

HEALTHY. HAPPY. FOR REAL. •

# Experience Life



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## PEAK POTENTIAL

JULY/AUGUST 2024

**LIFE TIME**

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**SKYWARD X**

Extreme cushion meets carbon



**HOKA**

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## Experience Life

July/August 2024

# PEAK POTENTIAL

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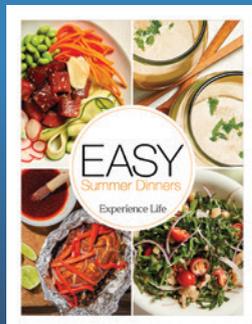
Experience Life

# DIGITAL



## Easy Summer Dinners

Make the most of this season's abundant fresh produce — and save time in the kitchen — by downloading our free recipe guide. It features no-cook meals, grill-friendly foil-pack dinners, simple salads, and more. Scan the QR code below or go to [ELmag.com/summerdinners](https://ELmag.com/summerdinners) to download.



CONNECT WITH US!

### SOLO CAMPING

While the challenges are real, the rewards of camping alone can be extraordinary. Learn why at [ELmag.com/solocamping](https://ELmag.com/solocamping).

### DIY DRY SHAMPOO

Give your hair a break this summer by using dry shampoo between washes. Check out our DIY recipes for dark- and light-colored hair. [ELmag.com/dryshampoo](https://ELmag.com/dryshampoo)

### 50 TIPS FOR OUTDOOR FITNESS

Enjoy all the perks — and avoid the pitfalls — of exercising outdoors this summer. [ELmag.com/outdoorfitness](https://ELmag.com/outdoorfitness)

### FUN IN THE SUN!

Looking for inspired travel destinations, mocktail recipes, tips for healthy skin, and more this summer? We've assembled a collection of articles to help you jump-start the fun this season. Check it out at [ELmag.com/summerfun](https://ELmag.com/summerfun) — or just scan the QR code.





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# Experience Life

BY LIFE TIME

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## EXPERIENCE LIFE MAGAZINE

EDITOR IN CHIEF **Jamie Martin**

DEPUTY EDITORS **Craig Cox, Michael Dregni**

MANAGING EDITOR **Courtney Lewis Opdahl**

FEATURES EDITOR **Courtney Helgoe**

SENIOR EDITORS **Maggie Fazeli Fard, Kaelyn Riley**

SENIOR COPY EDITOR **Mike Oakes**

ASSOCIATE EDITOR/FACT CHECKER **Molly Tynjala**

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

**Laine Bergeson Becco, Catherine Guthrie, Andrew Heffernan, Jill Patton, Mo Perry, Jessie Sholl, Alexandra Smith, Jon Spayde, Heidi Wachter**

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

**Lauren Bedosky, Henry Emmons, Callie Fredrickson, Jose Guzman, Katherine Reynolds Lewis, Aimee Prasek, Krysta Rzeszutek, Kara Douglass Thom**

EXECUTIVE CREATIVE DIRECTOR **Lydia Anderson**

PRODUCTION DIRECTOR **Jane Meronuck**

ART DIRECTOR **Jennifer Jacobson**

DIGITAL DIRECTOR **Anjula Razdan**

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR—DIGITAL MARKETING AND MEDIA STRATEGY  
**Laura Lineburg**

SENIOR MANAGER—BUSINESS AND CIRCULATION **Carrie Stafford**

SENIOR MANAGER—MULTIMEDIA, EMAIL, AND SOCIAL MEDIA  
**Tatyana McNamara**

DIGITAL CONTENT SPECIALIST/SPECIAL-PROJECTS

COORDINATOR **Christy Rice**

EXECUTIVE ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT/OFFICE MANAGER

**Sara Ellingsworth**

FOUNDING EDITOR **Pilar Gerasimo**

Please address all written correspondence and editorial inquiries to **Managing Editor, Experience Life**, 2145 Ford Parkway, Suite 302, St. Paul, MN 55116 or [experiencelife@experiencelife.com](mailto:experiencelife@experiencelife.com).

## LIFE TIME

FOUNDER, CHAIRMAN, AND CEO **Bahram Akradi**

PRESIDENT, MEDIA **Kimo Seymour**

Please address all media and advertising inquiries to [ltmedia@lt.life](mailto:ltmedia@lt.life).

## PICTURE CREDITS

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**LIFE TIME**  
HEALTHY WAY OF LIFE

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*Experience Life* shares health-and-wellness information and healthy-way-of-life stories that reflect a wide variety of human experiences. We respect individuals' pronouns and personal descriptors; for this reason, terms may vary from article to article.

# Ready to Expand

**WHEN I CROSSED** the finish line of my first half marathon, in 2006, I remember thinking there was no way I'd want to double that distance to complete a full. If I was going to run long distances, I should have started with 26.2 miles and *then* done a half — it probably would have seemed a lot easier in that order.

I maintained that mindset for more than 15 years, during which I avoided running with any real consistency. Instead, I centered my fitness routine around strength training and yoga.

But my outlook started to change last summer when I decided to run the Medtronic TC 10-Mile race and fundraise on behalf of a local nonprofit. As my training progressed into fall and race day drew nearer, I realized I was falling a little bit in love with running — how it gave me time to brainstorm and problem-solve, how it got me outside, how it reminded me of my strength and boosted my confidence. For the first time, I started seriously contemplating longer distances.

I achieved my “rundraising” goal and ran those 10 miles — and then I kept up my running routine. I even ran through the colder months; last year’s unseasonably mild Minnesota winter allowed me to maintain solid weekly mileage without relying on a treadmill.

As it warmed up, I realized my mindset had truly shifted: *I want to run a marathon*, I found myself thinking. It scared me, as unfamiliar challenges often do. But the desire outweighed the fear.

So, in the spirit of my word of the year, “expand” (referring to growth outside of my comfort zone), I registered for a fall 2024 marathon.

My goal is to train for and complete the race knowing I’ve done everything I can to optimize my efforts and be at my peak potential (the theme of this issue). To do so, I wanted a clear understanding of my starting point, as well as a plan for nourishing and supporting myself through the process. So I did a few things leading up to the official kickoff of my marathon training:

- I got an active metabolic assessment to determine my anaerobic threshold and heart-rate training zones, which inform my workout intensity and help me avoid overtraining.
- I took a food-sensitivity test to identify anything that might negatively affect my digestion and joint health, as both can be significant issues during endurance training. (I was surprised to learn that potatoes and garlic are potential problems for me.)
- I had a chiropractic and vestibular assessment to address any structural alignment, balance, or cognitive issues, and to determine performance-focused practices I could do to both complement and recover from training.
- I sought out support and insight from family, friends, and colleagues who’ve run the marathon distance. I gathered their best tips, tricks, and practices for making it across that finish line.

I’ve also been seeking inspiration from stories like that of pro off-road cyclist Haley Hunter Smith (page 16) — she bikes hundreds of miles time and time again; I’m leveraging the expertise from “Level Up” (page 52) by incorporating the strength and mobility moves into my postrun and cross-training regimens; and I’m taking note of how to balance my running routine with nature’s cycles (page 77) so I don’t burn out.

I’m excited to push myself to a new limit. How about you? In what areas might you be ready to step outside your comfort zone to see what’s possible?



“I realized my mindset had truly shifted: *I want to run a marathon*, I found myself thinking. **It scared me, as unfamiliar challenges often do.”**



## YOUR THOUGHTS?

Email us at  
[Experiencelife@  
 experiencelife.com](mailto:Experiencelife@experiencelife.com).

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**JAMIE MARTIN** is *Experience Life*’s editor in chief, Life Time’s vice president of content strategy, and cohost of the *Life Time Talks* podcast.

# OCEANFOAM

## Introducing: The First Foam Roller Made From Algae

Oceanfoam, launched in December 2023, is revolutionizing the foam roller industry with their eco-friendly approach. Inspired by his own experiences with injury recovery and muscle tension, Founder Zach Quinn noticed a gap in the market for environmentally conscious options. This realization, coupled with his passion for preserving the planet for future generations, led him to develop a foam roller made from algae.

The algae used in Oceanfoam's rollers are harvested from areas of overgrowth across North America, contributing to the cleanup of water sources. Additionally, the company prioritizes sustainability by utilizing recycled materials and eco-friendly packaging. Quinn's dedication to environmental preservation extends beyond product design; Oceanfoam is actively involved in beach clean-ups and other initiatives to directly impact the environment. For each foam roller made, the algae used helps to cleanse water and

remove CO<sup>2</sup> from the air. To date, in their first order alone, Oceanfoam products have cleaned over 600,000 gallons of water and almost 2 tons of CO<sup>2</sup> from the air.

Driven by a desire to marry functionality with aesthetics, Oceanfoam rollers are not only eco-friendly but also visually appealing. By creating products that people are drawn to, they are more likely to incorporate them into their daily routines, thus amplifying the positive impact on both personal well-being and the planet.

As Oceanfoam continues to expand its product line, including plans for sustainable yoga mats, pool toys, and more, they invite individuals to join their mission to protect the Earth and redefine their active lifestyles with Oceanfoam products.



# TALK TO US

## LARKS AND NIGHT OWLS

[On “How Can I Become a Morning-Workout Person?,” March/April 2024]

 I love this article — it’s spot-on! I’m a morning-workout person. I don’t get up super early — usually around 8:30 a.m. — but it has definitely kept me consistent in my routine. Also, being prepared the night before helps a lot. Just having my workout wear ready and my gym bag packed has helped me move toward my fitness goal.  
**Michelle S.**

 As a night owl, I spent a good part of my adult life trying to become a morning person, since this is always perceived as “better.” My many attempts at waking at the crack of dawn and developing a morning-workout routine, including many tips presented here, failed miserably and left me feeling discouraged and stressed out. My self-esteem suffered.

While I fully appreciate the benefits of morning workouts noted in the article, I think that self-acceptance and learning to make the most of who you are is more important. My morning routine now begins with reflection and planning my day, which allows me to maintain my evening workouts and end my day feeling accomplished. Our culture portrays morning people as more persistent and efficient, but there are studies that show night owls actually get more done.

**Dorothy**

## A VALUABLE VIEW

 Thank you for helping to raise awareness about the importance of the coronary artery calcium scan (“A Clearer View of Heart Disease,” March/April 2024). I’ve been actively encouraging my friends and acquaintances to seriously consider scheduling this scan. It’s a vital step in assessing the health of our arteries and offers insights into potential blockages that could lead to heart attacks if left undetected. Undergoing this quick scan enables timely identification of cardiovascular risks and allows individuals to



proactively take steps to address any concerns, to seek appropriate medical intervention if necessary, and to hopefully avert cardiovascular issues.

**Vanessa G.**

## PLUNGING PRIVATELY

 Regarding your article “Take the Polar Bear Plunge” (January/February 2024), I started plunging on Jan. 1 to get a more regular experience. With single-digit temps in Washington state, my plunge water almost completely froze and the temperatures are consistently lower than 30 degrees. I submerge up to my neck for anywhere from two to five minutes. It’s truly a peaceful and euphoric experience after the first initial shock.  
**Shirlena M.**

*Experience Life* welcomes your comments and suggestions. Email [experiencelife@experiencelife.com](mailto:experiencelife@experiencelife.com), connect with us on social media, or send feedback to:

**Letters to the Editor**

**Experience Life**

**2145 Ford Parkway, Suite 302**

**St. Paul, MN 55116**

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## MENTAL HEALTH BARRIERS

[On “A Generation in Need of Therapy — Again,” January 2024]

 I’m a licensed professional counselor and board-certified national counselor. I work primarily with pre-teens, adolescents, and adults in my private practice. Very infrequently do I receive inquiries for counseling from more advanced-in-age seniors. I believe there are several barriers, one of which is access to care. I do hope this new law and access to care with LPCs and LMFTs will eventually meet that need.

**Joanne K.**

 Thanks so much for sharing this article. I am a certified grief recovery specialist and see the ripple effects of not only COVID but our political unrest and unsettled world. I am a baby boomer, so I can truly relate to what you have shared. Thanks for bringing this to light. I plan to share it with my therapist friends.

**Nancy H.**

## THE YOGA-PILATES COMBO

 I’ve been a yoga instructor since the mid-1970s, and I’ve found over the years that Pilates has much to offer (“Is It Better to Do Yoga or Pilates?,” January/February 2024). They blend so well. I include them both in every class as well as in yin yoga, along with some basic physical therapy stretches. My students range in age from 23 to 76. Yoga and Pilates is the perfect combination for an aging body.

**Denise M.**

## A CURE FOR COMPLAINERS

 I wish I had read this article sooner (“How to Cope With Chronic Complainers,” January/February 2024). It offers so much practical advice on how to handle these situations. I see now where I was constantly trying to “fix,” but what the other person really just wanted was to voice their issues. I will learn to do better.

**Bonnie**

# The Rise of ADULT ADHD

**DIAGNOSES OF** attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) have been rising steadily for the past two decades, but one population has seen its prevalence skyrocket: adults. Diagnoses in this demographic have increased at more than four times the rate of those among children. Why?

It's not because more adults are suddenly developing ADHD. While researchers are beginning to consider the possibility of adult-onset ADHD, typically an adult could qualify for a diagnosis only if their symptoms were present in childhood.

Yet ADHD symptoms are often missed or misdiagnosed during adolescence. That, coupled with less historical awareness of the disorder, helps explain why an estimated three in four adults with the condition never received a diagnosis in their youth.

ADHD is a common — but also complicated — disorder. It's easily missed, easily dismissed, and easily misunderstood.

## WHAT'S BEHIND THE RISE?

The concept of ADHD only formally entered the psychological lexicon in 1968, and it was first viewed as something only children experienced and would in most cases outgrow. But research increasingly revealed that symptoms could persist beyond childhood and often manifest in conjunction with other disorders, causing the diagnostic criteria to expand.

So, an individual with ADHD who grew up in the '90s or early 2000s had a higher likelihood of being un- or misdiagnosed than a kid today. Someone who grew up in the '70s or '80s would have been even more likely to

fly under the radar. And those who left childhood before 1968 could not have been diagnosed at all.

Increased awareness of ADHD has likely contributed to the increased rate of diagnosis — especially when that awareness hits close to home. At least some of the rise in adult ADHD diagnoses can be attributed to the fact that a generation of parents now recognize symptoms in their children that were missed or misdiagnosed in their own childhood, explains clinical psychologist Marc Mooney, PhD, LP.

**An individual with ADHD will not “outgrow” their symptoms; rather, those symptoms will manifest in different ways and in different contexts.**

## ADULT ADHD SYMPTOMS

ADHD is a neurological disorder, which means it does not resolve with age. An individual with ADHD will not “outgrow” their symptoms; rather, those symptoms will manifest in different ways and in different contexts.

“In adults, I keep an eye out for warning signs like struggling to hold a job or constantly procrastinating,” says integrative psychiatrist Henry Emmons, MD. They often wait until the last minute to complete tasks, he

adds, because the rush of stress can be stimulating.

Difficulty keeping up with household chores, bills, and schedules can also be telltale symptoms of adult ADHD, says interventional psychiatrist Brent Nelson, MD. He notes that adults with ADHD often have partners frustrated by their inability to follow through with these responsibilities.

Indeed, the impact of ADHD on relationships is another area in which adults and children differ. We tend to extend kids some slack when it comes to social skills, but adults who struggle to sustain attention in conversations or fail to follow through with commitments may not elicit as much patience. Friends or partners may view such symptoms as signs of disinterest or irresponsibility.

Still, all brains mature with age, and certain symptoms tend to wane as executive functioning improves. Impulse control, especially, may benefit as individuals with ADHD enter adulthood.

“Adults are less likely than kids to be hyperactive, since most of us simply get better at sitting still with age,” says Nelson. “More often, adults with ADHD will swing back and forth between being hyperfocused — losing themselves in an activity for hours at a time — and being unable to focus at all.”

