen.

Why decluttering matters: This high-traffic area is used every day, which makes it easy to clutter. Still, we need

to keep it clear of things that get in the way of preparing and eating food.

“We call it the shuffle,” says Tracy. “You shuffle stuff from the counter to the table so you can make dinner, and then you move it from the table so you can eat dinner, and it ends up back on the counter.”

Skillen notes that “we’re going to be healthier if we prepare our meals at home and sit down and eat together. If there’s too much stuff on the kitchen table to sit down, everybody’s going to park where it’s easy and most comfortable, often in front of the TV.”

How to declutter: The kitchen table or island is ultimately meant for eating; it isn’t really designed for activities like working, paying bills, or playing games. But that’s how we use it, so rather than trying to relocate these activities, we can create systems to accommodate reality.

For example, if your kids like doing homework at the table, Skillen suggests buying a small caddy or rolling cart where they can stash their books and papers when it’s time to eat. “You can roll it away from the table and it doesn’t have to be a big production,” she says.

If you regularly pay bills or do other paperwork at the kitchen table, set yourself up to do so officially by keeping your checkbook or files in a cabinet or drawer near the table, advises Tracy. You can also create other spaces nearby for incoming stuff — a basket for mail, a bowl for keys, hooks for bags. Keeping the kitchen table decluttered is largely about creating systems to accommodate its many uses.

How to defend with beauty: Gerasimo explains that placing something beautiful — a special bowl, a silver platter, a bouquet — in the center of the table or island creates a sense of structure and discourages the willy-nilly depositing of clutter. “There’s something about a thing of beauty that says, ‘Don’t just come and set all your crap down here!’” ●

JILL PATTON, FMCHC, IS AN EXPERIENCE LIFE CONTRIBUTING EDITOR AND FUNCTIONAL-MEDICINE CERTIFIED HEALTH COACH.



One Healthy Habit: Cut Your Sugar Consumption

This month's challenge offers strategies to curb sugar cravings.

BY EXPERIENCE LIFE STAFF

Regularly eating large amounts of sugar, particularly added sugar, can trigger cellular inflammation, which can lead to a range of health issues, including type 2 diabetes, heart disease, candida overgrowth, and autoimmune disorders. Because sugar activates the brain's reward center, causing it to release dopamine and beta-endorphins, it can be more addictive than other foods.

People with naturally lower levels

of beta-endorphins get a bigger rush from sweets, too, notes Kathleen DesMaisons, PhD, author of *Potatoes Not Prozac: Simple Solutions for Sugar Addiction*. The subsequent rush-crash cycle can also spark mood dysregulation and fatigue.

Start by limiting the usual sugar suspects — think desserts, sodas, cereals. Then watch for other items that sneak sugar among their ingredients: ketchup, spaghetti sauce, barbecue

sauce, fat-free yogurt. (For packaged food, [find label-reading tips here](#).)

When in doubt, focus on consuming more whole foods so you don't need to stress about labels. Though whole foods such as fruit contain naturally occurring sugar, they also offer fiber, which reduces the impact on your blood sugar (but be wary of processed fruit juice, which lacks stabilizing fiber). If a sugar craving hits, reach for a glass of water and a snack with protein, healthy fat, and fiber. ●

FIND STRATEGIES TO TAME A SWEET TOOTH IN THE ARTICLES BELOW.





How Rebecca Walcott Discovered Wellness Through D.TOX

When her energy flagged, one woman learned how to fuel her body more efficiently by participating in a detox program.

BY REBECCA WALCOTT

Like many people, I used to drink coffee to start my day. It was the first thing I put in my body before my early morning workouts. I loved the smell — I still do. But to make my coffee more palatable, I loaded each cup with cream and sugar. I had no idea the concoction had the potential to hinder my health and fitness.

I've been dedicated to exercise since I discovered its ability to help me cope with the stress of a divorce in my early 20s. At the time, the tension relief and physical outlet it provided were so valuable that working out became an essential part of my life.

Over the following three decades, I continued to prioritize my mental, physical, and spiritual well-being through exercise. But in early 2022, I started to feel curiously sluggish during my workouts — no matter how much coffee I consumed.

I was particularly sensitive to this fatigue because it's a common symptom of Hashimoto's disease, an autoimmune condition I contracted in my late 20s. But because I thought I was managing my illness, I didn't know how to explain my fatigue, headaches, and indigestion. Only later did I realize

how much my dietary choices were sabotaging my well-being and how much I needed a nutritional reset.

Experimenting With Nutrition

I regularly attended classes taught by Life Time trainer and nutrition coach Brigitt Castille at my club in Gilbert, Ariz. When Castille shared that she had a positive experience with a detox program, I was inspired. I couldn't figure out what was causing the symptoms I'd been experiencing, but I knew I needed to switch something up. Nutrition seemed like a great place to start.

Although I believed I followed a pretty healthy diet, which featured a lot of carbs for energy, I wondered how much protein I should eat. I also wanted to understand the effects of inflammatory foods, because they can be particularly problematic for those with autoimmune disorders.

In September 2022, I began the Life Time D.TOX program. It's designed to support the body's natural detoxification system by eliminating potentially inflammatory foods — including gluten, highly processed foods, dairy, soy, eggs, peanuts, and caffeine — that may be problematic

for people with sensitivities. The program has three phases: roughly one week of preparation, two weeks of detoxification, and a period of restoration, during which participants slowly reintroduce foods and see how their bodies react.

The first few days of the preparation period were the most difficult. It was tough to wean myself from coffee, and grocery runs took longer than usual because I had to closely read labels to make sure to avoid elimination foods. The hardest ingredient to steer around was soy because it's so often found in foods like protein bars, baked goods, and sauces.

At first, I assumed that giving up certain foods meant I would eat less. But plenty of options were still on the table, including many vegetables and fruits (primarily organic to avoid the toxin residue on conventionally grown produce), wild-caught fish, organic or pasture-raised poultry, raw nuts (no peanuts), and starches like rice, potatoes, and quinoa. I was encouraged to eat as much as my body needed.

I kept my menu as simple as possible preparing mostly ground turkey in different ways, for protein because

I don't like beef. I mixed the turkey with brown rice or put it in lettuce as a wrap. I also ate a lot of salads and snacked on mangoes, blackberries, raspberries, and strawberries.

Over time, I realized I tended to overeat, which may have contributed to indigestion and bloat. Those symptoms resolved as I began eating more intuitively — paying attention to hunger and satiety. I found that I functioned better when I ate smaller portions more frequently.

After the detox phase, I started feeling lighter. I didn't lose weight, but my shape changed; my muscles became more defined. I didn't even realize I had been experiencing chronic headaches until they disappeared. I had renewed energy.

What's more, I didn't crave sugar or highly processed foods. Eating more protein and whole foods gave me a sense of satiety more quickly, so I didn't feel the need to seek out quick sources of energy.

One Step Back

During the restoration phase, I reintroduced foods as recommended. Doing this allows you to recognize how your body responds to different things. I learned that for me, eating soy and gluten led to inflammation, bloating, headaches, and a midday crash.

I stuck to eating only the program's approved foods for a while, but I eventually became less disciplined. By the end of the year I was eating more ultraprocessed foods, including pizza, and my beloved deep-fried tacos. My cravings returned, and with them came more food headaches, which I noticed after eating too much salt or soy.

Feeling the need to get nutritionally realigned, I signed up for a second

round of D.TOX at the beginning of 2023. I expected to jump back in, but my body didn't respond positively at all. I suffered more frequent headaches and constantly felt hungry and cold.

In addition to these symptoms, I was also choking on food and having trouble breathing, which encouraged me to check in with a doctor. An MRI showed my thyroid had swelled to three times its normal size. An enlarged thyroid is a common symptom of Hashimoto's; although it isn't usually painful, mine was partially obstructing my airway. When my doctor recommended removing my thyroid, I didn't hesitate. I underwent surgery to remove it that February.

I didn't realize how much my dietary choices were sabotaging my well-being and how much I needed a nutritional reset.

My recovery was relatively easy, and by the fall of 2023, I was healthy and ready to give the detox program another go. This time I understood what was involved and how to prepare more efficiently. I felt ready.

Third Time's a Charm

My third time through the program

was the most positive. I didn't fight through food cravings in the beginning or think about foods I was avoiding. Being prepared allowed me to try more recipes with the approved foods.

When the time came to slowly reintroduce restricted foods into my diet, I already had a good idea of what I needed to avoid, like soy and gluten, which caused bloating and terrible headaches. But this time, I also found I could not eat sausage — even turkey sausage — likely because of the nitrates used as preservatives and for coloring.

I've been able to manage the symptoms of my Hashimoto's disease, too. Despite having my thyroid removed, my medical team hasn't needed to adjust the medication I use for treatment, which is a good sign that my lifestyle habits are supporting my well-being.

Moving forward, I plan to prioritize protein and organic whole foods, honor portion sizes, and avoid foods that cause adverse reactions. My commitment to exercise has also remained steadfast, especially now that my diet is more supportive of my goals.