— ALEXANDRA SMITH, MA, LPCC



## LEARN MORE

For more on adult ADHD and treatment options, see an extended version of this story at [ELmag.com/adultadhd](https://www.ELmag.com/adultadhd).



## COUNTING Steps

**There isn't** a true magic number of daily steps to keep healthy: Being active is the key. So, if you're wondering how to get in your steps, here's a comparison of some simple — and not-so-simple — options. Note that your actual number of steps will vary depending on your pace and stride length.



20 minutes of vacuuming  
= **1,500 steps**

1-mile walk with a friend  
= **2,000 steps**



Zumba class  
= **4,000 steps**

5-mile walk with your dog  
= **10,000 steps**



Ultimate Frisbee or soccer game  
= **12,000 steps**

Marathon  
= **31,000 steps**



Leadville Trail 100 Run  
= **190,000 steps**

# A NEW SPIN ON DIZZINESS

**Dizziness and vertigo** are two of the most common reasons people visit a doctor — and yet they can be complex conditions to identify and resolve, according to functional neurologist Jeremy Schmoie, DC, DACNB, founder and director of the Functional Neurology Center in Minnetonka, Minn.

Doctors may have “a hard time coming up with a diagnosis or putting a name on it,” he says. “And that’s when people get told that maybe this is psychological or maybe it’s just stress induced.”

Even assessing the conditions’ prevalence can be head-spinning: It’s estimated that between 20 and 56 percent of Americans deal with dizziness or vertigo at some time during their lives.

And although the terms are often used interchangeably, they describe subtly different sensations. Dizziness is the feeling of being lightheaded or unsteady, while vertigo is an overall spinning sensation.

“At the functional level, it’s about how the system in your brain is integrating things and letting you know where your body is in space,” Schmoie explains. “So, when people come in and they’re dizzy, you have to try and figure out what the root cause of that dizziness is.”

Those causes can be myriad. They include severe neurological issues, such as a stroke, transient ischemic attack, a concussion, and traumatic brain injury.

Functional causes may include cervicogenic issues, when neck muscles are providing problematic proprioception senses; issues with feet proprioceptors; loose crystals in the inner ear affecting vestibular functions; visual anomalies; migraine; virus-generated inflam-

mation; autoimmunity; inflammation from metabolic issues or gut-microbiome imbalances; food sensitivities, such as gluten intolerance; and even tick- or flea-borne diseases or reactions to mold.

Functional neurology treatments are targeted at root causes. Schmoie uses a variety of therapies and equipment, starting with basic nutrition and marker lab tests as well as eye-movement graphing.

To rehabilitate vestibular or visual functions, he relies on seemingly simple eye and balance exercises. He also uses complex machines, such as the GyroStim, which looks like a NASA spacecraft simulator and moves patients through planes of motion to stimulate their brains’ sense of balance.

Nutrition can also play a key role. Schmoie checks for low thyroid hormone and ample levels of magnesium and vitamins D and B12.

Most important, keeping blood-sugar levels stable can have a key effect on remedying dizziness.

“We just start pecking away at this, this, and this,” he says. “Maybe working with you neurologically gets you 10 percent better. Structurally working on your neck makes you 30 percent better. Fixing your gut makes you 20 percent better. And that’s what gets you back to where you need to be.”

— MICHAEL DREGNI



### GET MORE INSIGHTS

For a Q&A with functional neurologist Jeremy Schmoie, see [ELmag.com/dizziness](http://ELmag.com/dizziness).



## TINY BUG, Big Threat

The most dangerous animals to humans are not sharks or tigers or crocodiles — or even pufferfish. They're mosquitoes, which can transmit one or more of myriad deadly diseases with a single bite you may not even notice.

Each year, snakes — No. 2 on the deadly list — kill some 100,000 people. Pesky mosquitoes have caused, on average, an estimated 830,000 human deaths each year since 2010. In years past, they've killed 2 million or more annually.

"There are estimates that almost half of the 108 billion humans who have ever lived succumbed to a mosquito-borne disease," explains historian Timothy Winegard, PhD, author of *The Mosquito: A Human History of Our Deadliest Predator*.

In recent years, the climate crisis has begun pushing species of mosquitoes into new, wider territories, and the bugs are bringing what were once considered

tropical diseases to North America and other parts of the world.

Malaria is the most notorious among these diseases, followed by viruses including West Nile, Zika, chikungunya, dengue, and yellow fever. Chikungunya, dengue, and yellow fever have vaccines.

While cases of malaria worldwide dropped to a historic low in 2015, they're now rising again. The last U.S. domestic case of malaria had been in 2003; in 2023, malaria reappeared in Texas, Florida, and as far north as Maryland, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Dengue — once confined to the tropics — is now being transmitted in the United States as well.

Insecticides have been hailed for halting the spread of mosquitoes, but in recent years we seem to be falling behind in the bug war, the *New York Times* reports.

"Mosquitoes adapt and evolve quickly, which is why our frontline weapons of extermination fail miserably," Winegard explains.

"If not for all of the disease, death, and suffering that this creature bestows on humanity — and has since the dawn of human beings and our hominid ancestors and tons of other animals — we might actually marvel at the sophistication and evolutionary adaptation of this amazing creature," he says.

— MD

**110  
Trillion**  
Estimated number  
of mosquitoes  
on Earth — **about  
14,000 per  
human.**

## YOUR GUT AND YOUR MOOD

A common bacteria found in yogurt and other fermented foods may hold the key to an effective, nonpharmaceutical approach to treating depression and anxiety.

The results of a recent study on mice by University of Virginia School of Medicine researchers suggest that the presence of adequate amounts of *Lactobacillus* in the gut microbiome helps the animals maintain levels of interferon gamma, a cytokine that regulates the body's response to stress and helps protect against anxiety and depression.

The study, published in the journal *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity*, describes how researchers transferred the microbiota of mildly stressed lab mice with microbiome dysbiosis to non-

stressed, germ-free mice; this initiated behavior that was suggestive of mood disorders.

When subsequent tests exposed separate groups of mice to environmental stress, the researchers found that the brains of mice with lower levels of *Lactobacillus* in their gut microbiomes showed increased activation in neural regions associated with fear and anxiety when compared with those with higher levels of the bacteria.

"With these results in hand, we have new tools to optimize the development of probiotics, which should speed up discoveries for novel therapies," study collaborator Andrea Merchak, PhD, said in a press release.

— CRAIG COX





# Are Tattoos Harmful or Helpful to Your Health?



## A MESSAGE TO THE FDA:

# Ban Red Dye No. 3

**ALMOST A THIRD** of American adults are “inked,” including 22 percent who have several tattoos, according to a 2023 Pew Research Center survey. But when you stick ink-filled needles into your skin, is it bad for you — or perhaps beneficial?

It makes sense that your immune system reacts to the invader penetrating your body’s first line of defense. White blood cells called macrophages attack the ink to break it down and dispose of it via your lymphatic system. But research finds that some ink droplets may remain in your system — sometimes even coloring your lymph nodes — potentially exposing your body to carcinogenic or otherwise harmful materials in inks.

Still, research on the long-term effects of ink on *and* in the body is inconclusive.

Tattooing is regulated in the United States by local laws. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approves the sale of cosmetic inks, investigates reports of its ill effects, and issues safety advisories. Yet the agency admits that it “traditionally has not exercised regulatory authority for color additives on the pigments used in tattoo inks.”

“Although a number of color additives are approved for use in cosmetics, none is approved for injection into the skin,” the FDA warns. “Many pigments used in tattoo inks are not approved for skin contact at all. Some are industrial-grade colors that are suitable for printers’ ink or automobile paint.”

Several case studies note a concurrent rise in skin cancers and inking, but they do not find direct causation between the two. “Both the incidence of melanoma and the number of tattoos

have been increasing in recent years, but a possible carcinogenic effect of tattoos remains unproven,” conclude the authors of a literature review published in 2018.

Other research suggests that your body’s response to tattoos may actually strengthen the immune system.

Biocultural medical anthropologist Christopher Lynn, PhD, at the University of Alabama, studies traditional tattooing in Samoa and modern inking in the United States. In several studies of modern electric tattooing, he has found that “people with more tattoos have a more immediate immune response and higher levels of the antibodies lining the body’s mucosa, which is the frontline in the fight against infection.”

Modern inks may pose a different threat. For a study published in *Frontiers in Immunology* in 2022, researchers began assessing the effects of common ink pigments containing possible toxins, including cobalt and zinc. “The problem is that side effects can take decades to develop — think, for example, about cigarette smoke and lung cancer. So if there is a big problem, we will know, but not for years,” says colead author Dr. Thierry Rabilloud of France’s Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique.

Still, Lynn believes tattoos work like a vaccine or like exercise: “A little bit is actually good for you and prepares your body to fight off germs. Regular exercise provides immune-function benefits through repetition, not necessarily single visits to the gym. We think this is similar to how each tattoo seems to prepare the body for vigilance.”

— MD

**The controversial additive** that adds color to more than 3,200 food products, Red Dye No. 3 has managed to avoid meaningful federal oversight in the 30-plus years since the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) banned its use in cosmetics after studies found that it causes cancer in lab rats. But its purveyors’ regulatory immunity has suddenly become less assured.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom in October 2023 signed a law that would ban the sale of products containing the dye — as well as three other food additives — beginning in 2027. The move is expected to put pressure on the FDA to revisit its 1990 ruling that prohibited the dye’s use in cosmetics but not in food.

“The primary purpose of this bill was to protect kids and families and consumers in the state of California,” Assemblymember Jesse Gabriel tells the *New York Times*. “But a secondary purpose here was to send a message to Washington that the FDA process is broken, and hopefully to spur momentum in Washington, D.C., for real, significant change.”

Red Dye No. 3 is already banned for most food uses in several countries, including Canada, Australia, and those in the European Union. 🌐

— CC

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KIT UP NOW



# CHANGING GEARS

Olympian and pro off-road cyclist Haley Hunter-Smith shares her journey to mental well-being and how she's refocusing her goals.

BY CALLIE FREDRICKSON

PHOTOS BY LANDON LANG BURNLEY

**ANYONE CAN CHASE** excellence, but defining what excellence means to *you* and instead chasing *that* is a true triumph. For Haley Hunter Smith, Olympian and professional off-road cyclist, that change in focus proved to be a groundbreaking shift over the past year.

Some would expect Smith, 30, who competed in the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, to continue to pedal toward a medal. But in the years following those games, she found her path led elsewhere.

“We often think of the Olympics as the pinnacle for sports because we make them so,” she says. “I’ve been able to appreciate the riding I do because I’ve learned to value what’s important to me. That has given me freedom.”

Smith’s journey along this route wasn’t always easy; her biking career began during one of the hardest periods in her life.

Though she describes her childhood in the small town of Uxbridge, Ontario, as “pretty amazing,” life brought challenges as she got older. In ninth grade, she was hospitalized and diagnosed with anxiety and anorexia.

“I was very anxious growing up,” she recalls. “When I went to high school, that transition sent things out of control for me, and my anxiety sharpened into a food focus. Since then, I’ve been re-diagnosed with anxiety and orthorexia.”

Soon after being released from the hospital, Smith began bicycling — which became a therapy of sorts. “My dad and brother biked recreationally,” she explains. “I started riding with them for fun, but I soon learned it was the only thing that made me feel better from my mental illness.”

Smith also worked with a psychologist and psychiatrist, and she practiced yoga and mindfulness to help manage her diagnoses. “Nothing was as powerful as the bike, though. Being outside grounds me and makes me feel less anxious. I can just breathe.”

After a few years of riding recreationally, Smith, at 17, tapped into her competitive nature and started racing.

“I started out riding in a Thursday-night race series, then raced in Ontario Cup events, then Canada Cup races.”

From there, she progressed to the Canadian Mountain Bike National Championships before being invited to participate in some World Cup races. By the time she turned 20, in 2013, Smith was on the professional circuit — and had set her sights on the Olympics.

For nearly seven years, Smith competed full-time. Though she had a few setbacks, she generally experienced more success each year — culminating in her selection to Team Canada for the 2020 Olympic Games.

But her performance didn’t match her dreams. “I was drowning in pressure,” she recalls. “I didn’t realize it then, but I was struggling so much.”

Despite top-10 finishes in a number of qualifiers, she finished 29th in the cross-country mountain-bike event.

“I struggled with the pressure and scrutiny that came with competing, and honestly, just underperformed,” she recalls. “It was emotionally, mentally, and physically a lot to handle — on top of it also being during the pandemic. I didn’t handle it well. I was working with a psychologist and several other performance specialists — a dietitian, physiologist, therapist, etc. — throughout the whole Olympic quadrennial.”

Looking back, Smith has learned that challenging scenarios like those she experienced during the Olympics tend to bring disordered-eating behaviors and thinking back to the forefront. So she decided to step away from Olympic mountain biking.

“A few years ago, I would have said I’ve overcome my eating disorder. Now, I’m not so naive,” she says. “The thought and behavior patterns that are characteristic of my eating disorder are deeply ingrained, and though those pathways may become

buried or disused, they’re still there. It’s something I will always have to be aware of and work around. Practicing self-awareness is key.

“Sometimes that looks like a formal meditation practice; other times it’s journaling. Recently, I started working with a dietitian again, and I’ve received more professional help.”



After taking some time off, Smith competed in her first gravel race, UNBOUND Gravel, in 2022. She went on that year to win the women’s division of the Life Time Grand Prix off-road cycling series — the pinnacle of months of training and dedication.

In 2023, Smith placed third in the series, won the Canadian Cross-Country Marathon national title, and finished second at a Cross-Country Marathon World Cup.

“I’m focusing more on endurance racing now because it feels like a place where I have a lot of curiosity,” she explains. “In a way, I feel like I reached the ceiling with what I was capable of with Olympic racing. There is so much to explore with endurance racing — both literally and internally.”

# Q&A

WITH HALEY HUNTER SMITH

**EXPERIENCE LIFE** • You're dedicated to helping others who struggle with their mental health. Can you explain why and speak to some of the things you've done?

**HALEY HUNTER SMITH** • I've been living with my diagnosis since I was young. I go through periods when I feel like I have great mental health and periods when I feel like I have terrible mental health. I knew people must be able to relate to me.

I realized that I had an opportunity to show kids they don't have to be defined by a diagnosis and that they can achieve whatever they want. The only thing they need to do is have a dream and have the courage to pursue it. That became my purpose, and my mountain bike became the method.

I started to speak publicly about [mental health] in my early 20s, and that was scary at first. But when I went through the worst of my struggles in ninth grade, I was so alone because nobody talked about that kind of stuff yet. It was the "pre-stigmatization" era. I made a choice that I would do whatever was in my power to make sure no one else went through it the same way I did.

I spoke at local clubs to raise awareness and reach girls, specifically, who might not otherwise have been reached. It progressed from there and became like a pro bono speaking gig that I would do.

Through that, I ended up being connected with a lot of people who were going through something similar for one-on-one mentor relationships.

There's also an organization called Cam's Kids that helps kids manage anxiety, and I helped launch that organization as their first youth ambassador. I've also given guest lectures to university students on mental health and sports performance.

I'm currently advancing my education in hopes of continuing to make a difference. I chose to go into



sports psychology for my master's and am in a lab that focuses on youth development. This is a group of master's and doctoral students and faculty members who conduct qualitative and quantitative research into youth development through sport. I'll begin pursuing my PhD in sports psychology in fall 2024.

I hope that in the future I can make impacts on sports policies and sports delivery — providing sports as an experience and opportunity for youth in terms of programming, leagues, etc. — so kids are given a better outlook and more mental health skills when they're younger.

**EL** • What advice would you give someone who is struggling with their mental health or knows someone who is dealing with these issues?

**HHS** • The first step is to tell somebody. It will make the situation so much better, and it takes courage to do that. If you can even just tell one person, that is the first step to finding support for your journey to better mental well-being.

You don't deserve to feel this way, you don't have to feel this way, and you don't have to be a prisoner to this disordered way of thinking. If you can take that first step and share what you're feeling with someone, I highly encourage you to do it.

**EL** • What's next for you with riding?

**HHS** • I recently signed with Trek, specifically representing their Driftless gravel-bike team, which is really exciting. Signing with this company allows me to focus solely on endurance racing and have the confidence and assurance

to not feel like I have to pursue cross-country Olympic racing simultaneously.

My goal this year is to race at UNBOUND Gravel, Leadville, the UCI Gravel World Championships, and the UCI Mountain Bike Marathon World Championships. I'm also competing in the Life Time Grand Prix again this year.

Unfortunately, I was recently diagnosed with asthma, so I'm learning how to deal with that while continuing to ride. The asthma makes it hard for my lungs and throat to function properly, but I'm learning how to respond to it while also managing my anxiety. I've learned if I panic while feeling an asthma attack coming on, it starts a negative feedback loop. Therefore, I'm learning to control my response to the physiological sensation of it.

**EL** • You found biking to be therapeutic for you. What advice would you give to someone who wants to try biking for the first time?

**HHS** • Don't be intimidated. It's supposed to be fun, and it doesn't matter if you're not wearing the "right" gear or if you look goofy. It's just a fun thing to do and it's great for your mental and physical health.

An easy way to get into biking is through gravel or riding on rail trails. It's a little safer than roads and you don't have to worry about traffic. I'd say just don't be intimidated and give it a try. Don't worry about what you look like or if you feel like you don't belong on a bike because the answer is yes, you belong. 🚴

**CALLIE FREDRICKSON** is a Life Time content editor.

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# Eat Protein at Every Meal

Reach your healthy protein goals with this month's challenge.

BY *EXPERIENCE LIFE* STAFF

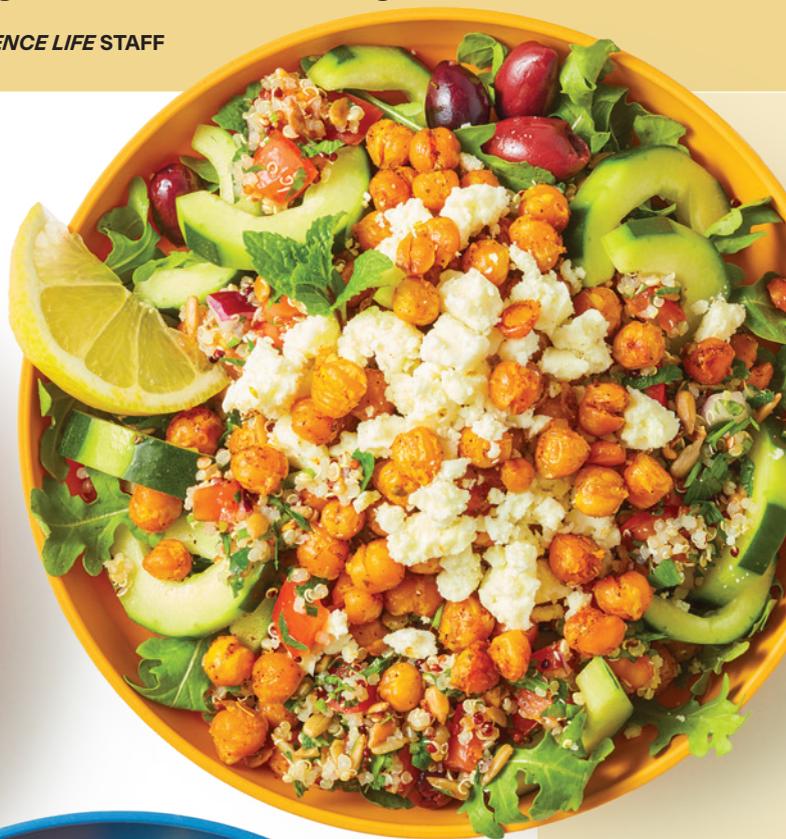


## WHY

Often referred to as the building blocks of life, proteins help build muscle, support tissue repair, and manage metabolism.

## HOW

Individual protein needs vary by body size and activity level. However, most nutritionists recommend that we eat 20 to 30 grams of protein at each meal. For cooked meat, that amounts to a portion about the size of a deck of cards. For cooked beans, it's 1½ to 2 cups.



## TAKE ACTION

Find more protein serving sizes and the recipes for the meals pictured here at [ELmag.com/onehealthyhabit](https://www.ELmag.com/onehealthyhabit).

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# A Healthy Evolution

How a woman's health issues encouraged her to forge a more balanced relationship with fitness and her body.



Bottom left: Krysta Rzeszutek's fitness progress went off track when she began experiencing health issues in 2020. Top left and right: She has since built a routine that better supports her physical and mental well-being.

BY **KRYSTA RZESZUTEK**

**MY YOGA PRACTICE** begins in child's pose: forehead on the mat, arms stretched out, fingertips reaching forward. I am literally grounded. Here, I bring intention to my breath and its connection with my body.

There was a time when the desire to change my body ruled my life. But a series of ailments began to limit my physical abilities; these included cystic acne, hormone imbalances, and gastrointestinal issues. Since then, I've learned that supporting my health is much more important than adjusting my appearance.

Now, exercise — the tool I once used to change how I look on the outside — has become one way I feel more at home inside my body.

In the stillness of this moment during a yoga class, my heart surrenders and I feel at peace. Child's pose symbolizes an opportunity to reset and release what weighs me down. It represents where I am now on my fitness journey. I have come a long way.

## FINDING FITNESS

I've struggled with body image since I was young. Genetically, I tend toward thin, which wasn't what I wanted for myself. These insecurities intensified following my first heartbreak and upon

graduating from high school in 2013. I became clinically underweight. At the time, I equated my self-worth with my appearance; I didn't feel worthy. I didn't want a slender build; I wanted curves.

This desire and insecurity followed me to college, where I started taking medication for anxiety and depression. Despite the side effects, I continued to take them until I graduated in 2017 with a degree in journalism and the enduring belief that the ideal body image was a fuller figure.

**I've learned that supporting my health is much more important than adjusting my appearance.**

The next summer, I stopped taking antidepressants to see how I'd feel. I got a budget-friendly gym membership with the goal of gaining weight and shaping the body I longed for. I wasn't motivated by better health; my fitness journey began from a place of deep insecurity.

I worked out three to five times a week, doing a combination of low-intensity weight training and some

cardio, mostly walking. I didn't notice much of a difference in my physique, but I gained some healthy weight and my mental health improved. I had a sense of pride in exercising consistently, and I felt confident.

Then the pandemic happened. I stopped working out when gyms closed. I was furloughed, and eventually laid off, from my job as a marketing associate.

In the span of three months my face became covered in cystic acne — for reasons still unknown to me. I didn't recognize the person I saw in the mirror. It was disorienting, especially after I had worked so hard to build confidence. Something with my health had clearly fallen off the rails.

In late 2020, I went on Accutane for four months. The side effects were harsh, but my skin slowly improved.

Once gyms and fitness centers reopened, I joined Life Time, where I eventually learned more about exercise technique and form. I started focusing on progressive overload and steadily gained strength and muscle.

By the summer of 2021, I was stronger and more confident than ever before. Fitness had become a part of who I was. My identity and self perception were closely tied to it.

## STRENGTH SETBACKS

Meanwhile, my hormones became deeply unbalanced as a result of reproductive health issues. This led me to experiment with different forms of birth control and new medications for recurring skin complications. Consequently, by 2022, I had lost much of my energy and hard-earned strength and muscle.

Still, I stayed consistent with my fitness routine and pushed even harder. I went to the gym almost every day and religiously tracked my food intake. I wasn't kind to myself. I was frustrated with my body because it felt foreign and untrustworthy — constantly sabotaging the gains I'd worked so hard to make.

Pushing myself only made me feel worse physically, mentally, and emotionally, but I didn't know what else to do. I had an overwhelming desire to regain control, feel strong again, and overcome my insecurities. My fixation resulted in neglecting other hobbies, my relationships, and my responsibilities, and it prevented me from processing emotions.

In hindsight, I recognize this as a pivotal time: Losing my strength and well-being planted the seeds for a gentleness with myself. Though I continued to show up and work hard, something inside of me shifted. I started to reevaluate my relationship with fitness and my body.

## A NECESSARY RESET

In the spring of 2022, I was dealing with severe anxiety, brain fog, bloating, and gut-health issues. I'd struggled with irritable bowel syndrome when I was younger, but this was different.

The bloating was so bad that a few sips of water in the morning would inflate my stomach so much that I couldn't see my toes. And even though I was eating more than enough, I was rapidly losing weight.

These symptoms prompted me to see multiple gastroenterologists. After many tests, I received a diagnosis of small-intestinal bacterial overgrowth (SIBO) in fall 2023. It felt like another setback.

In the wake of my SIBO diagnosis, I realized that I needed to again reconsider how I approached my health and wellness. For the longest time, my main focus had been trying to change my body to fit

the ideal I had in mind. Fitness was my primary tool to achieve that goal.

It wasn't working. Overexercising made me feel worse because it drained the energy my body needed to recover and further dysregulated my nervous system.

When I asked myself, *In the absence of health, what role does fitness play in my life?*, I understood that my goals needed to evolve. Rather than try to change my body, I wanted to meet my body where it was. This shift toward honoring my body's limits became crucial to healing — both physically and mentally.

## REGAINING BALANCE

Today, my main goal is to balance my life, habits, and routines to fit what my body needs in the moment. It hasn't been an instant change, but the progress is encouraging. I now see the health issues I've experienced as opportunities to lean in and listen to my body.

Most weeks I strength train three to five days and attend regular yoga classes, which offer my mind a different workout and more peace.

As of May 2024, after a difficult recovery path, I no longer have SIBO, but my symptoms persist. As I continue with more testing, I've started learning about the gut-brain connection and the ways that past trauma has affected my nervous system and overall health.

With healing my nervous system in mind, I've incorporated acupuncture, meditation, and mindful breathing into my routine. I prioritize sleep, whole foods, and supportive relationships that restore a sense of belonging and security.

My fitness journey initially stemmed from insecurity and dissatisfaction, and the gym became a battleground. But these days, I consider exercise a form of self-care and empowerment.

My workouts have become a means of caring for my body, fostering a connection between physical and mental well-being. I love my body and everything it does for me, on both good and tough days.

With this grander vision for my health, I'm actively working on showing my body all the love it deserves — as it exists today and all the days in the future. 🌱

## Krysta's Top Takeaways

1.

### Be intentional.

"My body is constantly teaching me," Krysta says. "I know when to push myself and when to gently nurture myself."

2.

### Embrace change.

Krysta notes that trying to control her body led to greater instability. These days, her goal is to adapt to change rather than to try to assert control.

3.

### Give yourself grace.

"Our hearts deserve the grace to feel our way through the complexities and chaos of life," she says. "Every emotion deserves kindness and space to exist without judgement."



## TELL US YOUR STORY

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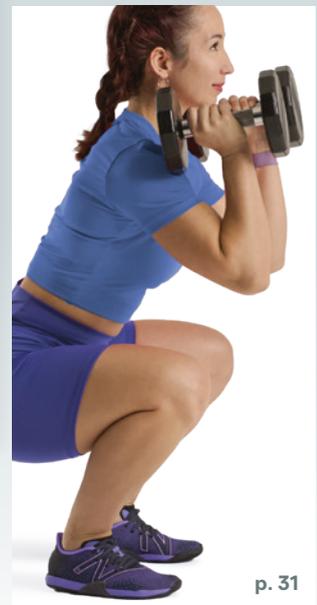
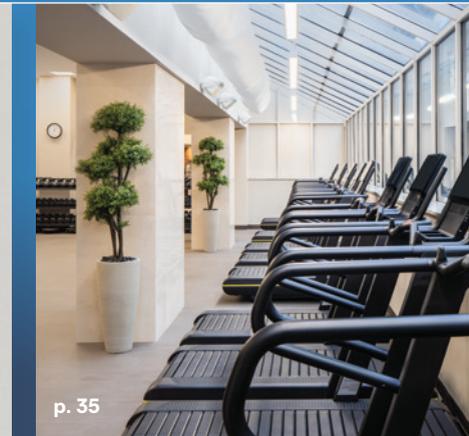
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# REAL FITNESS



**KNEE WOES** don't have to be part of getting older. Many injuries in this multifaceted joint can be prevented or rehabilitated with targeted strength and mobility exercises that focus on stability and rhythm. Build strong, powerful knees with our progressive workout plan on page 26.



# 5 Moves for Resilient Knees

Build strong, powerful knees with this progressive workout plan.

BY ANDREW HEFFERNAN, CSCS

**KNEE ISSUES** and the mobility limitations that accompany them are so pervasive that it's easy to believe they're a foregone conclusion, an expected part of growing older. Injuries to the ligaments of the knee, fractures around the joint, gout, osteoarthritis, and overuse — the result of time under the tensions of an active life — are just a few common causes of knee pain.

But knee issues don't have to accompany the aging process, says Mark Schneider, a trauma-informed strength coach specializing in injury rehab and pain management. Many injuries can be prevented or ameliorated through targeted strength and mobility work.

"The knee flourishes in stability and rhythm," Schneider explains.

*Stability* requires strengthening the muscles that cross the knee joint — particularly those on the front and back of your thighs and calves. Those

muscles, he says, are your first line of defense against injury. When they're weak, the tendons and ligaments in the knee joint can be easily overtaxed.

But when you strengthen them, he notes, "they act like a waterproof shell that takes most of the abuse of the environment so that the jacket underneath can keep you warm."

*Rhythm* refers to your knees' ability to work in tandem with the more complex joints in the kinetic chain. As Schneider describes it, "The knee is the servant of the hip above and the ankle below." When those joints don't function well — bending and rotating as they're designed — the knee is often pulled off-kilter, resulting in pain and injury.

Schneider created the following routine to hone both of these skills. It aims to build muscle around the knees to improve stability while teaching coordination and balance in all the major lower-body joints to bolster rhythm.



# The Workout

This program is based on five movements, each with three to five variations, and is intended to be progressive. Begin with the level-one variations and work your way up over time, focusing on time rather than reps.

With each exercise, aim to move at a steady, continuous pace for about one full minute. Work to increase your time whenever you repeat the workout. When you can perform a movement continuously for two minutes, progress to the next level. You may not level up every move at the same pace.

The exercises should be challenging and may be uncomfortable, but they should not be painful — so scale up only as quickly as you can with control and without pain. (If you are experiencing acute or chronic pain, or recovering from an injury or surgery, consult a medical professional prior to beginning this program.)

Perform the entire workout as a standalone session two or three times per week. Alternatively, perform two or three of the moves daily, either as a warm-up to a lower-body workout or as a standalone mini workout.