That's why I'm over my emotional attachment to coffee (and the headaches and indigestion that I learned came with it). After the first detox, I switched to decaf but eventually weaned off coffee altogether. I finally learned that my life and fitness are better off without it. ●

REBECCA WALCOTT LIVES IN GILBERT, ARIZ. SHE IS PASSIONATE ABOUT LEADING A PURPOSEFUL LIFE AND POSITIVELY INFLUENCING THOSE AROUND HER.

Rebecca's Top Takeaways

1. Mentally prepare. After you decide to start, she advises, "commit to it 100 percent." Sticking to a detox program can be more difficult if you're not wholly committed.

2. Follow a plan for achieving well-

ness objectives. It's important to have wellness goals, Rebecca notes, but it is equally vital to develop a solid plan to achieve them.

3. Inform close friends and family. "Going out to eat was a big challenge,"

she recalls. Let people know what you're doing to give them the opportunity to be more supportive. That way, "they won't wonder why you're choosing not to eat certain things or try to coerce you to eat them anyway."



A Nasal Breathing Strength-and-Conditioning Workout

Learn how to harness the power of nasal diaphragmatic breathing with this body-weight strength-and-conditioning flow.

BY LAUREN BEDOSKY

Breathing is essential for life — and also for optimal performance. Yet most of us don't pay attention to how we breathe, and as a result, our breathing pattern isn't as effective as it could be, especially during exercise.

"Many people generally breathe through their mouth or they're using their neck and shoulder muscles to govern how they breathe," says fitness coach Harrison Klein, CPT, who trains clients with a breath-first approach at his performance and recovery center, Sauna Strong.

An ideal, functional breath is both nasal and diaphragmatic, says Klein. This means the breath goes in and out through the nose and is powered by the diaphragm, the dome-shaped muscle that sits beneath the lungs. Nasal diaphragmatic breathing optimizes oxygen uptake, which can improve mental clarity and delay muscle fatigue, among other benefits.

"With nasal breathing, we absorb [up to] 20 percent more oxygen than with mouth breathing, which is a profound amount," he explains. That's because the air passing through the nasal pathway mixes with nitric oxide, "a vasodilator that opens our blood vessels and increases oxygen circulation throughout the body."

Nasal breathing may train the body to tolerate more carbon dioxide, another vasodilator that helps deliver more oxygen to muscles during exercise. Carbon dioxide is also a waste product that's exhaled once oxygen is exchanged in the lungs. (Fun fact: It's the buildup of carbon dioxide that creates the urgency to breathe when you hold your breath.)

None of this is to say that breathing through your mouth is necessarily wrong or that all your breathing must be done through your nose. There are myriad breathing techniques — nasal-only breathing, mouth-only breathing, a combination of inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth, exhaling during exertion, holding your breath during exertion, and so on. All manner of breathwork can be used to meet various goals if wielded intentionally and practiced consistently.

For many people, breathing through only the nose during exercise is unfamiliar and uncomfortable — making it a hindrance rather than a help. But nasal diaphragmatic breathing is a skill, and tolerance can be developed. Klein designed this body-weight workout for nasal-breathing newbies to help them begin working with their breath in a different way.

The Workout

This nasal-breathing workout follows a circuit format, meaning you'll perform the exercises one right after the other. Do one exercise for 45 seconds, rest for 15 seconds, and move on to the next exercise. Once you get to the end of the circuit, return to the beginning and repeat until you've completed five rounds total.

Don't worry about racking up tons of repetitions or moving quickly; instead, move with control and let your breaths lead the way. Work at a pace that allows you to sustain nasal breathing. If it gets too hard to breathe steadily in and out through your nose, slow down or pause long enough to regain control. Pair breath to movement, exhaling on the exertion of the movement, and make sure to breathe deep into your belly. Avoid taking shallow, rushed breaths, even as you get tired.

While you rest between exercises, practice recovery breathing with a double intake: Inhale into your belly through your nose, inhale again into your chest, and then exhale slowly through your mouth. Repeat three times.

WARM-UP

- In a standing position, inhale and exhale normally through your nose one time.
- After exhaling, plug your nose, hold your breath, and begin walking in place.
- Eventually, perhaps almost immediately, you'll feel an urgency to breathe. Try to hold your breath a bit longer, working up to 30 seconds.
- Once you can't hold your breath any longer, release your nose and inhale in a slow, controlled manner. Exhale quietly and with control, as if there were a feather under your nose that you're trying not to disturb. Resist the urge to blow out the air forcefully.
- Then take four calm, controlled nasal breaths.
- Finally, inhale through your nose and exhale out your mouth four times.
- That's one round. Do three rounds total.

More on the Moves

For video demonstrations, visit ["Nasal Breathing Workout."](#)

THE WORKOUT

1. BODY-WEIGHT SQUATS



- Stand with feet hip to shoulder width apart, toes pointed forward.
- Inhale through your nose as you squat down, lowering your hips until your thighs are parallel or almost parallel with the floor.
- Exhale through your nose as you press back up to standing.
- Keep your chest up and knees in line with your toes.

Do three recovery breaths before moving on to the next exercise.

2. PUSHUPS



- Set up in a pushup position: Arms straight, palms in line with your shoulders, feet propped up on your toes about hip width apart.
- Inhale through your nose as you bend at the elbows to lower your chest. Make sure your elbows flare out no more than 45 degrees.
- Exhale through your nose as you push back up.

Do three recovery breaths before moving on to the next exercise.

3. BODY-WEIGHT REVERSE LUNGES



- Stand with feet hip width apart.
- Inhale through your nose as you step one foot back, bending both knees to 90 degrees.
- Exhale through your nose as you return to the starting position.
- Alternate legs with each repetition.

Do three recovery breaths before moving on to the next exercise.

4. MOUNTAIN CLIMBERS



- Set up in a straight-arm plank position: Arms straight, palms in line with your shoulders, feet propped up on your toes about hip width apart.
- Inhale through your nose as you bring one knee toward your chest.
- Exhale through your nose as you return your foot to the floor.
- Alternate legs with each repetition, moving slowly and with control to match the movement to the breath.

Do three recovery breaths before moving on to the next exercise.

5. FOREARM PLANK



- Set up in a forearm plank on the floor with elbows directly under your shoulders, feet propped up on your toes about hip width apart.
- Contract your abdominal muscles to maintain the plank position.
- Inhale and exhale through your nose throughout.

Do three recovery breaths before moving on to the next exercise.

6. BREATH HOLDS



- Lie on your stomach and prop your chin up on your forearms.
- Inhale through your nose on a three-count.
- Exhale through your nose on a three-count.
- Hold for five seconds before repeating.

This may be the most challenging part of the workout because it asks you to slow your breathing at a moment when it's natural to want to breathe fast. Klein suggests trying to own your breath hold while staying calm through the stress and the desire to breathe fast.

COOL-DOWN

Klein suggests practicing a technique known as box breathing to slow your heart rate and help your body recover after your workout. Pick a spot where you can sit or lie down for a few minutes (the floor, a chair, a sauna, etc.) and close your eyes. Follow this breathing pattern:

- Inhale through your nose on a four-count, filling your belly with air.
- Hold for four seconds.
- Exhale through your mouth on a four-count, pulling your belly toward your spine.
- Hold for four seconds.
- Repeat for a total of 10 rounds. ●

LAUREN BEDOSKY IS A MINNESOTA-BASED HEALTH AND FITNESS WRITER.

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Enhance Your Running Performance With Nasal Breathing

Nasal breathing is an efficient way to circulate oxygen through your body during a run. Master the technique with these three expert tips.

BY LAUREN BEDOSKY

When you run, you're most likely sucking air into your mouth and blowing it out through your mouth. While this breathing pattern feels natural when working intensely, there are advantages to learning to breathe through your nose while running.

Research suggests that nasal breathing is a more efficient way of getting the oxygen your body needs for exercise. Translation: Your body doesn't have to work as hard to supply oxygen, which means it can focus more energy on other aspects of running performance.

Use these three tips from Harrison Klein, a breath-first fitness instructor, personal trainer, and breathing coach at his performance and recovery center, Sauna Strong, to get started with nasal breathing while running.

- 1 Slow your pace at first.** If you typically mouth-breathe while running, you probably won't be able to sustain the same pace while nasal breathing — at least not in the beginning. Depending on how often you run and how diligently you practice nasal breathing, it may take several weeks for your body to adjust. In the meantime, dial back your running pace. “You can even scale it down to walking at first to develop the nasal-breathing pattern,” Klein suggests.
- 2 Practice during endurance-focused runs.** Longer endurance runs are a natural fit for practicing nasal breathing because your pace is typically slower. This allows you to focus on taking slow, calm breaths, he notes. Easy recovery runs are also a good opportunity to do nasal breathing.
- 3 Maintain a steady rhythm.** Aim to keep your breathing calm and steady while you run. Let the nasal inhaling happen naturally (passively), and actively contract your belly to exhale all the air and empty your lungs, he advises. If you feel your breathing get out of control, slow down or stop to reset. ●

LAUREN BEDOSKY IS A MINNESOTA-BASED HEALTH AND FITNESS WRITER.

PHOTO: KELLY LOVERUD; STYLING: PAM BRAND; MODEL: ANNA TAYLOR



6 Tips to Work Out While Fasting

Here's how to stay strong and energized while refraining from food and drink.

BY NICOLE RADZISZEWSKI

Throughout Ramadan, Ayesha Akhtar wakes up before sunrise and starts her day with the early morning breakfast called suhur. She goes about her daily routine without any food or drink because Muslims are required to abstain from both (as well as from smoking) from dawn to dusk. Then, just before breaking her fast, Akhtar might head out for a run at a casual pace or do a light strength workout. As the sun sets, she rehydrates and replenishes by eating a hearty meal known as iftar.

Ramadan calls for a scaled-back version of daily life to allow more time to focus on spirituality. And for Akhtar, 48, a personal trainer, distance runner, and CrossFit enthusiast in Oak Park, Ill., that includes a pared-down fitness routine. In fact, for many years, Akhtar didn't exercise at all during the month-long fast.

"For me, it's been a personal progression to get to where I am right now. I didn't used to work out during Ramadan, and I'd come out of it feeling sluggish and not great," she says. "Then I started to incorporate exercise slowly, to the point where now I'm able to run during my fast and not feel thirsty."

When Akhtar began to safely integrate fitness while fasting, she felt the effects beyond her physical experience.

"I think people should realize [that] if they are doing some sort of exercise at all, that is an amazing accomplishment in itself and another layer of your spiritual practice," she says.

There are many reasons for fasting, in addition to observing Ramadan. Other religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism, incorporate routine fasts as a spiritual practice. And many health enthusiasts have adopted intermittent fasting (IF) due to the mounting research that suggests it can boost digestion, assist with weight loss, support cognition, improve heart health, enhance sleep quality, and potentially even help with cancer prevention. (Learn more about intermittent fasting at ["Everything You Need to Know About Intermittent Fasting."](#))

Fitness and fasting may seem to be at odds with one another: We know food is energy and our bodies need energy to perform at our best. But we can still safely exercise while adhering to a fasting protocol. Like Akhtar, many people who fast — for whatever reason — feel better when exercise is a part of their life. "I cannot imagine a life without daily exercise, nor do I feel good when I miss days in a row," she says.

Experts share these six tips for enjoying the mutual benefits of fasting and fitness.

1. Consider the timing of your workouts.

There are many ways to schedule specific types of strength or cardio workouts while practicing intermittent fasting. "If you're doing low- to moderate-intensity workouts, most people can safely go into their exercise session in a fasting window, depending on their own unique tolerance," says Samantha McKinney, RD, CPT, Life Time's national program manager for nutrition and metabolism. "It might be hard for people to concurrently try to adjust their exercise timing while beginning a new fasting regimen. So, it really is about doing what works for you to stay consistent with exercising along with your other healthy lifestyle habits."

The timing of the fasting window for Ramadan can pose an additional challenge. Waking up before dawn to fit in a workout and suhur might seem like a good plan, but it's important to make sure you're getting adequate sleep. Exercising after iftar might feel like a way to avoid exercising on an empty stomach, but not everyone's gut can tolerate that timing.

"I have friends who will break their fast at the end of the day and then go work out, but that order of operations was tough on my digestion,"



says Akhtar, who prefers to exercise just before sundown and then eat a big dinner afterward. “I’d encourage people to find a rhythm that works for them.”

2. Use caution when it comes to high-intensity exercise.

Intermittent fasting typically involves periodic, intentional fasts lasting longer than 12 hours. Some people practicing IF can safely continue to train at a high intensity, but McKinney cautions against doing this type of workout following a long period of fasting — say, 24 to 48 hours.

“One thing to keep in mind is that when you’re doing high-intensity exercise, your body relies on carbohydrates, [which are broken down into] glycogen [and] stored in your liver and muscles. When your glycogen stores are lower from fasting, you’re not going to perform as well during your workout,” she explains.

Akhtar recommends sticking to low or moderate intensity for both cardio and strength workouts while fasting for Ramadan, “because there is not a lot of time in the eating window to rebuild muscle fibers.” She often takes the month off from CrossFit and creates her own “maintenance” strength workouts.

“Because I work out in the mornings, it is hard for me to do that level of physical exertion without being able to drink water or recover with a protein shake — nor do I want to,” she says. Rather than working on big lifts, Akhtar takes the time to focus on areas that she normally doesn’t prioritize, such as accessory work and core exercises.

3. Make the most of mealtimes.

What you eat affects your energy throughout the day, so it’s important to look to foods that are nutrient-dense and high in fiber and protein to sustain you throughout your fasting window.

During Ramadan, take advantage of both opportunities to eat — and prioritize protein and hydration to optimize what is lost from not consuming food and water during the day, says Anika Christ, RD, PT, Life Time’s senior director of nutrition and a detox coach.

“Some people aren’t super hungry first thing in the morning, so in that

case I recommend a good quality protein shake. Most people can stomach a beverage even if they can’t stomach food,” she says. And “if possible, try to consume your evening meal a couple hours before bed to help avoid any sleep disruptions that could happen from your body trying to digest food.”

4. Hydrate with electrolytes when possible.

For those practicing IF, McKinney recommends drinking water with electrolytes throughout the day and especially during workouts.

“Let’s say you did a workout toward the end of the day and then you broke your fast, but you’re still tired and not recovering. That’s a sign you might have gone too hard.”

If you’re fasting for Ramadan, when both food and drink are restricted, she advises using nonfasting windows to increase your water and electrolyte intake. “Adding an electrolyte mix to water can often help you get rehydrated faster than water alone, especially when going long periods without consuming liquids,” she says.

5. Listen to your body.

“If you’re getting dizzy or lightheaded, stop your activity and at least reduce the intensity of your workout based on how your body responds,” McKinney advises. “But also make sure you check off other important boxes: Did you sleep enough? Did you eat enough protein? Are you hydrated with adequate water and electrolytes headed into your workout? And then finally, when it comes to

restricting your eating window and coupling that with exercise, did you approach it gradually to ensure you’re being mindful of what works best for you?”

McKinney suggests ramping up the duration and intensity of your workouts slowly after adopting a fasting protocol. Start with gentle and low-intensity exercise — activities like yoga, walking, and resistance training with light weights or bands are some good options — as your body adjusts to the short eating window.

In addition to how you’re feeling during exercise, pay attention to how you feel afterward. “Let’s say you did a workout toward the end of the day and then you broke your fast, but you’re still tired and not recovering. That’s a sign you might have gone too hard,” says Akhtar.

6. Reframe your mind.

If you’re new to fasting, be patient. “Depending on where you are coming from with your current eating habits, you’ll want to be patient with your body’s response to hunger, energy, etc.,” says Christ. “Some people have to work their way up to a certain window of fast because their body doesn’t tolerate it well at first, and [they] might experience some common symptoms like headache, low energy, or fatigue.”

She adds that “some people use fasting as a long-term tool: It’s all about how you adapt to it over time. That first workout, you might think, *I’m starving!* because you’re so used to fueling up beforehand. But then over time, your blood-sugar management gets better, or you find that you’re sleeping better.”

Ramadan is not a time to challenge yourself, says Akhtar. “I think a lot of people have a defeatist attitude about exercising during Ramadan, thinking, *This scaling back is going to set me back,*” she says. “But really, it’s a nice, forced break to get to try different things. Embrace that time of Ramadan and enjoy the break that comes with it.” ●

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What Treating A Migraine With Botox Means for Upper-Body Strength

Can Botox treatments for migraine headaches cause weakness in the trapezius muscles?

BY JESSICA MIGALA

Botox can reduce the appearance of fine lines and wrinkles, but it's also an FDA-approved medical treatment for a variety of conditions, including excessive sweating, neck spasms, overactive bladder, and migraine.

No matter how it's used, the mechanism behind the injectable is the same: "Botox is a neurotoxin that inhibits the release of acetylcholine, a neurotransmitter that causes contraction of muscle," says Gretchen Frieling, MD, a dermatopathologist in Wellesley, Mass. When it's injected into muscle, Botox — as well as Dysport and other botulinum toxin A brands — works by blocking the chemical signals that cause muscles to contract. Depending on the dose, it temporarily relaxes or paralyzes muscles, Frieling explains.

Applied cosmetically in the face, Botox treatments can result in softening of fine lines as well as diminished movement of the facial muscles.

When it's used to treat migraine headaches, a greater dose of Botox is required to cover a much wider area. According to neurologist Andrew Blumenfeld, MD, director of the Los Angeles Headache Center, the common Botox protocol for chronic migraine includes injections in 31 sites across the muscles of the forehead,

temples, back of the head, neck, and upper body — specifically the trapezius muscles, the large, triangular muscles located in the upper back.