## SEE THE MOVES IN ACTION

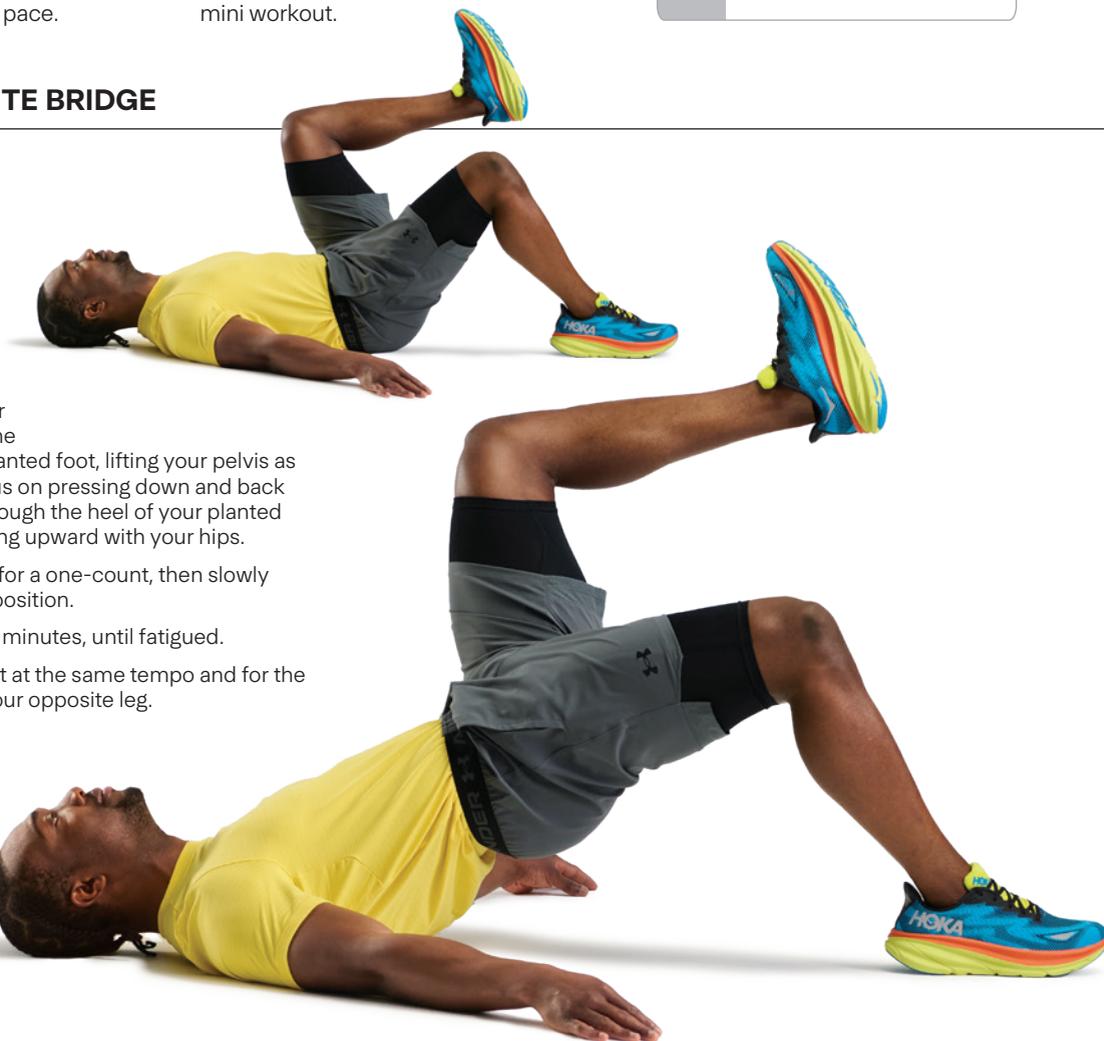
For exercise demos, visit [ELmag.com/knees](http://ELmag.com/knees).



## SINGLE-LEG GLUTE BRIDGE

### LEVEL 1

- Lie on your back with your feet flat on the floor and your knees bent.
- Lift one foot off the ground.
- Start a timer. Then, keeping your shoulder blades and head on the floor, push off your planted foot, lifting your pelvis as high as possible. Focus on pressing down and back (toward your hips) through the heel of your planted foot instead of thrusting upward with your hips.
- Hold the top position for a one-count, then slowly return to the starting position.
- Repeat for one to two minutes, until fatigued.
- Repeat the movement at the same tempo and for the same duration with your opposite leg.



### LEVEL 2

Perform the movement with the ball of your foot (of the working leg) on a step, and your heel hanging off. Keep your foot level for the duration of the set and focus on pressing downward through the ball of your foot.

### LEVEL 3

Perform the movement with the foot of your working leg on a higher surface. Press the ball of your foot firmly into the surface as the set progresses.

### LEVEL 4

Perform the movement with the foot of your working leg on a foam roller, a Swiss ball, or some other unstable surface.

## SPLIT SQUAT

### LEVEL 1

- Assume a shoulder-width stance with your feet parallel, then step one foot directly backward 2 to 3 feet, placing the sole of that foot flat on the floor. This is your starting position.
- Start a timer. Keeping your front shin vertical and the pressure on your front heel, bend your knees and hips to lower your back knee close to the floor while simultaneously bending your torso forward so your belly touches — or comes close to — your front thigh. Your back heel will rise off the floor.
- Return to the starting position, driving through your front heel and lowering your back heel. Repeat for one to two minutes, until fatigued.
- Repeat for the same duration with your other foot forward.



### LEVEL 2

Perform the movement by keeping the pressure on the ball of your front foot.

### LEVEL 3

Perform the movement by driving your front knee forward while maintaining maximal pressure on your heel throughout each rep.

### LEVEL 4

Perform the movement by keeping the pressure on your front heel and maintaining a vertical torso throughout each rep.

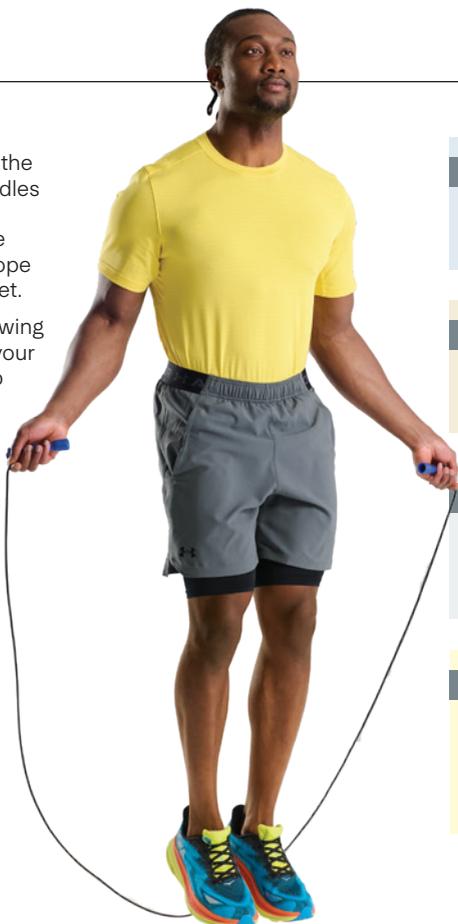
### LEVEL 5

Perform the same movement as level four, but keep the pressure on the ball of your front foot throughout the set.

## JUMP ROPE

### LEVEL 1

- Stand, holding the jump rope handles at about waist height, with the center of the rope behind your feet.
- Start a timer. Swing the rope over your head and jump over the rope continuously, as best as you can (single or double foot, steady or erratic pace).
- Repeat for one to two minutes, until fatigued.



### LEVEL 2

Perform the movement by trying to land as quietly as possible on each rep.

### LEVEL 3

Perform the movement by “slapping” the floor strongly with the balls of your feet on each jump.

### LEVEL 4

Perform the movement by skipping from foot to foot on each rep (skipping over the rope with your right foot on the first rep, your left on the second, and so on).

### LEVEL 5

Perform the movement by working in tricks as desired, such as crossovers (crossing your arms as the rope passes over your head and jumping through the loop) and double-unders (swinging the rope twice under the feet).

## COPENHAGEN PLANK

### LEVEL 1

- Assume a side-plank position, with the inside of your top knee resting on an exercise bench and your bottom leg extended below the bench. Your bottom elbow, hand, and forearm, and the outside of your bottom foot, should be on the floor. Stack your shoulders and hips. This is your starting position.
- Start a timer. Maintaining your alignment, press the inside of your top knee into the bench and lift your right foot from the floor. Hold this position for one to two minutes, until fatigued.
- Switch to the opposite side and repeat for the same duration.



### LEVEL 2

Perform the movement with your bottom leg off the floor, repeatedly oscillating that leg up and down 4 to 6 inches.

### LEVEL 3

Perform the movement with your bottom leg off the floor, repeatedly oscillating up and down as far as possible.

### LEVEL 4

Perform the movement, this time with the top leg extended and the shin/calf of that leg on the bench. Then progress through levels one through three again, using this new setup.

## ISOMETRIC HOLD



### LEVEL 1: SPLIT SQUAT

- Assume a split-squat position as described on the top of page 28.
- Bend both knees, lowering yourself to a point that feels stable but not easy.
- Start a timer. Hold the low position as long as possible (up to two minutes), then repeat the movement for the same length of time on the other side.



### LEVEL 2: WALL SIT

- Stand with your back against a wall.
- Keeping your back flat against the wall, bend your knees, lowering yourself into a position that feels stable but not easy.
- Start a timer. Hold the low position as long as possible (up to two minutes).



### LEVEL 3: SINGLE-LEG ROMANIAN DEADLIFT

- Stand with your knees slightly bent.
- Place your weight on your right foot and lift your left foot an inch or two off the floor.
- Start a timer. Keeping your lower back in its natural arch, lift your left leg behind you and simultaneously hinge forward at your right hip so you're balancing on your right leg.
- Extend and straighten your left leg behind you, attempting to keep your left leg and torso parallel to the ground and the toes of your left foot pointing toward the floor.
- Hold the position as long as possible (up to two minutes). Repeat for the same length of time on the other side. 🔄



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Brace your core to maintain an upright chest position.

Keep your heels down throughout the movement.

Squat down until your thighs are about parallel (or below parallel) to the floor.

Avoid slumping or overarchng your spine.

Squeeze your glutes at the top of the press.

# The Thruster

This full-body move combines two strength exercises to boost power and conditioning.

BY **MAGGIE FAZELI FARD, RKC, MFT-1, ALPHA**

**THE THRUSTER** combines two moves — the front squat and the push press — into a single exercise that’s notable for building strength and power; improving movement efficiency, coordination, and balance; and boosting your cardio capacity.

Like burpees, thrusters are one of the more polarizing compound exercises. Whether you love them or hate them, these tips can help you get the most out of this movement.

**Hone your form.** A common pitfall when you’re doing thrusters is to attempt the move without mastering its individual parts. Make sure that you are comfortable with the

mechanics of a front squat and push press before piecing them together.

**Move with control.** Because thrusters are a conditioning challenge, it’s tempting to assume a breakneck pace. Not only is this exhausting, but it can also compromise your form.

Stay in control, taking care to hit each beat at the bottom of the squat and to complete a full extension at the top of the press. As you become more proficient, you can speed up the movement while staying mindful of your form and range of motion.

**Keep the motion fluid.** Yes, you want to reach full range of motion at the bottom and the top of the move,

but don’t get stuck. Avoid lingering at the bottom of the squat or top of the press or stopping midway through the move. Take advantage of momentum to maintain a fluid down-and-up motion.

**Don’t overload the weight.** If you’re new to thrusters, start with light weights — or no weight at all, keeping your fingertips on your shoulders. As you build strength and comfort, increase the load.

**Remember to breathe.** Inhale through your nose as you squat down. Exhale through your nose or mouth as you stand and press the weights overhead. Do not hold your breath.

PHOTOS: KELLY LOVERUD; STYLING: PAW BRAND; MODEL: ANNA TAYLOR

INSTRUCTIONS

1.

Stand holding your weight of choice — a pair of dumbbells, kettlebells, or a barbell — at shoulder height with feet at about hip width.

2.

Keeping your chest up and your spine in a neutral position, squat down as far as you comfortably can.

3.

Reverse the move, forcefully pressing the weight overhead as you rise. Fully extend through your arms, hips, and knees.

4.

Lower the weight to shoulder height with control, and immediately flow into the squat position to repeat the move.



**CHANGE IT UP**

For five thruster variations, visit [ELmag.com/thruster](http://ELmag.com/thruster).



# Learn to Love the Ladder

Short on time, equipment, or space? Try this high-volume training style for an effective strength and conditioning workout.

BY **MAGGIE FAZELI FARD,**  
RKC, MFT-1, ALPHA



## 1. Ascending Ladder

**WHEN YOU'RE** strength training, nothing beats a progressive, periodized program that aligns with your goals and fitness level. But sometimes — say, when you're traveling, when life throws you a scheduling curveball, or when you simply want to mix things up with a new challenge — it can be helpful to go off-plan rather than skip exercising altogether. That's where ladder workouts truly shine.

Not to be confused with agility ladder workouts, the “ladder” here refers to an ascending or descending rep scheme to rack up volume in a short period of time without requiring much, or any, weight. It's an efficient, effective way to train conditioning and strength endurance.

To get started, give one of these ladder schemes and sample workouts a try.

This is a rep scheme that increases in consistent intervals. You can add any number of reps — one, two, three, and so on — but the key is that the increases are not random. You can apply this to a single exercise using a single weight, a single exercise using multiple weights, or a circuit of multiple exercises using the same weight. Starting with low reps provides a built-in warm-up and gives you the chance to groove the movement pattern before doing higher reps.

### Single-exercise, single-weight ascending ladder

Set up one kettlebell for kettlebell swings; the weight you choose is the weight you'll stick with. Perform one swing and set the bell down. Reset, then perform two swings, and set the bell down. Reset, then perform three swings, and set the bell down. Continue increasing the reps in each set by one. You can set a time limit — for instance, stop after five minutes. Or you can cap the reps of the final set — say, stop after you've completed a set of 10 or 20 reps. Pace yourself and rest as needed between rounds.

### Single-exercise, multiweight ascending ladder

Set up three sets of dumbbells — heavy, medium, and light — for floor presses. Perform five reps with the heavy weights, then 10 reps with the medium weights and 15 reps with the light weights. Pace yourself, and rest as needed between rounds. Repeat the circuit up to three times, if desired.

### Multimove, single-weight ascending ladder

Set up a single barbell, or set of dumbbells, to perform a circuit of deadlifts, bent-over rows, and thrusters (see page 31 for thruster form tips; this will be the limiting exercise for most people, so choose a weight that feels slightly challenging and use that same weight for all three movements). Set a timer for 12 minutes. Perform three reps of each exercise, in order, then six reps, then nine reps, then 12 reps, and so on, increasing in intervals of three until time is up. Pace yourself and rest as needed between rounds.



## 2.

### Descending Ladder

This is a rep scheme that decreases in consistent intervals. As with the ascending ladder, the reps can decrease by any number, and this scheme can be used for single exercises and multi-move circuits. For many people, doing fewer reps with each round makes it psychologically more approachable.

#### Single-exercise, single-weight descending ladder

Prepare to perform pull-ups, using assistance (with resistance bands or your feet) as needed to make the following rep count accessible. Perform 10 pull-ups. Release the bar and reset, then perform eight pull-ups. Release the bar and reset, then perform six pull-ups. Continue decreasing the reps by two in each set until you've completed a set of two. Pace yourself and rest as needed between rounds.

#### Single-exercise, multiweight descending ladder

Set up three kettlebells — heavy, medium, and light — for deadlifts. Perform 15 reps with the light bell, then 10 reps with the medium bell and five reps with the heavy bell. Pace yourself, and rest as needed between rounds. Repeat the circuit up to three times, if desired.

#### Multimove, single-weight descending ladder

Set up to perform a circuit of body-weight squats, sit-ups, pushups, and burpees. Perform 10 reps of each exercise, in order. Then nine reps, then eight reps, and so on, ending with one rep of each move. Pace yourself and rest as needed between rounds.

## 3. Ascending-Descending Ladder

Finally, you can combine the ascending and descending schemes to create a longer or more challenging workout. There are a few different ways to approach this ladder style, largely depending on how many exercises you want to incorporate.

#### Pyramid ascending-descending ladder

This approach features reps that increase in consistent intervals until reaching a predetermined rep or time cap, then decreases in the same consistent intervals. Pyramid workouts work particularly well when doing a single movement.

Set up to perform body-weight reverse lunges. Perform one reverse lunge per leg. Reset, then perform two reverse lunges per leg. Reset, then perform three reverse lunges per leg. Continue increasing the reps in each set by one. You can set a time limit (five minutes, for instance) or cap the reps (say, 10 lunges per leg). This is the ascending ladder.

Then reverse the rep count to complete the descending ladder. Be sure to decrease the repetitions in each round by the same original number. Pace yourself and rest as needed between rounds.

#### Waving ladder

This version is best for circuits of two exercises. The rep scheme for one exercise will increase each round while the reps for the other exercise will decrease.