In Search of Relief

So, if Botox that's used for migraine relief essentially paralyzes (or causes paralysis to) treated muscles, is there a risk that your upper-body muscles could become frozen and weakened, affecting your strength? Not likely.

With this protocol, "you're not knocking out the entire muscle — it would take a lot of neurotoxin to do that," Frieling says. Moreover, as Blumenfeld explains, Botox injections for migraine aim to interrupt signals from pain fibers, which are more superficial, so injections do not travel deep into the muscle.

It's also worth noting that not all Botox-for-migraine treatments require injecting the upper-body muscles.

"There is a protocol for migraine," says William J. Binder, MD, a facial plastic and reconstructive surgeon in Beverly Hills. Though he notes that over time, those experienced in the use of Botox for migraine headaches have learned to customize treatments to meet the individual needs of patients. This has improved results.

Binder was the lead author on the initial published research that paved the way for the 2010 FDA approval of Botox for chronic migraine.

Beyond Botox

If you are one of the more than 39 million Americans who live with migraine — or if you experience severe or chronic headaches that may not be diagnosed as migraine — Botox could be a promising option for relief. But it's not the only path available.

To begin with, experts stress the importance of analyzing muscle imbalances and hyperactivity throughout the body and correcting underlying mechanics that could contribute to chronic head pain, says Reza Alizadeh, DC, founder of LifeClinic Chiropractic and Rehabilitation. This can be done

If you are one of the more than 39 million Americans who live with migraine, Botox could be a promising option for relief.



through soft-tissue techniques and spinal manipulative therapy. “I prefer to take a conservative approach and recommend people see someone who knows tissue work and understands the biomechanics of movement,” he says.

No matter the treatment approach you choose, exercise can help with headache and migraine management, says Alizadeh. This is paradoxical because exercise can also trigger migraine headaches. Physical activity raises beta-endorphin and endocannabinoid levels, which can affect pain transmis-

sion; it may also downregulate other pain pathways, according to a study in the *Journal of Headache and Pain*.

Cardio and yoga have been specifically recommended to reduce migraine frequency, duration, and intensity and to improve quality of life. Strength training has been found to reduce migraine episodes too. Researchers think that strengthening the neck and shoulders may help quell pain in these areas — an important consideration, given that new research has shown a direct correlation between neck pain and migraine.

Additionally, deep breathing, meditation, acupuncture, and certain supplements — riboflavin (vitamin B2), magnesium, butterbur, and coenzyme Q10 (CoQ10) — have been shown to help alleviate symptoms and diminish headache frequency. (Learn more about how to naturally treat and prevent headaches, including migraine, at “[Natural Ways to Treat and Prevent Headaches](#).”) ●

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Botox for Nonmigraine Headaches

Botox is not FDA approved for treating nonmigraine headaches, but a systematic review and meta-analysis of 11 studies, published in *Cephalalgia* in 2023, suggests that the treatment can reduce headache intensity, frequency, duration, and pain-medication use

in people who have chronic tension headaches (more than 15 days per month for more than three months).

Anecdotally, patients also report that cosmetic injections in smaller doses into the muscles of the forehead help alleviate some of their head pain, says

facial plastic surgeon Mark M. Hamilton, MD, chair of the public information committee at the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery. “A side benefit of this is that migraines will often be less frequent and less intense.”

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Nutrition for Addiction Recovery

What you eat can play a key role in overcoming both drug and alcohol addiction.

BY MO PERRY

When Clara Hernandez got sober in 2018, the sugar cravings hit. “I knew enough about nutrition to know that sugar was bad for me,”

recalls the 34-year-old playwright, who comes from a family with a history of addiction. “But when it came down to a choice between having alcohol or sugar, I chose sugar.”

Within a few months, Hernandez (a pseudonym used to protect her privacy) found herself exhibiting the same red-flag behaviors with sweets that she’d displayed with alcohol. She’d wait



anxiously for the workday to end so she could eat sugary treats for relief. She'd drive to the store late at night when her supplies ran low — and then lie to the cashier about why she was buying so much candy.

"I'd make up a story about babysitting my nieces and nephews and pretend it wasn't all for me," she says. "That's when I decided I had to deal with the addiction that was helping me deal with my addiction."

Hernandes's experience is not unusual for people recovering from substance use disorder, says David Wiss, PhD, MS, RDN, founder of the Los Angeles-based addiction-treatment program Nutrition in Recovery. Alcohol, sugar, and other highly addictive substances share similar neural-reward pathways in the brain.

"It's predictable that once someone gets sober they'll have excessive consumption of rewarding dopaminergic foods, such as sugar," he explains.

The brain's nucleus accumbens region, which plays a role in reward behavior, is key to addiction. Sugar causes it to flood with dopamine, just as drugs do, and highly sweetened foods can lead to the same type of physiological dependence.

In fact, products that contain high-fructose corn syrup are often blatantly marketed as being addictive: Consider taglines like "Betcha can't eat just one." (Yes, even some potato chips are sweetened.)

Arwen Podesta, MD, FASAM, ABIHM, a New Orleans-based integrative doctor and psychiatrist who specializes in addiction medicine, explains that sugar and processed foods cause an imbalance of serotonin and dopamine in the brain. (Both are feel-good neurotransmitters: Serotonin is calming; dopamine is often associated with pleasure.) This imbalance can lead to cravings for "rewards" — namely, more sugar — that temporarily restore depleted neurotransmitters.

At least until the next crash.

"Whatever causes those reward spikes, crashes, and cravings can have the same effect as strongly addictive drugs," she says.

Although sugar can play a pernicious role in sustaining substance addiction, these practitioners believe the flip side is positive news: Better nutrition can be a key tool to support recovery.

The Sugar-Sensitive Body

Why are some people largely immune to the addictive effects of sugar, drugs, and alcohol, while others are more likely to get hooked? Podesta believes that vulnerability to a substance use disorder is rooted in a combination of genetics and circumstances.

Trauma, for example, may trigger addictive behaviors in a person who's genetically primed. But epigenetics research tells us that improved circumstances can help override these tendencies. "We can't change our genes," says Podesta. "But we can influence them with our environment and diet."

Products that contain high-fructose corn syrup are often blatantly marketed as being addictive: Consider taglines like "Betcha can't eat just one." (Yes, even some potato chips are sweetened.)

Diet, in particular, may be a potent tool in addressing inherited inclinations.

"Some of us — particularly those for whom alcoholism runs in the family — are simply wired to be more sensitive than other people to sugar and other addictive substances," notes Kathleen DesMaisons, PhD, an addictive-nutrition specialist and author of *Potatoes Not Prozac: Simple Solutions for Sugar Addiction*.

"People who aren't sugar sensitive don't tend to respond to drugs or sugar in the same way — they can just

say no. Those of us with these other bodies have a little and want more," she explains. "That insight is so liberating, because now instead of a character flaw, we know it's a biochemical reality that can be changed."

Others attribute sugar sensitivity to hypoglycemia, or low glucose levels. The late Joan Mathews-Larson, PhD, author of *Seven Weeks to Sobriety*, noted that the majority of people she treated for addiction tested positive for it.

"Alcohol becomes a way for them to cut off the symptoms of their hypoglycemia, such as anxiety and irritability, and feel normal for a while," explained Mathews-Larson.

Licensed clinical social worker Jennifer Matesa places herself squarely in the sugar-sensitive camp. "Sugar was my first substance of abuse," says the author of *The Recovering Body*, recalling a childhood binge when she ate the icing off an entire batch of birthday cupcakes her mother had baked for her sister. Years later, she found herself in recovery from a years-long, life-threatening opioid addiction.

Like many people, Matesa white-knuckled her way through her first year of sobriety — as long as she wasn't using opioids or alcohol, her sober peers told her, anything else she put into her body was OK. So, she temporarily returned to sugar as her drug of choice.

It's common practice in some 12-step programs to suggest sugar as a tool to satisfy cravings; it's even included in *Alcoholics Anonymous* (also known as the "Big Book"), Matesa notes.

As strange as it sounds, this may have practical value in the short term, because stopping all stimulation to the dopamine pathways can be too much for those just starting their recovery. "If someone in early recovery tries to just drop sugar all at once, it can create a biochemical crisis that can set up relapse," DesMaisons explains.

She emphasizes, however, that sugar is not a sustainable solution to cravings. Substituting sugar addiction for alcohol or drugs isn't just hard on overall health: It can backfire.

"Sugar activates the same part of the brain that opioids do," says DesMaisons. "So, it seems to be a good solution in early recovery to eat a lot of sugar instead of doing drugs, but [over



time] that just keeps those same reward pathways wide awake in the brain. Then the sugar wears off, and you crave alcohol or drugs because that's what the brain has been trained to want. It keeps those cravings active."

DesMaisons takes a strict stance that sugar is dangerous for sobriety, but Wiss believes that some sugar can help augment dopamine levels in the immediate aftermath of detoxing from drugs or alcohol. Still, he says, the sooner you can free yourself from sugar addiction after getting sober, the better your brain will be able to recover from its dependency on reward — whether from drugs, alcohol, or sugar.

"Adding a nutrition intervention to recovery can also help restore healthy gut flora and release the brain from the cycle of addiction," he says. "It can add a lot of healing at the gut-brain level."

Eating for Recovery

When DesMaisons first advised "intractable" alcoholics (people with treatment-resistant addiction) to remove sugar from their diets, the results surprised her. "It had a huge impact on treatment outcomes," she says. "People who had never been able to get or stay sober were able to make progress in an unexpected way when they changed their diet."

Adding a nutritional component to other types of support seems to help people get a firmer grip on sobriety — perhaps because a low-glycemic diet helps train the brain and body away from the spike-and-crash cycle.

Still, says DesMaisons, a stable biochemical state is built slowly and methodically — it can't be done overnight. That's why weaning off sugar is the sixth step in her seven-step food program for addiction recovery, not the first. These are the seven steps, described in *Potatoes Not Prozac*:

1. Eat breakfast with protein every day
2. Keep a food journal
3. Eat three meals a day
4. Increase your serotonin naturally by eating a potato before bed every night
5. Move from refined grains to whole grains
6. Reduce or eliminate sugar
7. Build life skills

A sobriety-supportive diet is generally low in sugar, with plenty of stabilizing protein and antioxidant-rich vegetables. How that looks on the plate will vary from person to person; it's important that nutrition not become punitive, warns Wiss.

"You don't want to tell someone that now they just need to eat lentils and broccoli every day," he explains. "Food can be a symbol of independence and self-care, a mechanism for someone to empower themselves and take their well-being into their own hands. People connect with that idea a lot more than just focusing on the biology."

"If you think of the brain as a lattice that gets torn [by] substance abuse, protein provides the raw materials that allow the brain to reweave itself."

Likewise, any sobriety-oriented nutrition plan is most effective when combined with other recovery tools, such as a 12-step or other peer-support program, talk therapy, exercise, mindfulness, or some combination. With that in mind, these nutrients can play a key role in supporting a successful — and sustainable — recovery from substance addiction.

PROTEIN

For people overcoming addiction, protein is one of the most vital nutrients. "If you think of the brain as a lattice that gets torn [by] substance abuse, protein provides the raw materials that allow the brain to reweave itself," says DesMaisons.

Podesta notes that specific protein needs vary by person, but most people

in recovery benefit from including protein in their breakfast every day.

"A lot of the susceptibilities in relapse have to do with the oxidative damage that happens in the brain during addiction," she explains. "We need building blocks to repair that neurological damage, and having healthy protein with breakfast can help give us those tools."

Quality Sources: Grassfed and pastured meats, eggs, wild-caught fish, legumes, nuts, and full-fat yogurt.

FIBER

Wiss focuses on fiber as one of the main nutrients needed to rebalance the body in the wake of addiction, pointing out that opioids in particular seem to harm gut bacteria and slow down the gastrointestinal tract.

"Fiber is broken down slowly by gut bacteria, and sugar is absorbed rapidly," he says. "People who abuse substances often have a preference for those kinds of concentrated, rapidly absorbed substances."

Adding fiber to the diet can nurture beneficial gut bacteria back to health, help heal the GI tract, and support the gut-brain connection.

DesMaisons suggests eating a potato every night before bed, in no small part because of its fiber-packed skin, which can help slow down the glycemic reaction and stabilize blood sugar. The complex carbohydrates in potatoes also help the body transfer tryptophan to the brain to support serotonin production while you sleep, she says.

Quality Sources: Vegetables and fruits, legumes, ground flax, chia seeds, and whole grains.

WHOLE GRAINS

The fifth step in DesMaisons's food plan is switching from refined "white" grains to whole grains, such as brown rice, whole-grain bread and pasta, oatmeal, and unsweetened granola. (Whole grains deliver more fiber to support digestion and slow the metabolizing of the natural sugars in grains.)

She cautions people in recovery to steer clear of low-carb diets, such as keto or paleo. "Carbs are crucial for the brain to create and use the 'just say no' chemical, serotonin," she stresses. "If you don't have enough serotonin and you're restricting carbs, you'll feel



crazy. People getting sober do much better when they incorporate slowly digested, complex carbohydrates, such as oatmeal and whole-grain toast.”

Quality Sources: Quinoa, millet, brown rice, buckwheat, wild rice, and steel-cut oats.

HEALTHY FATS

People addicted to drugs and alcohol tend to be deficient in omega-3 fatty acids, which are important for nerve and brain health.

“Fat helps regulate inflammation and keep the blood sugar steady for a longer duration,” says Podesta. “The brain’s myelin sheaths also need antioxidants and omegas for proper functioning.”

Research suggests that adding omega-3s to the diet may help reduce

anger and aggressive behavior in people with addiction. And a study at the Indiana University School of Medicine found that among rats given fish oil rich in DHA fatty acids, some had reduced alcohol cravings.

Quality Sources: Avocados, walnuts, cold-water fish, and chia and hemp seeds.

SUPPLEMENTS

“In early recovery, there’s a stronger case to consider supplements,” says Wiss, noting that B vitamins, omega-3 fats, and probiotics can help stabilize the body as it detoxifies.

In the long term, however, it’s important to get nutrients from real food. “Supplements tend to appeal to people with dependency,” explains Wiss. “It’s a quick fix — a pill, powder,

or potion. The goal is to move people to think differently: Instead of taking a pill, let’s go to the grocery store.”

DesMaisons recommends that people in recovery take a B-complex vitamin, vitamin C, and zinc, and aim to get the rest of their nutrients from real food. “Teaching people how to feed themselves creates a whole different environment in the body than taking a bunch of pills,” she says. “Eating food moves you into the relational aspects of your recovery.”

Quality Sources: Buy the best-quality supplements your budget will allow. Food-based supplements are often a good choice since they can be easier for the body to metabolize. ●

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Top Foods for Addiction Recovery

The following foods support the body as it adjusts and rebuilds during recovery.

Cilantro has powerful properties that may help detoxify the body of heavy metals. Mercury and lead, for instance, have been shown to disrupt the brain’s dopamine-reward system, which can increase vulnerability to addiction.

Grassfed and pasture-raised beef are healthy sources of protein, a critical building block for the recovering brain — which needs vital amino acids to repair oxidative neurological damage, notes Arwen Podesta, MD. Compared with grain-fed beef, grassfed contains more conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), a natural trans-fatty acid that supports many healthy functions. Protein itself also keeps blood sugar stable, which is why Podesta recommends people have it with all meals, including breakfast.

Walnuts are packed with protein, healthy fats, and fiber, making them a great on-the-go option for snacking. They help keep blood sugar steady and provide the brain with much-needed antioxidants and anti-inflammatory phytonutrients.

Flaxseed is rich in omega-3 fatty acids and fiber; it also nourishes beneficial gut bacteria, supports the GI tract, and strengthens neurological health. Try adding ground flaxseed to your morning smoothie, or pair flaxseed crackers with cheese or nut butter for an afternoon snack.

Hemp is a nutritional superfood. Hemp-seed oil is rich in fatty acids, which nourish the brain’s myelin sheaths, and gamma-linolenic acid (GLA), which supports hormonal health. Hemp seeds (also called hemp hearts)

have a nutty flavor and are a great source of magnesium and zinc, two vital nutrients for addiction recovery.

Lemon juice helps promote healthy digestion by stimulating bile production in the liver. In addition, a study published in 2017 found that mice that consumed lemon juice experienced reduced alcohol-related liver damage compared with a control group.

Potato skin — whether on a russet, Yukon gold, or sweet potato (which is technically not a potato) — is a rich source of fiber and other vital phytonutrients. It also provides complex carbohydrates. When eaten a few hours after a meal that contains protein, these carbohydrates stimulate the body to produce the insulin it needs to create serotonin, helping to regulate mood and impulse control. (Note: Try to stick with organic potatoes if you’re going to eat the skin.)

Cold-water fish, such as salmon, mackerel, herring, and sardines, are some of the most potent sources of omega-3 fatty acids, as well as of protein and vitamin D. Vitamin D has been shown to help modulate the brain’s dopamine circuits and contribute to the creation of serotonin. Look for canned fish that includes skin and bones — that’s where you’ll find most of the vitamin D.

Whole grains, like steel-cut oats, brown rice, and barley, provide complex carbohydrates that are digested more slowly than their refined counterparts. This process helps nurture beneficial gut bacteria and support satiety. Whole grains supply calming minerals — like selenium, potassium, and magnesium. And oats are a good source of tryptophan, a key ingredient in serotonin production.



12 Strategies for a Safe Detox

If you detox too quickly — or without the right support — you might reabsorb some of the toxins you're trying to get rid of. These tips can help you detox safely.