Set up a single kettlebell to perform goblet squats and cleans. You'll use the same weight for both movements, so choose one that is challenging but doable for both.

In the first set, perform two reps of the goblet squat and 10 reps of the kettlebell clean. Then perform four reps of the goblet squat and eight reps of the kettlebell clean. Continue in this fashion, increasing the number of goblet squats and decreasing the number of kettlebell cleans by two per round. Complete the workout with a set of 10 goblet squats and two kettlebell cleans. Pace yourself and rest as needed between sets.

#### 12 Days ladder

Yet another approach to ascending-descending ladders is called a 12 Days ladder — a riff on the song "The 12 Days of Christmas." Despite its name, this routine is not spread out over 12 days — it's done in one continuous session during which a rep count of one to 12 is assigned to a specific movement and, like in the song, every move is repeated in each round. (While it often pops up during the winter holiday season, this workout is a fun challenge any time of year and can be adapted for any number of exercises other than 12.)

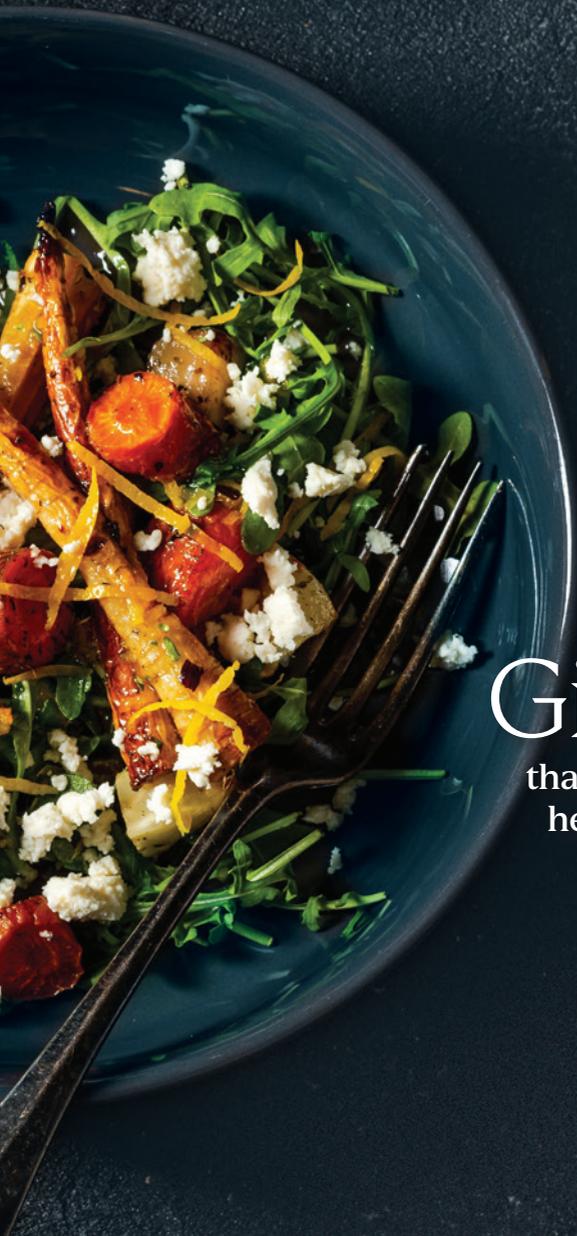
Here's an example of a 12 Days ladder:

1. Star jump
2. Turkish get-up (per side)
3. Inverted row
4. Deadlift
5. Pushup
6. Inchworm
7. Squat jump
8. Gorilla row (per side)
9. Walking lunge (per side)
10. Kettlebell swing
11. Glute bridge
12. Mountain climber (per side)

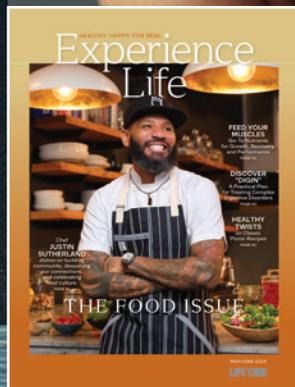
Set up multiple sets of dumbbells or kettlebells, or prepare to use body weight only, as needed for each movement. Begin with one star jump. In the second round, you'll do two Turkish get-ups per side, then one star jump. In the third round, you'll do three inverted rows, two Turkish get-ups per side, then one star jump.

Continue in this fashion until the last round, when you'll complete 12 mountain climbers per side, 11 glute bridges, 10 kettlebell swings, nine walking lunges per side, eight gorilla rows per side, seven squat jumps, six inchworms, five pushups, four deadlifts, three inverted rows, two Turkish get-ups per side, and, finally, one star jump. Pace yourself and rest as needed between sets. 🎯

MAGGIE FAZELI FARD, RKC, MFT-1, ALPHA, is an *Experience Life* senior editor.



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# 3, 2, 1... Go!

Our fitness editor shares a fave indoor hiking workout for the treadmill.

BY **MAGGIE FAZELI FARD, RKC, MFT-1, ALPHA**

**ONE OF MY ABSOLUTE** favorite pastimes is hiking. Not only is it a great workout, training legs, core, heart, lungs, and mind, but hiking has also offered me numerous opportunities to see the world. I've hiked while visiting far-flung locales — Peru, Iceland, Nicaragua, Italy, Greece, and Jordan — and explored my own “backyard” while living in New Jersey, California, the D.C. area, and now, Minnesota.

Whether I'm hiking two miles or 27, whether the terrain is relatively flat or a steep climb up 15,000-foot peaks, I revel in the physical and mental challenges as well as the connection between my spirit and the natural world.

I wish hiking could be a daily practice for me, but my day-to-day life prevents that from being my reality. Rather than waiting for the stars to align before lacing up and heading for the hills, I've found a way to scratch the itch to climb an incline and keep me conditioned between outings: I turn to the tread.

The treadmill gets a bad rap. It is often dismissed as an unnatural way

of moving and scorned as a source of ultimate boredom. Additionally, working out on a treadmill exclusively (or doing any one type of repetitive exercise exclusively) can lead to physical imbalances and overuse injuries.

Avoiding the treadmill at all costs seems shortsighted to me. No, it's not a perfect replacement for hiking outdoors — and I wouldn't want it to be. But as a complement to my routine when my schedule, the weather, or other factors prevent me from getting outside? Sign me up.

One of my go-to hiking workouts for the tread follows a “3, 2, 1... go!” approach: intervals of three minutes, then two minutes, then one minute, then 30 seconds, repeated for multiple rounds.

Here's what one round looks like:  
**3... Set your treadmill to 15 percent incline, or as high as it will go. Begin climbing at a slow pace (2 to 3 mph). Continue for three minutes.**

**2... Drop your incline to 10 percent and increase your speed to a medium pace (2.5 to 4 mph). Continue for two minutes.**

**1... Lower your incline to 8 percent and increase your speed to a power-walking pace (3 to 4.5 mph). Continue for one minute.**

**Go!** Keeping your incline at 8 percent, walk at your fastest pace without

switching to jogging or running (3.1-plus mph). Continue for 30 seconds.

Choose speeds you can control without holding on to the treadmill for support. Use the strength in your core and glutes and swing your bent arms. Avoiding the handholds doesn't just make the workout more effective; it also protects your lower back by forcing you to maintain a slight forward lean and core engagement.

I like to repeat the routine three to five times, without stopping between rounds. Including a dynamic warm-up and gentle cool-down, that amounts to a 25- to 35-minute workout that can be a standalone or stacked with strength or mobility work.

There is no replacement for spending time in nature. But drawing on my past outdoor experiences, I can evoke what hiking in nature feels like, smells like, sounds like, and looks like, even when I am indoors. Visualization transports me as music buoys me, warding off the typical treadmill boredom.

And by the time I step off the tread, I feel on top of the world.



**MAGGIE FAZELI FARD, RKC, MFT-1, ALPHA,** is an *Experience Life* senior editor.



## FEEL THE BEAT

For an upbeat, multigenre playlist curated for this indoor hiking workout, visit [ELmag.com/indoorhiking](http://ELmag.com/indoorhiking).

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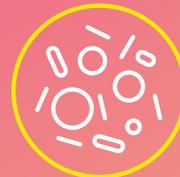
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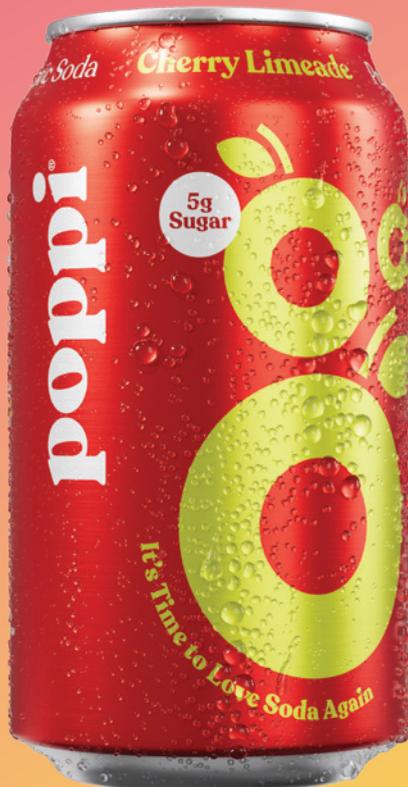
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# REAL FOOD



**GRILLED SKEWERS**, infused with unique spices and enticing aromas, are a street-food staple in many parts of the world. Broaden your culinary horizons and get grilling this summer with the nutrient-packed recipes on page 48.





# In Defense of FRUIT

Why enjoying a diverse array of fruits is still good for you.

BY CATHERINE GUTHRIE

**IN THE RACE** to embrace low-carb eating, many health-conscious people have been eschewing fruit, pointing to the carbohydrates and their implication in the onset of many chronic diseases. But a lot of experts consider the backlash against fruit misguided.

“People are looking at fruit the same way they look at a piece of cake, and that’s simply not equivalent,” says Linda Shiue, MD, an internist at Kaiser Permanente in San Francisco and author of *Spicebox Kitchen*. “Fruit is a perfectly designed package of healthy goodness and joy.”

The sheer magnitude of fruit’s nutritional bounty is unequivocal.

“Everyone has heard the adage ‘Let food be thy medicine,’” says integrative nutritionist Cindi Lockhart, RDN, LD. “But people might not realize that this medicine is coming largely from colorful plants, including fruit.”

Yet many of us forfeit those benefits these days. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates 88 percent of Americans don’t get the recommended 1.5 to 2 cups of fruit per day.

Experts worry about the long-term health consequences of abstaining from fruit. “The laser focus on cutting carbohydrates without thinking about

what the carbohydrate is embedded in is shortsighted,” says Simmons University professor of nutrition Teresa Fung, ScD, RD. “You can’t ignore the health benefits of fruit.”

## WHY FRUIT?

Fruit’s two biggest deliverables are polyphenols and fiber.

Polyphenols, a type of phytonutrient, are among the richest sources of antioxidants and are partly responsible for fruit’s color and flavor.

“Polyphenols are critical for the function of every cell in the body,” says functional-medicine physician Susan Blum, MD, MPH. “The phyto-

nutrients in fruit are where you get the antioxidants that synergistically help your body fend off the diseases of aging.”

Studies suggest that people who eat more fruit may have lower risk of developing hypertension, type 2 diabetes, and certain types of cancer.

Think of antioxidants as the body’s equivalent of a security detail: These compounds seek out and shut down the destructive effects of free radicals, which damage DNA and cell tissue. “The antioxidants in fruit quench the smoldering embers of inflammation,” says Blum. “Left unchecked, those embers ignite disease.”

Fiber is an equally important reason to eat more fruit. The average American is fiber-starved, eating just 10 to 15 grams of fiber a day — around half of the 28 grams recommended by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). “If we cut fruit out of our diets, it’s a lost opportunity for fiber,” says Fung.

Fiber’s bona fides are undeniable. Those who eat more of it are less likely to suffer from heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and common cancers, including breast and colon.

What’s more, fiber-rich foods, including fruit, inch through the intestines more slowly than simple carbs, triggering earlier satiety and staving off hunger.

In short, says Fung, “denying yourself fruit costs your body the opportunity for an easy source of fiber and antioxidants.”

### **BUT WHAT ABOUT FRUCTOSE?**

Some people worry about a sugar in fruit called fructose. Consuming large quantities of this simple carbohydrate can lead to a number of health complications, including an increased risk for hyperinsulinemia and liver disorders.

Fructose can indeed be insidious. Eat more than the body can process and it goes straight to the liver, where it turns into fat. If the fat stays in the liver, it can contribute to a list of complex metabolic issues, including nonalcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) and type 2 diabetes.

Conversely, if the liver exports the fat, it may lead to obesity and heart disease.

The fiber in fruit is the key here, says Robert Lustig, MD, MSL, a pediatric endocrinologist and professor emeritus at the University of California, San Francisco. He refers to sugar as “poison” and likens fructose to alcohol for its ability to damage the liver. “Fiber,” he explains, “limits the body’s absorption of fructose, so the liver doesn’t get overwhelmed.”

Lustig notes that a medium-size apple has roughly 10 grams of fructose and, more importantly, two types of fiber: soluble and insoluble. Eat an apple, and the soluble fiber coats the intestinal lining, moderating the effect of the apple’s fructose on the body. “Picture soluble fiber as petroleum jelly and insoluble fiber as a spaghetti colander: The jelly plugs the holes in the colander,” he says.

At this point, any leftover fructose becomes fodder for the microbiome, Lustig says. “Nature made sure that however much fructose is in a piece of fruit, the antidote is in there too.” (For more on the benefits of fiber, see [ELmag.com/fiber](http://ELmag.com/fiber).)

So go ahead and enjoy fruit. “Fruit has such unique flavors, textures, and scents,” says Shiue. “It is something to be savored and celebrated.”

What follows are some favorites — plus some protein pairings to improve satiety and stabilize blood sugar.

# Apples and Pears

## **Good sources of fiber and quercetin**

Often described as “hard fruits,” apples and pears are best eaten fresh and whole to take full advantage of their fiber and antioxidants, most of which are concentrated in the skin.

European pears are categorized as fall (but sometimes referred to as summer) pears, such as Bartlett, and winter pears, such as Bosc. One large pear contains about 7 grams of fiber, roughly 25 percent of the daily recommended amount.

Apples are a bit more durable, and good ones are available year-round, which make them a fan favorite. “I always have an apple in my bag because it’s the perfect snack,” says Shiue. The average American consumes more than 15 pounds of fresh apples a year, though that total does not include apple juice, which has a more complicated nutritional picture (see “How to Protect Your Blood Sugar” on page 42).

Compared with other fruits, apples may seem basic, but they are a nutritional powerhouse hiding in plain sight. A meta-analysis published in 2016 found that consuming apples is associated with lower incidences of cancers of the lung, colon, esophagus, digestive tract, and breast.

Apples are also high in quercetin, a powerful anti-inflammatory and antioxidant that may help lower both blood pressure and the risk of heart attack. Quercetin doubles as a mast-cell stabilizer, meaning it interrupts the body’s production of histamine, the neurotransmitter that triggers swollen sinuses, sneezing, and watery eyes. Quercetin is why Blum recommends apples “for people with histamine or allergy issues.” (For more on quercetin, see [ELmag.com/quercetin](http://ELmag.com/quercetin).)

**IDEAL PROTEIN PAIRING:** Nut butter or cheddar cheese with apples; blue cheese with pears.



# Bananas

## Good source of potassium and resistant starch

Bananas don't get the love they deserve. Sure, their white flesh means they don't get a spot on the nutrient color wheel, and the lack of fiber in ripe bananas can make them a mashable mess. But they are delicious, and let's take a moment to appreciate their potassium.

A medium banana delivers 422 mg of potassium. An underappreciated workhorse, potassium maintains acid-base balance, helps build proteins, and even regulates the heartbeat.

Each of the body's trillions of cells relies on potassium to manage fluid balance. Yet most American diets lack the mineral, prompting the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Agriculture to label it a "nutrient of public health concern."

Potassium isn't all bananas have to offer. People with type 1 or type 2 diabetes or prediabetes may feel compelled to swear off bananas, but in their earliest stage of ripeness, tinged with green, they pose little threat to blood-glucose levels thanks to their resistant starch.

Resistant starch is a carbohydrate tough enough to survive the digestive juices of the small intestine. Because it doesn't break down there, it does not raise blood-sugar levels. Instead, it travels to the large intestine, where it becomes brunch for your microbiome.

A diet with plenty of resistant starch increases feelings of fullness, prevents constipation, and lowers cholesterol. Recently, an animal study suggested resistant starch from green bananas can protect against NAFLD and help reinforce the gut lining, soothing conditions like inflammatory bowel disease. "I always eat my bananas at the green-turning-yellow stage," says Blum. (For more on resistant starch, see [ELmag.com/resistantstarch](http://ELmag.com/resistantstarch).)

**IDEAL PROTEIN PAIRING:**  
Nut butter.

# Berries

## Good source of flavonoids

Berries are estimated to make up less than 10 percent of the average American's fresh fruit intake, but ounce for ounce, they may convey more health benefits than any other fruit. Low in sugar and high in antioxidants, berries are a great option for people with insulin sensitivities, says Lockhart.

Berries owe their reputation as a superfood to a class of flavonoids called anthocyanins, and the average cup of berries contains anywhere from 30 to 735 mg of them. These natural plant pigments help defend cells from free radicals, and they're responsible for berries' signature hues.

Summer is an ideal time to enjoy some fresh and local berries, but don't be afraid of frozen options — they might give you a chance to try something that doesn't grow in your region. "Different antioxidants have various properties in terms of where they work in the body and what kind of free radicals they neutralize," says Fung.

Have fun experimenting — blueberries, strawberries, blackberries, and goji berries all have something unique to offer.

Word to the wise: Because berries lack protective peels and are often sprayed with pesticides, it's best to buy organic when possible. (For more on the benefits of specific berries, see [ELmag.com/berries](http://ELmag.com/berries).)

## IDEAL PROTEIN PAIRING:

Greek or Bulgarian yogurt for protein and probiotics.



# Stone Fruits

## Good source of phenolic compounds

Stone fruits — think peaches, apricots, nectarines, plums, and cherries — are the true harbingers of summer. Typically fragrant and thin-skinned, they don't travel well, making their peak season even more special.

Stone fruits are rich in phenolic compounds and terpenoids, with each fruit's nutrient profile suggested by its color. With their golden flesh, peaches and apricots are high in carotenoids, including lutein and beta-carotene. Purple plums are rich in anthocyanins, and sweet cherries brim with flavonoids, including quercetin. The peel of stone fruits contains higher concentrations of certain phytonutrients — potentially twice as much — compared with the pulp, an extra incentive to buy organic when you can.

**IDEAL PROTEIN PAIRINGS:** Pecans with peaches; almonds with plums.



# Citrus

**Good source of vitamin C, flavonoids, and fiber**

Citrus fruits are the juicy gems of winter. Oranges, lemons, limes, pomelos, mandarins, and others reach peak ripeness in warm climates just as the northern hemisphere gets chilly and dark. It's perfect timing for cold and flu season: One medium orange delivers almost a day's dose of vitamin C.

The phytonutrients in citrus have anti-inflammatory, anticancer, antimicrobial, and antiallergy effects. Studies show that citrus protects the heart, brain, and liver.

Much like berries, each fruit has its own unique pattern of phytochemicals, so go for variety. The orange pigments found in tangerines and oranges deliver carotenoids like lutein, an anti-inflammatory that protects the eyes. Grapefruit provide flavonoids that may



help prevent diabetes and heart disease.

Citrus is also full of fiber, 65 to 70 percent of which is pectin, a soluble form that acts as a prebiotic by feeding the microbiome. Good bacteria ferment pectin in the colon and create beneficial short-chain fatty acids, including acetate, propionate, and butyrate.

Studies show pectin also helps maintain the intestine's protective barrier. This matters, because when the gut's bacteria get hungry, they will eat the mucosal layer. "If you don't feed your bacteria, they will feed on you," says Lustig. This damage can lead to

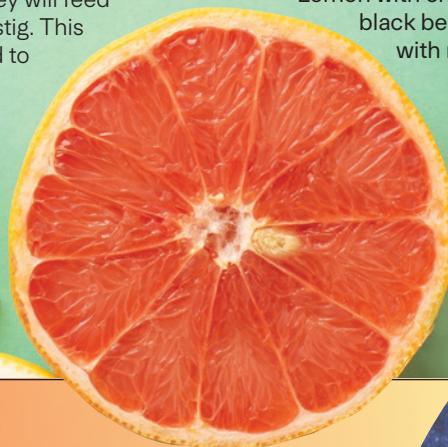
gut issues like irritable bowel syndrome and inflammatory bowel disease.

Squeezing a wedge of lemon or lime into your water glass, salad bowl, or pan of sautéed vegetables is an easy way to get a dash of citrus, says Blum. She adds the juice of half a lime to her morning green drink.

Some citrus — primarily grapefruit but also limes and pomelos — contain furanocoumarins, plant substances that can interfere with dozens of drugs. Check with your healthcare provider about potential contraindications with your prescriptions.

## **IDEAL PROTEIN PAIRINGS:**

Lemon with chicken; lime with black beans; cottage cheese with mandarins.



# Grapes

**Good source of vitamin K and copper**

One of the oldest cultivated fruits in the world, grapes have been grown by humans since the Neolithic era. Spanish explorers first brought them to the Americas almost 500 years ago.

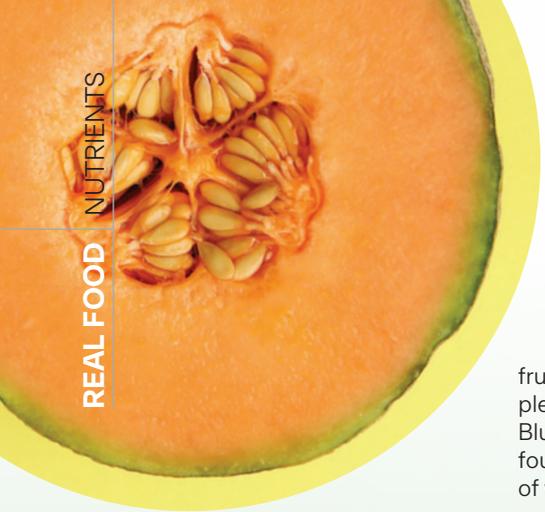
The average American eats more than 8.5 pounds of fresh grapes a year — despite the fact that grapes often get the side-eye for their sweetness. But grapes contain more than 1,600 health-supporting phytonutrients, including quercetin and resveratrol. Studies have found that these phytonutrients can assist with arterial health, osteoarthritis, bladder function, and more.

Grapes are technically berries, and some varieties contain abundant anthocyanins, the plant compounds responsible for the deep reds, blues, purples, and other vibrant hues of those fruits.

Grapes are rich sources of copper and vitamin K as well as fiber, most of which is concentrated in the skin. "Grapes may have more sugar than some fruits, but grapes also have a high ratio of skin to pulp, and everyone eats the skin, which has most of the fiber, which helps moderate the effects on blood-sugar levels," says Shiue.

**IDEAL PROTEIN PAIRINGS:** Walnuts, almonds, and pretty much all cheeses.





## Melons

### Good source of vitamin C and potassium

Melons are superbly versatile. They make an excellent breakfast, snack, dessert, or picnic treat. Members of the cucurbit family, which includes cucumbers, melons are believed to be native to Africa and Asia.

Watermelon, cantaloupe, and honeydew are common varieties in the United States, and the average American is estimated to enjoy 15.5 pounds of watermelon, 6.1 pounds of cantaloupe, and 1.4 pounds of honeydew each year.

A hot-weather staple, watermelon is more than just hydrating; it's an excellent source of electrolytes. It also contains plenty of phytonutrients, including beta-carotene and beta-cryptoxanthin.

Still, it's lycopene that steals the show. This carotenoid is found in other red produce, like tomatoes and guava, and it's been shown to support prostate health and to buffer skin from ultraviolet rays.

Like berries, watermelon is lower in sugar than some other popular

fruits, so it's a good choice for people with insulin sensitivities, says Blum. A study published in 2019 found that people who ate two cups of watermelon daily had lower body weight and fewer hunger cues compared with those who ate low-fat cookies every day. Experts suspect this is because watermelon is both filling and sweet. "There is no better summertime fruit," Blum says.

Honeydew and cantaloupe also have high water content, great for hydration in hot weather. As for nutrient density, cantaloupe edges out honeydew thanks to the beta-carotene in its orange-tinted flesh. Beta-carotene is converted by the body to vitamin A, an important nutrient for skin health.

**IDEAL PROTEIN PAIRINGS:** Salad with watermelon, feta cheese, and mint; slices of cantaloupe with prosciutto. 🍷

**CATHERINE GUTHRIE** is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.



## HOW TO PROTECT YOUR BLOOD SUGAR

**Two facts** about fruit are indisputable: 1) It is full of healthy phytonutrients, antioxidants, and fiber; and 2) it contains glucose, fructose, and sucrose.

But nature built in a safety check, and that's fiber. The fiber in whole fruit buffers the impact of sugar on blood-glucose levels, says Robert Lustig, MD, MSL.

For people with insulin sensitivities, eating fruit at the end of a meal or combining it with some protein and fat can help. Both strategies ensure the fruit arrives in the gut alongside slow-metabolizing nutrients that lessen sugar's effect on blood sugar.

People with either type 1 or type 2 diabetes can choose to count fruit among their daily allotment of carbohydrates, says Teresa Fung, ScD, RD. "Honestly, I'd rather someone eat a piece of fruit in place of refined carbohydrates, such as processed grains, because fruit has so many vitamins and antioxidants."

Individual carb tolerance varies, which means everyone processes carbs at different speeds. "Your liver has a limited capacity to metabolize fructose in the same way it has a limited capacity to metabolize alcohol," says Lustig. "As long as you stay within your tolerance, you're fine." (For more on finding your unique carb tolerance, see [ELmag.com/carbtolerance](https://www.experience-life.com/carbtolerance).)

Then there's fruit juice. Juicing fruit strips out its protective fiber and leaves the sugar behind. One glass of orange juice contains roughly 23 grams of sugar. While it's true that juicing retains the fruit's polyphenols, which the body can use, the high sugar content makes fruit juice a losing bargain for blood glucose.

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# Sheet-Pan Summer Veggies With Shrimp and Feta

BY **KAELYN RILEY**

Makes two servings  
Prep time: five minutes  
Cook time: 10–12 minutes



10 oz. cherry tomatoes



1½ cups fresh corn kernels (or thawed from frozen)



2 cloves garlic, sliced



1 tbs. plus 1 tsp. extra-virgin olive oil, divided



¾ tsp. sea salt, divided



½ lb. large shrimp, peeled and deveined



¼ tsp. red-pepper flakes



Zest and juice from ½ lemon



3 oz. feta cheese, crumbled



Fresh dill, for garnish



## SHRIMP SHOPPING

Wild-caught shrimp are a good source of protein and crucial minerals, including selenium and iodine. Look for domestic frozen shrimp and thaw them just before cooking for the freshest flavor and texture.

Preheat the oven to 425 degrees F and line a sheet pan with parchment paper. Place the tomatoes, corn, and garlic on the sheet pan; drizzle with 1 tablespoon of the olive oil, sprinkle with ½ teaspoon of the sea salt, and toss to coat.

Place the shrimp in a medium bowl. Add the remaining olive oil and salt, the red-pepper flakes, and the lemon zest. Toss to coat, then arrange the shrimp on the sheet pan with the vegetables.

Sprinkle the feta cheese over the shrimp and veggies, then place the pan in the oven for 10 to 12 minutes, until the vegetables have softened and the shrimp are opaque. Serve garnished with the lemon juice and fresh dill.

**KAELYN RILEY** is an *Experience Life* senior editor.



# How to Shop an INTERNATIONAL MARKET

Advice for navigating the aisles with greater ease.

BY KATHERINE REYNOLDS LEWIS

**WHEN CHINESE NEW YEAR** approaches, I know it's time to visit Great Wall Supermarket in Rockville, Md., to pick up mooncakes, glutinous rice flour, and other traditional foods for my family's celebration. But shopping at international markets doesn't need to be limited to holidays — or to your own culture. Whether you're craving Indian dosa, West African jollof rice, or Korean bibimbap, you can find the fixings at a market that carries groceries for dishes originating in countries far from the United States.

International markets primarily serve immigrants and their descendants, but they offer a treasure trove for shoppers of any background seeking fresh, reasonably priced, and varied spices,

meats, produce, and snacks. You get to explore another culture, perk up your weekly meal rotation, and perhaps discover a new favorite food.

Don't be intimidated by a potential language barrier or by unfamiliar products. Go in with a plan for a few basics you'd like to try or a dish you want to make. Be prepared to ask for help from a clerk — or from other customers, who often enjoy giving recommendations. Apps like Google Translate can decode packaging for you: Use the camera function to translate non-Latin-based languages, like Japanese or Russian.

"These are small businesses that are trying to make it work. They're great resources," says Nandita Godbole, an Atlanta-based cookbook author who runs the website Curry

Cravings Kitchen. Ask which days shipments arrive if you want to get the best ingredients. Shop seasonally and learn about cultural holidays to understand the significance of particular dishes — and to know when higher demand will likely mean fresher products and well-stocked shelves.

If you're still wary, bring a friend along. Or pick a weekday when the crowds are sparser and you can linger over packaging or engage other shoppers in conversation. "Don't be afraid to ask questions, otherwise you'll be standing there for an hour feeling overwhelmed," says Jose Guzman, RDN, a chef and dietician based in New Mexico.

Bring this list of items — broken down by each section of the store — with you and start to explore.

## Fresh Produce

International markets are great destinations for fresh, inexpensive vegetables and fruits.

In an Asian market, you can get bags of bok choy, bitter melon, Chinese eggplant, and giant cabbage. Try the tropical fruits — dragon fruit, pungent-but-flavorful durian, fresh lychee.

The ginger is often larger and less nubby than what you'll find in a North American supermarket. "If you go to a Chinese or Jamaican grocery store, they have mature ginger that's easier to peel and more flavorful," explains Detroit-based chef Jon Kung, author of *Kung Food: Chinese American Recipes From a Third-Culture Kitchen*.

In an Indian grocery, you'll find a variety of gourds, squashes, and okra that are sweeter than what you're used to. For any of these vegetables, Godbole recommends simply sautéing them in cooking oil with some garlic and chili flakes.

Similarly, African markets boast a wide variety of fresh yams, all with different flavors and uses.

Think seasonally when possible. Around the holidays, Latin markets carry abundant sugarcane, guava, and tamarind pods to make Ponche Navideño, a traditional beverage that Guzman compares to mulled wine.



## Meat and Fish

Brace yourself when you come to the meat and fish counter of an international store. "If you're squeamish, be prepared," says Guzman. "Chickens might have their feet. You're going to see claws, stomach and intestines, maybe a whole pig's head."

The rewards in Latin markets, however, include finds like inexpensive whole chickens and pork shoulder or short ribs that you can thinly slice and grill.

Some Indian grocery stores are vegetarian, but in those that carry animal products, look for goat meat and fish like pomfret, some species of which are native to India and absorb spices well, Godbole says. If you find crab meat, it has likely been extracted raw, so it's more tender. For lamb, hit a Middle Eastern market — you can substitute it for goat in any Indian recipe.

Asian markets often carry live fish, so you can take home a portion fresh enough for sushi or delicately steamed Cantonese fish. "You'll find the best deal on lobster and shellfish at any Asian market," Kung says.