BY LAINE BERGESON BECCO

Anyone who's been stuck behind a bus inhaling big gulps of diesel exhaust or noticed a funny plastic taste in bottled water has probably wondered about the effects of those extra toxins entering the body — as well as about how to get rid of them.

The instinct to detox is understandable: Each year, an estimated 2,000 new chemicals are registered for everyday use in the United States, notes functional-medicine doctor Robert Rountree, MD, who adds that “humans have become rent-free storage systems for synthetic chemicals.”

A wealth of research shows that toxic exposures can contribute to weight-loss resistance, fuel chronic conditions like cancer and diabetes, and both trigger and aggravate autoimmune conditions. So, engaging in a strategic detox protocol can help you maintain — and improve — your overall health.

As they do when they enter and stay in the body, toxins can wreak havoc on their way out. Detoxing too fast or without the right support can leave you vulnerable to reabsorbing some of those dangerous chemicals as they try to exit the body.

When the release of toxins from body tissue outpaces the body's ability to eliminate them, they stay in the bloodstream, triggering an inflammatory response and causing people to feel, in the unofficial parlance, crappy.

“There are two phases of liver detoxification. The first phase liberates the toxin, and the second phase deactivates it. Many people have difficulty with phase two,” writes Eileen Laird, author of *A Simple Guide to the Paleo Autoimmune Protocol*. “If you feel sick on a detox protocol, there's a reason. You are essentially getting poisoned with your own released toxins.”

Symptoms tend to mimic the flu: fatigue, nausea, headaches, dizziness, bloat, digestive issues, chills, elevated heart rate, brain fog, and increased joint and muscle pain.

Some health practitioners call this detox reaction a “healing crisis,” saying that if you feel bad during the detox process, then you know it's working because toxins are on the move.

But there's a broader consensus among practitioners that this type of reaction is not necessarily good — or healthy.

“People shouldn't say, ‘Oh, I should just push through it,’” says functional-medicine practitioner Jill Carnahan, MD, ABIHM, IFMCP. “It's a sign that they should slow things down or take an alternative approach because they're overwhelming their detox pathways.”

In other words, when it comes to detoxing, the best advice is simply to listen to your body. “Our bodies speak to us all the time,” says Laird. “It's risky to override those signals of what our body is telling us is true.”

How to Detox the Safe Way

The first step in any safe, effective detox is to seek a qualified practitioner. Look for someone who has experience with strategic detox protocols and ask how that person works with patients or clients who have a detox reaction.

“At minimum, if you can't do a detox alongside a professional, follow a program that's created by one,” says Anika Christ, RD, LD, senior director of nutrition at Life Time, who leads a program called D.TOX. “I've seen so many programs that lack the critical components of a well-rounded detox.”

Once you've found a solid program, consider these 12 strategies to support and protect yourself during the detox window.



1. Make sure your symptoms aren't related to something else.

If something in your environment is causing an allergic reaction, you will feel consistently crummy. If you're experiencing detox-related symptoms, you should feel better in a couple of days, says Carnahan.

No matter what, consult your practitioner: You'll want to determine the root cause of an allergy or other issue. Or you'll want to slow down your detox protocol.

Sometimes people experience temporary flu-like symptoms from simply eliminating certain foods. This is often described as a detox reaction, she says, but it's more likely withdrawal.

For example, dairy contains opioid peptides called casomorphins, and gluten contains opioid peptides called exorphins; both substances can produce a mild opioid-like effect. When these foods disappear from the table, mild withdrawal can follow. If symptoms last more than a couple of days, consult your practitioner.

Eliminating sugar may destroy intestinal yeast (yeast loves sugar) and cause a similar set of symptoms. Taking a natural binder, like activated charcoal, can help absorb the yeast and hasten it out of the body.

2. Keep new toxins off your plate.

Try to eat organic vegetables and fruits and organic, pasture-raised animal proteins. Otherwise, you could be adding extra toxins while you're trying to eliminate them — which means you're never getting ahead.

3. Keep toxins off your body.

Make sure your health- and body-care products aren't introducing new synthetic chemicals into your system. Their effect on the body is no different than food. "If you're putting it on your skin, it's like you're eating it," says Rountree.

(Learn more about the ingredients to watch out for at ["How the Ingredients in Personal-Care Products Can Affect Your Health."](#))

4. Continue with strategies No. 2 and No. 3 after you finish your targeted detox protocol.

"Being mindful of toxins all the time can be overwhelming," says Laird. "People are drawn to detox because they

think they can burn the candle at both ends and then just detox seasonally."

The better strategy is to keep those toxins at arm's length every day. Once you make the switch to organic foods and body-care products, all the new choices will gradually become less overwhelming.

5. Make sure you're getting your minerals.

Minerals are critical for optimizing the body's detox pathways. Two easy mineral-boosting strategies? Take Epsom-salts baths (for the magnesium) and drink mineral water, says Carnahan.

"If you're putting it on your skin, it's like you're eating it."

6. Eat your (brassica) veggies.

The *Brassicaceae* family of vegetables — including broccoli, cauliflower, watercress, Brussels sprouts, kale, and collard greens — contains sulforaphane, which can stimulate enzymes in the liver that break down certain toxins.

7. Eat the rainbow.

The health-promoting compounds in vegetables and fruits are also usually responsible for their bright colors. The more colorful produce you eat in a day, the more phytonutrients you'll consume.

These powerful compounds assist the detox process and help protect the body against more toxin-related damage. Try to eat one food from each color of the rainbow every day.

8. Load up on fiber — and don't forget protein.

Toxins leave our bodies in one of three ways: through urine, sweat, or elimination via the GI tract. Keep your digestion humming along by eating fiber-rich foods, like beans, avocados,

berries, peas, squash, and flaxseeds and chia seeds.

Protein is also critical, says Christ. "Your body needs ample amino-acid pools to actually detox."

(Dietary fiber performs key roles that might surprise you. Learn more at ["Fiber: Why It Matters More Than You Think."](#))

9. Stay hydrated.

The more water (ideally clean and filtered) you drink, the more you urinate — and the faster toxins leave your system. Christ suggests drinking half your body weight in fluid ounces of water each day. "To help with absorption and increase mineral and electrolyte intake, add a crystal or two of Himalayan sea salt to each bottle," she says.

10. Sweat.

Move toxins out through your skin by engaging in a heart-pumping workout or sitting in a steam or infrared sauna, which many integrative- and functional-medicine practitioners recommend as part of a detox protocol. "I recommend sweating 20 minutes per day during a detox, whether it's through a fast-paced walk, a strength-training session, or a hot bath," Christ says. "The bath also becomes a great self-care habit to help you relax and de-stress — which is also critical during a detox."

11. Consider herbal and supplemental support.

There are some great herbal blends for optimizing liver and kidney function. Consult with your practitioner about what might be best for your unique situation.

The antioxidant glutathione is vital for detox. One of the best ways to supplement with glutathione is to take N-acetylcysteine, or NAC, a glutathione precursor.

12. Rest.

"Sleep is powerfully regenerative," explains Laird. Getting high-quality rest can optimize all your body's functions, including its ability to effectively and efficiently detox. ●

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Healthy Recipes, Happy Gut

Try these nutritious dishes to heal your gut lining and support your microbiome.

BY KATE MORGAN

Food is medicine, and if your gut is giving you trouble, part of the fix may lie in the meals you eat.

The lining of your intestines — which, if stretched and laid out flat, would cover more than 4,000 square feet — has one main job: to absorb nutrients and water into the bloodstream and keep unwanted things out. But in an unhealthy gut, the lining can be too permeable, or “leaky,” allowing toxins, bacteria, and food particles through.

Also known as intestinal permeability, leaky gut taxes the liver and stresses the immune system. It’s been tied to gastrointestinal disorders, like celiac and inflammatory bowel disease, as well as to chronic conditions like arthritis, fibromyalgia, and even asthma. (To learn more about leaky gut, see [“How to Heal a Leaky Gut.”](#))

Your diet can support your gut’s well-being. Pro- and prebiotics, healthy fats, phytonutrient-rich vegetables, nuts, and gluten-free grains can all help rebuild tissue and repair the gut lining.

The recipes that follow are designed to support that healing process. Better still, they’re simple enough to whip up on a weekday and so flavorful that you’ll want to make them again and again.

Shaved Asparagus and Brussels Sprouts Salad With Kefir Ranch Dressing

Makes two servings

Prep time: 15 minutes

For the salad:

- 1 lb. asparagus spears, ends trimmed
- 1 dozen Brussels sprouts, ends trimmed
- ¼ cup chopped cashews

For the dressing:

- ⅓ cup plain kefir
- ¼ cup mayonnaise
- 1 clove garlic, chopped
- 1 tbs. chopped fresh parsley (or 1 tsp. dried)
- 1 tbs. chopped fresh dill (or 1 tsp. dried)
- 2 tsp. lemon juice
- ½ tsp. sea salt
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste

Using a vegetable peeler, shave the asparagus into thin ribbons. Use a knife or a mandoline to thinly slice the Brussels sprouts.