You'll also find chicken feet, stewing hens for stock, and black Silkie chickens, which some Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioners view as having medicinal properties.

## Dry Goods

Asian markets feature large bags of many types of rice — including some you may have never seen before — all at a low price. Be sure to ask for help if you're not clear on what you're buying. "You don't want a 20-pound bag of the wrong rice," Godbole says.

Beans are plentiful in Latin supermarkets. Recipes from northern Latin America favor pinto beans; those from farther south tend to favor black beans. "Be adventurous and cook your own beans," Guzman urges.

You could even pick up some corn husks to make tamales.

## Spices and Condiments

International markets offer abundant spices and condiments. And because turnover in their spice racks is likely higher than at a conventional North American grocery store, the offerings tend to be fresher — so even if the names are familiar, the taste may be new.

In Indian markets, look for black cardamom for its pungent, smoky taste. Pick up star anise or mace for curries and chutneys, and seek out big bags of whole chilies. There's also an array of pickled fruits and vegetables, such as raw mangoes and green peppers, often with different ingredients, like lemon and berries, Godbole says. Condiments like tamarind sauce and Maggi ketchup bring a different kind of tang to your table.

Mexican and Latino groceries offer a variety of whole spices and herbs, like cumin seeds and oregano. Mexican oregano is more citrusy than Italian; both can be mashed by hand to add to soups and stews, says Guzman. Ground annatto seeds make achiote paste, which gives al pastor its reddish color and characteristic smoky flavor.

Unlike the Asian-sourced cassia cinnamon sold in most conventional U.S. markets, the cinnamon in Mexico is Ceylon, a thin-bark cinnamon with many layers. "It's less spicy, more sweet and complex," Guzman explains.

And, of course, shelves are usually overflowing with a variety of chilies, the pillar of Mexican and Latin cuisine: ancho, pasilla, chipotle, and more. Consider making your own flavored waters

from tamarind pods or hibiscus leaves, which create a stunning red beverage with natural acidity.

Asian groceries carry more kinds of soy sauce than you might have known existed: dark, light, sweet, and others. Pick up something that looks interesting and experiment with it.

There are larger, cheaper bottles of sriracha and dark vinegar than you'll find at a grocery chain, as well as a huge array of fermented products — soybeans, chilies, and tofu — that you can keep in your fridge seemingly forever, Kung says.

Korean markets offer several varieties of kimchi, made from cucumber, radish, and many other vegetables beyond cabbage.

In Persian markets, seek out the big containers of tahini and an assortment of high-quality olive oils stamped with place of origin. And don't miss the dried or fresh spices and herbs, such as turmeric, cumin, mint, parsley, and fried whole limes.



## Deli and Bakery Items

Many markets have bakeries as well as a deli, where you can pick up premade dishes to broaden your palate. Kung recommends Taiwanese pineapple cakes, composed of chewy bits of pineapple jam in a shortbread pastry, and Filipino otap cookies flavored with purple ube. At Persian markets, enjoy sampling breads like pita, lavash, and barbari. ➔

**KATHERINE REYNOLDS LEWIS** is a journalist and author based in the Washington, D.C., area.



### EXPLORE MORE

Find our suggestions for shopping international markets for beverages, snacks, frozen products, and cookware at [ELmag.com/intlmarket](http://ELmag.com/intlmarket).

# SKEWERS AROUND THE WORLD

Broaden your culinary horizons with these grilled dishes from across the globe.

BY JOSE GUZMAN, RDN

**GRILLED FOOD ON A STICK** is common fare in many countries, with each culture offering its own rendition with unique regional ingredients. Japanese yakitori, Peruvian anticuchos, Turkish döner kebab, Greek souvlaki — each of these street-food staples is infused with unique spices and enticing aromas.

Many of them also offer health benefits. Ground and whole spices are a source of anti-inflammatory antioxidants. Grilling extracts excess saturated fats from meats — just be sure to avoid flare-ups to minimize exposure to potential carcinogens. Plus, the flavor-enhancing effects of spices and char mean that you can often use less salt than usual. (For more on the healthiest grilling techniques, see [ELmag.com/grilltips](https://www.ELmag.com/grilltips).)

If you're not the grilling type, you can make these recipes indoors using a cast-iron grill pan, a panini press, or the broiler setting in your oven. Whichever route you choose, you'll be rewarded with a skewer full of flavor.

## 6 STEPS TO SKEWER SUCCESS

1. Soak wooden skewers in water for 30 minutes before using so they don't burn.
2. Don't overload your skewers; if the ingredients are too tightly packed, they'll steam rather than brown.
3. Leave an inch of empty space at the bottom of each skewer for easy handling.
4. Allow skewers to cook undisturbed on each side. The more you move them, the less browning they'll develop.
5. For the grill: Preheat to 400 degrees F and ensure the grates are clean. Pour a bit of oil on a paper towel, then use tongs to swab the grates with the towel before cooking.
6. For the broiler: Preheat on high for at least 10 minutes. For each recipe, broil skewers on a heavy, greased sheet pan for five to six minutes per side until evenly cooked.





## Al Pastor Pork Skewers With Cilantro Chimichurri

Makes four  
servings

Prep time:  
30 minutes,  
plus one to  
four hours for  
marinating

Cook time:  
12 to 16  
minutes

### FOR THE MARINADE:

- 3 dried guajillo chilies, seeds and veins removed
- 2 dried ancho chilies, seeds and veins removed
- 2 cups water
- 4 garlic cloves, peeled
- ½ cup chopped red onion
- ¾ cup chopped pineapple
- ¼ cup white vinegar
- ¼ cup orange juice
- 2 tbs. achiote paste (or add more cumin, smoked paprika, and oregano as noted below)
- 1½ tsp. sea salt
- 1 tsp. ground cumin (plus ½ tsp. if not using achiote paste)
- 1 tsp. smoked paprika (plus 1 tbs. if not using achiote paste)
- ½ tsp. Mexican or Italian oregano (plus ¼ tsp. if not using achiote paste)
- ¼ tsp. ground cloves

### FOR THE CHIMICHURRI:

- 2½ cups loosely packed cilantro leaves and stems
- 1 jalapeño, chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, chopped
- ¼ cup chopped red onion, rinsed under cold water
- 2 tbs. lime juice
- 2 tbs. water
- ½ tsp. sea salt
- ¼ tsp. Mexican or Italian oregano
- 2 tbs. extra-virgin olive oil

### FOR THE PORK SKEWERS:

- 1½ lb. boneless pork shoulder, excess fat trimmed, cut into 1-inch cubes
- 2 cups cubed pineapple (¾ inch)
- 1¾ cups cubed red onions (¾ inch)
- 20 presoaked wooden skewers

**Prepare the marinade:** Add the dried chilies and water to a small saucepan and bring to a simmer. Turn off the heat and cover the pan; allow the chilies to soften for eight to 10 minutes. Place the softened chilies and remaining marinade ingredients in a blender, and blend until smooth. Set aside ¼ cup of the marinade for brushing the skewers during grilling. Place the pork cubes in a medium bowl and pour the remaining marinade over them. Allow to marinate for at least one hour (or up to four hours) in the refrigerator.

**Prepare the chimichurri:** Combine all ingredients except the olive oil in a food processor or blender until finely chopped. Transfer to a small bowl and stir in the olive oil.

**Prepare the skewers:** Alternate the pork, pineapple, and onion cubes on the skewers.

Grill the skewers for three to four minutes on all sides until golden brown. Lightly brush the skewers with reserved marinade and cook briefly on each side to seal. Serve with the chimichurri on the side.

## Jerk Eggplant Skewers With Mango Chutney

**Makes four servings**

**Prep time: 40 minutes, plus one**

**to four hours for marinating**

**Cook time: 12 to 16 minutes**

### FOR THE MARINADE:

- 1 tbs. ground allspice
- 1 tbs. granulated garlic
- 1 tbs. muscovado sugar (or brown sugar)
- 2 tsp. paprika
- 1½ tsp. dried thyme
- 1 tsp. ground cumin
- 1 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- ½ tsp. ground cloves
- ½ tsp. ground nutmeg
- ½ tsp. ground cinnamon
- 1 tsp. sea salt
- 2 tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 Scotch bonnet or habanero peppers, seeds and ribs removed
- 2 tbs. lime juice
- 2 tbs. water

### FOR THE MANGO CHUTNEY:

- 3 cups roughly chopped mango (fresh or frozen)
- ½ cup minced red onion, rinsed under cold water
- 1 jalapeño, minced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- ¼ cup white vinegar
- ¼ cup muscovado sugar (or brown sugar)
- ¼ tsp. ground allspice
- ¼ tsp. ground cinnamon
- ¼ tsp. sea salt
- Pinch freshly ground black pepper
- ¼ cup water

### FOR THE EGGPLANT SKEWERS:

- 2 medium globe eggplants, cut into 1¼-inch cubes
- 1½ cups cubed red onions (1 inch)
- 3 bell peppers, cut into 1-inch cubes
- 20 presoaked wooden skewers



**Prepare the marinade:** Whisk together all ingredients except the peppers, lime juice, and water in a medium bowl. In a food processor or blender, purée the peppers with the lime juice and water until smooth, and add to the bowl, whisking until smooth. Add the eggplant cubes and marinate for a minimum of one hour (or up to four hours) in the refrigerator.

**Prepare the chutney:** Combine all ingredients except the water in a small saucepan and bring to a simmer over low heat. Cook for about 10 to 12 minutes, until the liquid has evaporated, then add the water and simmer for eight to 10 minutes more until thickened. Remove from heat and lightly mash any large mango pieces with a fork.

**Prepare the skewers:** Alternate the eggplant, onion, and pepper cubes on the skewers. Reserve the marinade left in the bowl.

Grill the skewers for three to four minutes on all sides until golden brown. Lightly brush with the reserved marinade and cook briefly on each side to seal. Serve with the mango chutney on the side.



### ENJOY MORE

Find Jose Guzman's recipes for Balsamic-Glazed Fruit and Goat Cheese Skewers and Bulgogi Beef Skewers With Pickled Veggies at [ELmag.com/skewers](https://www.ELmag.com/skewers).



# Garam Masala Chicken Skewers With Cucumber Raita

**Makes four servings**

**Prep time: 30 minutes, plus one to four hours for marinating**

**Cook time: 10 to 12 minutes**

## FOR THE MARINADE:

- 2 tbs. cumin seeds (or ground cumin)
- 1½ tbs. coriander seeds (or 1 tbs. ground coriander)
- 1 tsp. whole black peppercorns (or ground black pepper)
- ½ tsp. green cardamom seeds (or ground cardamom)
- 3 star anise
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 (1-inch) cinnamon stick (or ½ tsp. ground cinnamon)
- ½ tsp. ground cloves
- ½ tsp. ground nutmeg
- 1 tsp. sea salt
- 2 tbs. extra-virgin olive oil

## FOR THE CUCUMBER RAITA:

- 2 cups plain, full-fat Greek yogurt
- 1 cup grated English cucumber
- ¼ cup minced cilantro, plus more to garnish
- 2 tbs. minced fresh mint leaves (or 2 tsp. dried mint), plus more for garnish
- ½ tsp. ground cumin
- 1 lemon, zested and juiced
- ½ tsp. sea salt

## FOR THE CHICKEN SKEWERS:

- 1½ lb. boneless, skinless chicken thighs, cut into 1½-inch cubes
- 20 presoaked wooden skewers

**Prepare the marinade:** If using whole spices, place a small pan over medium-low heat and add all ingredients except the cloves, nutmeg, salt, and olive oil. Toast for four to five minutes, stirring constantly, until the spices are fragrant and slightly browned. Remove from heat and add the cloves and nutmeg, stirring for only a few seconds. Transfer to a spice grinder and allow to cool completely, about seven to 10 minutes. (If using ground spices, add them all with the cloves and nutmeg, and toast for only 10 to 15 seconds. Then transfer them to a blender.)

Grind or blend the spices until smooth, then pour them into a medium bowl, add the sea salt and olive oil, and stir to combine. Reserve ¼ cup of the marinade for brushing during grilling. Add the chicken to the remaining marinade, toss to coat well, and allow to marinate for a minimum of one hour (or up to four hours) in the refrigerator.

**Prepare the raita:** Combine all the ingredients in a small bowl and stir to thoroughly mix. Allow to sit in the fridge for at least 45 minutes before serving.

**Prepare the skewers:** Place four or five pieces of chicken on each skewer. Grill on two sides for five to six minutes each until golden brown. Lightly brush with the reserve marinade and cook briefly on each side to seal. Serve with the cucumber raita on the side. 🍴

**JOSE GUZMAN, RDN**, is a New Mexico-based dietitian and chef.





↑↑↑↑↑↑↑↑

# LEVEL UP

Step up your  
favorite  
cardio activity  
with these  
complementary  
strength  
and  
mobility  
moves.

BY LAUREN BEDOSKY

**TO REACH YOUR NEXT PR** in your favorite cardio activity — or to simply improve your game — the secret may not be doing more cardio work. Rather, it may be adding strength and mobility training to your routine.

Whether you love hiking, swimming, racquet sports, or Zumba, strength training helps build durable, powerful muscles and stable joints, which translates to better performance, fewer injuries, and improved recovery.

Mobility work, meanwhile, is “going to unlock your body for the work you’re going to be doing, which helps with proper muscle recruitment, range of motion, and all the things that can help

lead to injury prevention,” says NASM-certified personal trainer and corrective exercise specialist Carrie Boyle.

Yet making space in your busy schedule for targeted strength and mobility training is easier said than done. Knowing exactly which exercises to do, and finding the time and energy to do them while also focusing on your favorite sport, can be tough.

To help you over that hump, we’ve done some of the homework for you. Incorporating even a couple of exercises that are specific to your cardio activity of choice — such as the expert-recommended ones that follow — can help you level up your performance.

## CYCLING

Indoor and outdoor cyclists spend a lot of time in one position — seated, with spine, shoulders, and neck bent forward. Moving the thoracic (mid) spine in different planes of motion keeps the muscles and joints mobile, says Rachel Andrews, a certified strength and conditioning coach, who recommends the open book stretch for cyclists.

The ability to twist your spine, shoulders, and neck keeps other

joints and muscles from kicking in to compensate for a lack of spinal mobility, which reduces pain and injury risk. It also enables you to check behind you for vehicles while cycling.

To power each pedal stroke on the bike, cyclists must push down with one leg while the other leg is bent behind them. This position calls for strength in the quadriceps (the muscles in the front of the thighs) and hamstrings (the muscles in the back

of the thighs), along with help from the core muscles to keep cyclists from falling off the bike.

To shore up these muscles, Andrews recommends offset front-rack split squats. “It’s a similar position as the bike pedal stroke, where you always have one foot forward and one foot back,” she says. Holding a weight on one side can help train your core muscles to stabilize while your legs bend and straighten.

### MOBILITY

#### OPEN BOOK STRETCH

This is a great stretch to do first thing in the morning, before or after a ride, or after a long period of sitting, says Andrews.

- Lie on your right side. Bend your knees to 90 degrees and let them rest on the floor in line with your hips. Keeping your knees on the floor, extend both arms on the floor in front of your chest so your palms touch.
- On an exhale, retract your left shoulder blade and peel your left arm open as you gently rotate your upper body to bring your arm and shoulder blade toward the floor on the opposite side.
- Inhale as you return to the starting position. Do two sets of five reps per side. Try to deepen the upper-body rotation on every exhale.



### STRENGTH

#### OFFSET FRONT-RACK SPLIT SQUAT

Do this exercise two or three days per week.

- Rack a dumbbell or kettlebell in front of your left shoulder with your left hand.
- Step your left foot back and lower into a lunge, aiming to bring your left knee to the floor. Your back toes should be tucked so you’re on the ball of your foot. Your right foot should be on the ground in front of you, your right knee bent 90 degrees.
- Distribute your weight evenly across your right foot as you push up to a standing position, then lower your left knee back to the kneeling position. Do two or three sets of eight to 10 repetitions per side.