In a food processor or blender, blend the kefir, mayonnaise, garlic, herbs, lemon juice, salt, and pepper until smooth.

Toss the vegetables with the dressing, top with the chopped cashews, and serve.

**Food is
medicine,
and if your
gut is giving
you trouble,
part of the fix
may lie in the
meals you eat.**



Wild Salmon Cakes With Kimchi Tartar Sauce

Makes four servings
Prep time: 10 minutes
Cook time: 30 minutes

For the cakes:

- 1 6–8 oz. wild-caught salmon fillet
- ¼ cup plus 2 tbs. extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- 1 small white onion, minced
- ½ bell pepper, minced
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- ½ tsp. paprika
- ½ tsp. sea salt
- ¼ tsp. dried thyme
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 1 cup gluten-free panko-style breadcrumbs (or wheat-based panko)
- 1 large egg, lightly beaten
- 3 tbs. mayonnaise
- 2 tbs. minced fresh parsley

For the sauce:

- ½ cup mayonnaise
- ½ cup plain, full-fat Greek yogurt
- 2 scallions, thinly sliced
- ¼ cup finely chopped kimchi
- 2 tbs. kimchi brine

Preheat oven to 425 degrees F. Coat the salmon with 1 tablespoon of the olive oil and place, skin-side down, on a sheet pan. Bake for eight to 10 minutes, until the fish is cooked through. Use a fork to flake the flesh, discarding skin and any bones. Set the salmon aside to cool.

Place a skillet over medium heat, then add 1 tablespoon of the olive oil and heat until shimmering. Add the onion

and bell pepper and cook, stirring occasionally, until the vegetables have softened, about seven to 10 minutes.

Transfer the onion and pepper to a large bowl with the salmon and stir to combine. Add the remaining cake ingredients and mix well, then use your hands to shape the mixture into palm-size cakes.

Place the skillet back over medium heat and add the remaining ¼ cup of olive oil. Heat the oil until it shimmers, then cook the salmon cakes until crisp and brown, approximately three minutes on each side.

Whisk the tartar sauce ingredients in a small bowl. Serve the salmon cakes topped with a drizzle of sauce.



Quinoa Bowls With Herby Yogurt Dressing

Makes two servings
Prep time: 10 minutes
Cook time: 30 minutes

For the bowls:

- 1 cup dry quinoa, rinsed
- 1 head cauliflower, cut into florets
- 1 large sweet potato, chopped
- 6 tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 cup broccoli sprouts

For the dressing:

- ½ cup chopped fresh parsley
- ¼ cup walnuts
- 1 clove garlic, chopped
- ⅛ tsp. sea salt
- 1 tbs. lemon juice
- ½ cup full-fat Greek yogurt
- 2 tbs. extra-virgin olive oil

Cook the quinoa according to package directions.

Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. Arrange the cauliflower florets and chopped sweet potato on a sheet pan and drizzle with the olive oil, tossing to coat evenly. Roast for 30 minutes, or until the potatoes are fork-tender and the cauliflower has brown, crispy edges.

Meanwhile, make the dressing in a food processor or blender. Pulse

the parsley, walnuts, garlic, and salt until combined. Add the lemon juice and Greek yogurt and process until smooth, then add the olive oil and process until emulsified.

Assemble bowls by adding a scoop of the cooked quinoa, roasted vegetables, and sprouts to each. Drizzle generously with the dressing and serve.





Bone Broth Mulligatawny Soup

Makes four servings

Prep time: 8 ½ hours (30 minutes active)

Cook time: 45 minutes

For the bone broth:

- 1 whole roasted chicken (see recipe at “[Classic Roast Chicken](#)”)
- 12 cups water
- 1 tsp. sea salt
- 2 tbs. apple-cider vinegar

For the soup:

- ½ cup brown rice, rinsed
- 2 tbs. grassfed butter
- 1 small white onion, chopped
- 2 carrots, chopped
- 1 rib celery, chopped
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 4–6 leaves fresh sage, minced
- 1½ tsp. curry powder
- 1 tsp. paprika
- 1 tsp. dried oregano

- ½ tsp. dried sumac
- ½ tsp. sea salt
- 1 13.5-oz. can coconut milk
- 2 tbs. minced fresh parsley

To make the broth, remove the chicken meat from the carcass and shred it. Store the shredded meat in the refrigerator. Place the chicken bones in a large pot and cover with the 12 cups of water.

Add the salt and vinegar and bring to a boil. Reduce to a simmer, cover, and cook for six to eight hours or until reduced by about one-third.

When the broth has about one hour left, cook the brown rice in a separate pot according to the package directions and set aside.

When the broth is done cooking, strain it and discard the bones.

To make the soup, melt the butter over medium heat in a heavy-bottomed stock pot or Dutch oven. Cook the onion, carrots, and celery until the onions are soft and translucent, about eight to 10 minutes. Add the garlic and sage, stir, and cook until fragrant, about two to three minutes. Add the curry, paprika, oregano, and sumac, and stir to coat.

Add the broth, rice, shredded chicken, and salt and stir to combine. Bring the soup to a simmer, cover, and let cook for 30 minutes. Remove from heat and stir in the coconut milk. Serve topped with the minced parsley.



Maple Vanilla Millet Porridge

Makes two servings

Prep time: five minutes

Cook time: 20 minutes

- ½ cup millet
- 1 cup water
- 1 cup oat milk (or nondairy milk of choice)
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- 2 tbs. maple syrup
- ¼ cup sliced fresh strawberries

In a pot over medium heat, bring the millet, water, and milk to a boil. Stir, reduce heat to a simmer, and cover. Cook for 10 to 15 minutes, or until the millet is tender and some liquid remains.

Use an immersion blender to purée until smooth, then stir in the vanilla and maple syrup. Serve topped with the sliced strawberries. ●

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How to Declutter Your Calendar

If your busy schedule is spreading you too thin, it may be time to reevaluate your priorities.

BY KAREN OLSON

When Ellany Lea was a teenager, her calendar was jam-packed. Most of her schedule was devoted to charity work, helping at home, leading school clubs, and earning straight As. She didn't have free time. "I had no way to discern what was a priority," she recalls. "Everything that everybody else wanted and expected of me was a priority."

Her solution? "I became hyper-efficient at fitting everything in."

Overwhelmed and exhausted at 18, Lea awoke one morning feverish and unable to bend or lift her arms. She was hospitalized for four days, and though doctors couldn't come up with a diagnosis, she's certain she was suffering symptoms of burnout.

Lea's case was extreme, but many of us can relate to her overwhelming, overscheduled days. Adding to the stress of our crammed calendars is the realization that we're committing to activities that may be out of step with how we really want to spend our time and live our lives.

The cost of our overstuffed schedules and half-hearted commitments is borne by our health, relationships, and peace of mind. Nonetheless, many of us try to solve

the problem — as Lea once did — by trying to become even more efficient and productive, rather than by cutting back and creating space.

Perhaps we do this because many people see busyness as a badge

of honor and a symbol of success in our current culture. An article published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, based on a series of studies, noted that busy people are perceived as having a higher social status than their less-frazzled peers. Or, as "life hacker" and professional organizer Andrew Mellen suggests, maybe our cluttered calendars help us avoid things we don't want to face: "namely conflict, intimacy, money, mortality, and being uncomfortable."

Some people feel so uneasy when they're idle that, according to several studies, they would rather give themselves electric shocks than spend six to 15 minutes alone with their thoughts. Neuroscientists aren't surprised: Every time we engage in activities that our brains perceive as productive — checking our phone or email, or even actively worrying — we're flooded with dopamine.

For Mellen, author of *Unstuff Your Life!*, learning to free up a cluttered schedule is a matter of importance and urgency.

"You're going to get to the end of your life, and you're either going to be satisfied or dissatisfied," he cautions. "What difference do

The cost of our overstuffed schedules and half-hearted commitments is borne by our health, relationships, and peace of mind. Nonetheless, many of us try to solve the problem by trying to become even more efficient and productive, rather than by cutting back and creating space.



you want to make? What impact do you want to have? What choices do you need to make to live a life of meaning and significance instead of sleepwalking through it?”

The following strategies can help you start clearing your calendar so you have more time for what matters to you.

Identify Your Core Values

Before you can decide what should stay on your schedule and what should go, you must identify what’s important to you. “If your values aren’t crystal clear,” says Mellen, “you’re likely making decisions counter to them in the big picture, because you’re instead focused on short-term comfort.”

Recalling moments in your life that were particularly sweet — instances when you felt most alive — can help you identify your core values. Create a short list of the beliefs that those events illuminated or honored and assess whether the activities on your current calendar (and opportunities that may arise in the future) align with it.

Then, when you set your sights on specific life goals, such as more traveling or volunteering, try to clear your schedule of activities that are of “no value or consequence to you,” he says. This will open up time to dream, prepare, and pursue the items you find most meaningful.

Identifying core values can be especially helpful for creating cohesive work teams and families, Mellen adds. When everyone participates in the process of recognizing what’s important to the group, each person becomes more committed to those values. That group alignment simplifies scheduling decisions.

Take Inventory of Your Schedule

To get a better handle on your time, you need to know how you actually spend it. “Track everything you’re spending your time on for a week,” says Mellen. “Record everything you do, including eating, biobreaks, commuting — all of it.”

You can use a stopwatch to clock each activity and jot down the time you spend on a tracking sheet. Or you could chronicle your days in a personalized journaling system like a bullet journal, which is designed to help you record things you consider important. (For guidance on getting started with this journaling method, go to “[Life Log: The Bullet Journal Method](#).”) You could also color-code activities on a digital calendar or use a time-tracking tool such as Toggl.

“The process will open your eyes,” Mellen says. The numbers often reveal a story about your time use that’s completely different from what you imagined. This is especially true of those who linger online, he notes.

“People think they are ninjas with their internet skills. They think they’re slicing in and out. In fact, they go link to link, wandering around aimlessly in the world’s biggest shopping mall for hours.”

“I had a two-hour lunch with a friend rather than eating at my computer and found freedom. I went for half-day leisurely strolls along the seawall and found peace. I went out on a date to watch the sunset from a boat and found radiance. I had no idea that time was meant to be enjoyed — and that I was allowed to enjoy it.”

At the end of each day, reflect upon your activity and consider what’s working and what’s not. If you determine you’re not spending your time in satisfying ways, you can choose to do things differently.

Create More Open Space

Several years ago, to overcome the need to always be busy, Lea — now a success coach — started dedicating a full week each month to “scheduled spontaneity.”

Her first experience was an epiphany. “I had a two-hour lunch with a friend rather than eating at my computer and found freedom. I went for half-day leisurely strolls along the seawall and found peace. I went out on a date to watch the sunset from a boat and found radiance,” she says. “I had no idea that time was meant to be enjoyed — and that I was allowed to enjoy it.”

That revelation inspired Lea to start blocking time on her work schedule to focus on single tasks without interruption. In her personal life, she began making choices based on her identified values of freedom, peace, and joy.

When her clients report out-of-alignment schedules, Lea has often recommended a “freedom week” to reset their relationship with time. “Cancel everything in your calendar for just one week,” she advises. “Tell people you can’t make it, with no justifications and no excuses.”

This is a great way for some people to learn how to reclaim their time and transform how they schedule it in the future.

Even if taking a whole week off isn’t possible, small changes can be just as powerful, Lea maintains. For example, schedule regular chunks of Web-free time and restrict social media visits to brief periods each day. You may find these little windows open opportunities to relax, see a problem in a new way, or redirect energy toward the things in life you cherish most. ●

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The Art of Swedish Death Cleaning

This life-affirming practice can start at any adult age — and help your possessions live on in a meaningful, thoughtful way.

BY JON SPAYDE

When Marie Kondo published *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, many Americans embraced her simple decluttering principle: If something doesn't "spark joy," out it goes. A few years later, Margareta Magnusson published a similar guide with a mildly macabre title: *The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning*. We won't be around forever, Magnusson reminds us, and we owe it to the people who survive us to deal with our stuff so they don't have to after we're gone.

Are we looking at a stark contrast between Japanese joy and Nordic-noir morbidity? Not at all, says Caroline Guntur, a.k.a. The Swedish Organizer. The Chicago-based consultant insists there is plenty of joy in what the Swedes call *döstädning*. While Kondo advises chucking what doesn't make you happy, death cleaning is more about mindfully passing on what does — and ensuring the stuff you don't love finds a good home too.

Notably, although death cleaning is framed around an eventuality generally associated with old age, it pays to not procrastinate. For one thing, we don't know when the curtain will fall on our time. And

starting early can help us appreciate the things we really want and need while preventing clutter from overwhelming us.

Stress Sources

The concept seems morbid and sad. Death cleaning begins with an awareness of our mortality and the realization that our possessions will outlive us. It's easy to put off a process grounded in these uncomfortable realities.

You don't know at what age to start death cleaning. Guntur points out that the process takes time: "It's usually not

a decluttering job that you do over a weekend." Which raises the question, *When do I start?*

The prospect is overwhelming.

Americans tend to own a lot of stuff, and simply surveying it all can be so disheartening that you want to throw up your hands.

You don't know what to keep and what to give away. The goal of death cleaning is to downsize and make sure everything you own has a home eventually, but it can be hard to determine what you still need to keep in your life.

Your loved ones don't want to engage or participate. Finding good homes for your objects often involves passing many of them to family and friends, says Guntur. If they're uncomfortable with the idea, it can make you uncomfortable too. Also, some people in your close circle may not want to take anything that will create more clutter in *their* homes.

You don't know what to do with the things you'd like to part with. While there are natural destinations for some of your objects, there are other things that may be harder to place. How do you keep them out of a landfill?

While there are natural destinations for some of your objects, there are other things that may be harder to place. How do you keep them out of a landfill?



Success Strategies

Let go of morbid thoughts and regret.

Despite its name, death cleaning is all about life. In her book, Magnusson writes that the practice can make your life more pleasant by removing unnecessary things and making your home nice and orderly. “It is about a permanent form of organization that makes your everyday life run more smoothly.”

“It’s not about letting go,” Guntur adds. “It’s about making sure your possessions live on. Though you might feel like, *I really love this item, I’m attached to it*, when you see the joy of the person who gets to use and appreciate it, that tends to offset that feeling. You’re making conscious decisions about where your items go, not leaving it up to chance. I think that’s very life-affirming.”

Start before the last act of life. Guntur acknowledges that the elderly are more likely than younger people to think about their legacy and downsize, but it can start at almost any adult age — “after all, we really don’t know when the end is going to come, do we?” she says. “For people with children, it might be wise to wait [to share items] until they’re at an age when they can appreciate the value of what you’ll be passing on to them. But it’s never too early to get your affairs in order.”

Start small. The key to any kind of organizing, Guntur says, is to begin with one small goal; tackling something manageable will usually generate momentum. “The idea is just to get the ball moving,” she says, “and then, once it’s in motion, it tends to roll on its own.”

Tell stories. A big difference between decluttering and death cleaning is that the Swedish practice allows you to take time to appreciate and tell stories about important items, Guntur notes. This can help with the overwhelm.

“What I normally tell people is to choose one thing that’s important to you and that you want to pass on — maybe a family heirloom or a precious photo,” she adds. “Tell the story behind it, so the story doesn’t get lost. The process of sharing, and the appreciation that the recipient feels, can really work against overwhelm and make you say

to yourself, *That was great! Now, what else can I do?*” The positive feelings that come with this process can help bring resistive relatives and friends on board, too.

Take your time with the things that matter most. “Death cleaning is a dance between practicality and emotional well-being, as decluttering always is,” says Guntur. “The amount of emotion and value an item holds should be equivalent to the amount of time you put into finding its new home.”

For example, finding a home for a spare decorative item, like a vase from a department store, may take mere minutes because the item doesn’t hold a lot of meaning beyond its practical use. But finding a new home for something more valuable, like a signed piece of art, will take longer. While you will likely keep those items for more time to enjoy for yourself, you can consider eventually selling it, donating it to a charity auction, or passing it down to someone who will appreciate it.

Create a “Throwaway Box.” Consider filling a small box with personal items you can’t bear to part with, such as old letters, photographs, mementos, and

journals, which are valuable to you and no one else. Indicate that the box should be thrown away when you are gone so that no one feels obligated to keep or find a new home for those possessions.

Get help. You don’t need to death-clean alone. Family and friends are natural allies and you can also call on professional organizers. Guntur advises choosing one who understands death cleaning and the emotional, familial, and legacy-oriented aspects of the process — usually someone who has been trained as a personal coach as well. “A lot of organizers are trained to get the job done as fast as possible,” she says. “But you want someone who is going to support you through a process that is slower and full of feelings.”

Look far and wide for recipients. While many items may go to family members and friends, you’re likely to own things that either won’t be meaningful to them or will add unwanted clutter to their home. In those cases, try to remember that the rejection of your item is in no way a rejection of you as a person. “It may feel like a personal rejection, but it’s not,” Guntur notes. “Besides, if the person doesn’t see the value of the object, they’re not the right recipient anyway.”

Meanwhile, a little research can turn up those who will appreciate what you have to share, Guntur says. “A gentleman in one of my workshops said, ‘I have all these old books and photos and nobody in my family is interested.’ What we came up with for him was, ‘How about the local history museum?’ He had amazing photos of how his town used to look, and a museum would love them.”

Selling is your final option to keep your things out of the trash bin. Online marketplaces, such as eBay, Facebook Marketplace, and Poshmark, provide a wide pool of possibilities. You may also consider hosting a living estate sale, which can help you liquidate numerous belongings. After all, says Guntur, someone willing to pay for your object probably finds it meaningful. ●

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