# WALKING AND HIKING

The hips are ball-and-socket joints that play a central role in walking. “We want to make sure that we have a full range of motion in the hips and that they’re working properly for us because they anchor several big muscle groups that power us through our walk,” says Boyle, who is also a walking coach.

Single-leg mobility moves like the standing hip circle can improve range of motion in the hips and engage and optimize the surrounding muscles and joints — including those found in the core, spine, and legs.

In addition to mobility, hip strength is important for walking. There are many hip muscles, but the glutes are major ones. The following banded-squat variation targets the gluteus maximus (the meaty muscle in your buttocks that powers forward movement) and the gluteus medius (the side-butt muscle that stabilizes your pelvis and hips, which helps your knees and ankles maintain their proper alignment). It also strengthens the legs to help push you through every step and targets the calves and ankles for an added boost.



## MOBILITY STANDING SINGLE-LEG HIP CIRCLE

Warm up your hips with this move before a walking or hiking workout.

- Standing with feet hip width apart, place your hands on your hips or hold on to a railing, pole, or other sturdy object for balance support.
- Raise one knee as high as you comfortably can, keeping your toes pointed forward. Bring the knee out to the side to open the hip before slowly moving it down toward the floor.
- Continue moving your knee in a big circle until it’s pointing straight ahead again. Do 10 circles in one direction before repeating in the opposite direction. Switch legs.



## STRENGTH MINI BAND SQUAT WITH CALF RAISE

Perform this exercise two or three times per week on walking or nonwalking days.

- Place a mini band around your thighs just above your knees and stand with your feet hip width apart, toes pointed forward.
- Squat down as far as you comfortably can, gently pushing your thighs outward to create slight tension on the band. Maintain that tension throughout the whole movement. Keep your chest up, with your shoulders down and away from your ears, and knees in line with your toes. (If you feel your knees pull in during the squat, switch to a lighter band.)
- Push through your feet to return to the starting position. Once standing, shift your weight onto the balls of your feet to raise your heels off the ground.
- Lower your heels to the floor before starting your next squat. Do three sets of 10 repetitions.



# RUNNING

Like walking, running relies heavily on the hips — and limited hip mobility can create issues. Tight hip flexors (the muscles in the front of the hip that kick in with each step) tend to be common in runners, thanks to their use in running and sitting.

“If your hip flexor is tight, you’ll have limited ability to extend your hip,” says Mike Thomson, CSCS, a USATF-certified running and triathlon coach with Life Time. If you can’t extend your hip, you won’t be able to recruit as much of your glutes, which means less power with every stride.

Runners can also benefit from strengthening the glutes and legs to provide more stride power and minimize fatigue. This may help you run faster and longer, as well as prevent injury and pain by keeping other muscles and joints (like those in the lower back) from kicking in to compensate. For runners, Thomson favors the Bulgarian split squat, performed with the rear leg elevated, because it both stretches the hip flexor and strengthens the glutes and legs one side at a time.



## MOBILITY COUCH STRETCH

Use this stretch to loosen your hip flexors after every run.

- Kneel on the floor in front of a sturdy structure, like a wall, bench, or, as the name suggests, a couch, facing away. Position your right shin close to the wall or couch with toes pointed toward the ceiling. (Place a mat, towel, or cushion under your right knee, as needed.) Position your left foot flat on the floor in front of you with your left knee directly over your ankle.
- Lift your torso and rest your hands on your left thigh. Lean back until you feel a slight stretch along the front of your right hip and thigh.
- Hold for 10 deep breaths, sinking a little deeper on each exhale. Switch sides.



## STRENGTH BULGARIAN SPLIT SQUAT

Include this exercise in your routine two or three days per week.

- Stand 2 to 3 feet in front of a knee-high platform (like a box, bench, or step), facing away. Extend your right leg behind you and rest your toes on the bench. Toes can be flat or tucked, depending on personal preference.
- Keeping your torso upright, slowly lower your right knee toward the floor. Your front knee will form approximately a 90-degree angle. (It may go farther, depending on your mobility; just make sure your knee doesn’t cave inward.)
- Distribute your weight evenly across your left foot as you push up to return to the starting position. Squeeze your rear glute at the top of the movement. Do three sets of 12 repetitions per leg.
- Use only your body weight when learning the movement. Then add weight by holding dumbbells or kettlebells at your sides.

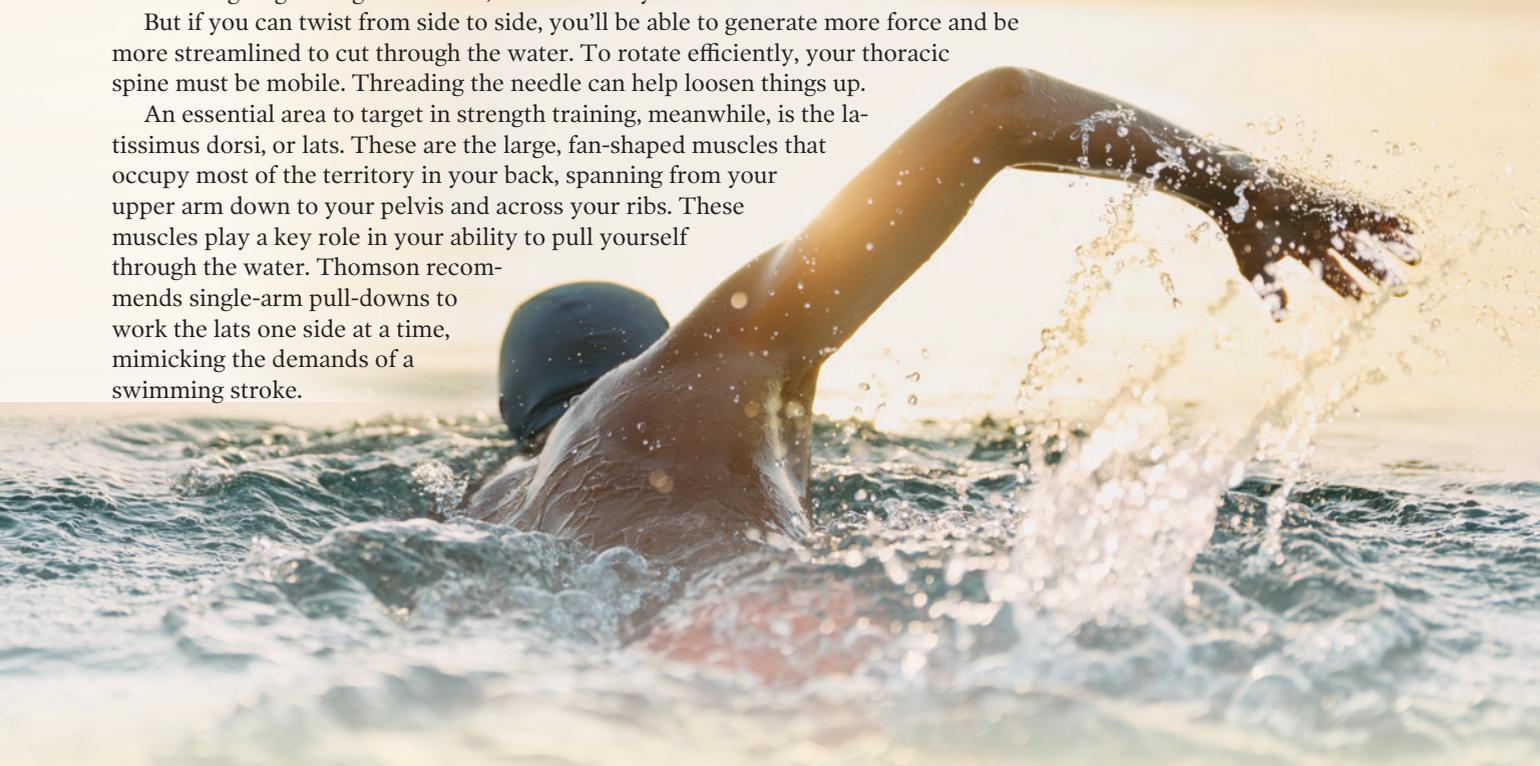


# SWIMMING

Rotating your torso in the water is essential for a more streamlined swim stroke. “Imagine swimming with your chest facing the bottom of the pool the entire time; [you would be] like a tank going through the water,” Thomson says.

But if you can twist from side to side, you’ll be able to generate more force and be more streamlined to cut through the water. To rotate efficiently, your thoracic spine must be mobile. Threading the needle can help loosen things up.

An essential area to target in strength training, meanwhile, is the latissimus dorsi, or lats. These are the large, fan-shaped muscles that occupy most of the territory in your back, spanning from your upper arm down to your pelvis and across your ribs. These muscles play a key role in your ability to pull yourself through the water. Thomson recommends single-arm pull-downs to work the lats one side at a time, mimicking the demands of a swimming stroke.



## MOBILITY THREAD THE NEEDLE

Warm up your thoracic spine with this movement before jumping into the water.

- Set up on the floor in a tabletop position: neutral spine, palms flat with shoulders over wrists, and knees on the ground in line with your hips.
- On an inhaled breath, lift your right hand and extend your arm toward the ceiling, following it with your gaze.
- Exhale and bring your right hand under your chest toward the floor. Thread it beneath your torso, allowing your right arm, shoulder, and side of your head to rest on the floor.
- Inhale to reverse the movement and extend your arm toward the ceiling. Do 10 repetitions per side.



## STRENGTH SINGLE-ARM CABLE LAT PULL-DOWN

Add this exercise to your routine two or three days per week.

- If you have access to a lat pull-down machine that allows you to work one arm at a time, go for it. If not, set up a cable machine with a handle attachment. Adjust the height so you can kneel on the floor (facing the cable machine) and grip the handle with your arm fully extended. You could also use a resistance band; just be sure to anchor the band to a sturdy object.
- Squeeze your shoulder blade as you pull the handle down toward you until your elbow points behind you.
- Extend your arm to return to the starting position. Do three sets of 12 repetitions per arm.



# PICKLEBALL

Pickleball and other racquet sports rely on many muscles and joints. In particular, they require great mobility of the hip flexors, adductors (the muscles in your inner thighs that move your legs inward toward the center of your body), and thoracic spine, says Joe Meier, CSCS, a Life Time tennis pro and strength coach.

If you lack mobility in these spots, you won't be able to lunge to return a serve, rotate to hit the ball, or jump from side to side efficiently. Meier likes the "world's greatest stretch" mobility exercise because it targets all the key muscle groups you need to improve your on-court performance and lower your risk of injury.

An important but often overlooked area when strength training for racquet sports is the back-body. Why does it matter? Just watch someone play and you'll notice that they don't often stand fully upright, says Meier. Usually, they're leaning forward in a quarter-squat, because this athletic stance allows them to change direction more easily when they need to return a serve.

Maintaining this position and moving quickly around the court requires a lot of strength in the back, glutes, and hamstrings, he explains. Bent-over rows build strength in that athletic stance.



## MOBILITY

### WORLD'S GREATEST STRETCH

Use this stretch to warm up before playing your favorite racquet sport.

- Begin on the floor in a high plank position.
- Step your left foot forward and to the outside of your left hand. Keep your right knee off the ground.
- Lift your left hand off the ground and rotate your torso toward your left knee to reach toward the ceiling; let your gaze follow your hand as you rotate through your spine. Hold for three seconds before lowering your hand back down to the ground. Do five repetitions with the left arm.
- Reverse the movement to return to a high plank and repeat on the other side, beginning by stepping your right foot forward to the outside of your right hand.



## STRENGTH

### TWO-ARM BENT-OVER ROW

Do this exercise two or three days per week.

- Stand with your feet hip width apart and hold a loaded barbell in front of you with both hands.
- Keeping your back flat, hinge forward at the waist so your arms are extended straight down toward the floor.
- Tighten your abdominals and bend your elbows to row the barbell up to your rib cage.
- Squeeze your shoulder blades at the top of the movement before lowering the barbell until your arms are fully extended and you feel a slight stretch in the shoulders. Do two or three sets of six to 12 repetitions.



# SOCCER

Soccer and other field sports feature a lot of accelerating, decelerating, and quick changes of direction, says former collegiate soccer player Erica Suter, MS, a youth female athlete speed and strength coach. As the link between the upper body and lower body, the hips play a crucial role in transferring power efficiently for these high-speed movements.

The ankles are key, too, because they help transfer the force from the hips to the feet. Without stable, mobile hip and ankle joints, you will be slower on the field — and more likely to twist a knee or an ankle.

Because field sports involve quick bursts of running and change of direction, targeting the glutes and legs is also essential. It's important for players to challenge their balance too; this helps build the stability needed to protect muscles and joints from injury during sudden shifts in direction. Suter says unilateral (single-sided) strength exercises check all the boxes.



## MOBILITY SUSPENSION TRAINER- ASSISTED SINGLE-LEG SQUAT

Add this move to your routine one or two days per week.

- Grip the handles of a suspension trainer and step back until there's no slack in the straps. Shift your weight onto your right leg, lifting your left foot a few inches off the floor in front of you.
- Bend your right knee and slowly push your hips back to squat down as far as you comfortably can. Try to get your hip as close to your right heel as possible while your left foot hovers off the ground in front of you. Keep your head and chest lifted.
- Distribute your weight evenly across your right foot as you push up to return to the starting position. Do two or three sets of six to eight repetitions per leg.



## STRENGTH SINGLE-LEG SQUAT TO BENCH

Do this exercise one or two times a week on nonsoccer days.

- Stand in front of a bench, facing away. Shift your weight onto your right leg, lifting your left foot a few inches off the floor in front of you.
- Bend your right knee and slowly push your hips back to squat down onto the bench. Let your left foot hover off the ground in front of you and keep your head and chest lifted.
- Lightly tap the bench with your glutes before pushing through your right foot to return to the starting position. Do two sets of six to eight repetitions per leg.
- If lifting the extended leg is too challenging at first, practice leaving it planted on the ground in front of you. As your squat becomes more stable, progress to lifting it a few inches off the floor.



## ZUMBA

Cardio dance classes call for a wide range of dynamic movements. “Especially in Zumba, you can expect to move your hips a lot as you swivel, thrust, and twist during rhythms like salsa, merengue, and reggaetón,” says Alayna Curry, a licensed Zumba instructor and NASM-certified women’s fitness specialist.

Tightness in the hips and groin can make dance movements difficult or uncomfortable. To help reduce your risk of a muscle strain or injury, Curry recommends doing mobility exercises that help open the hips.

Strengthening the core and leg muscles can also help you perform dance movements longer. Plus, it shores up the muscles surrounding your hip, knee, and ankle joints, improving their stability, she notes. “This is especially important when you’re dancing and doing a lot of jumping, shuffling, and quick movements from side to side and forward and back.”

### MOBILITY BUTTERFLY STRETCH

Add this stretch to your dance class warm-up and cool-down.

- Sit or lie on the ground and place the soles of your feet together. Adjust how close your feet are to your body to find the appropriate intensity of stretch. (Move the heels in toward the body for a more intense stretch; move them away from the body to reduce the stretch.)
- Allow your knees to gently drop toward the floor. Don’t force them to drop; let gravity do the work.
- If you’re seated, keep your posture tall by reaching the crown of your head toward the ceiling. If you’re lying down, lightly engage your core to keep a neutral spine and avoid arching your back. Hold for 30 to 60 seconds.



### STRENGTH GOBLET SQUAT

Do this exercise up to three days per week.

- Stand with your feet hip width apart, toes pointed slightly out, and hold a kettlebell or dumbbell at chest height with both hands, palms facing in.
- Push your butt back and bend your knees to squat down as far as you comfortably can. Keep your chest up; shoulders down and away from your ears; and knees in line with your toes.
- Distribute your weight evenly within and across both feet as you push up to return to the starting position. Do three sets of 10 to 12 repetitions. 🏋️



### SUPPORT YOUR SPORT

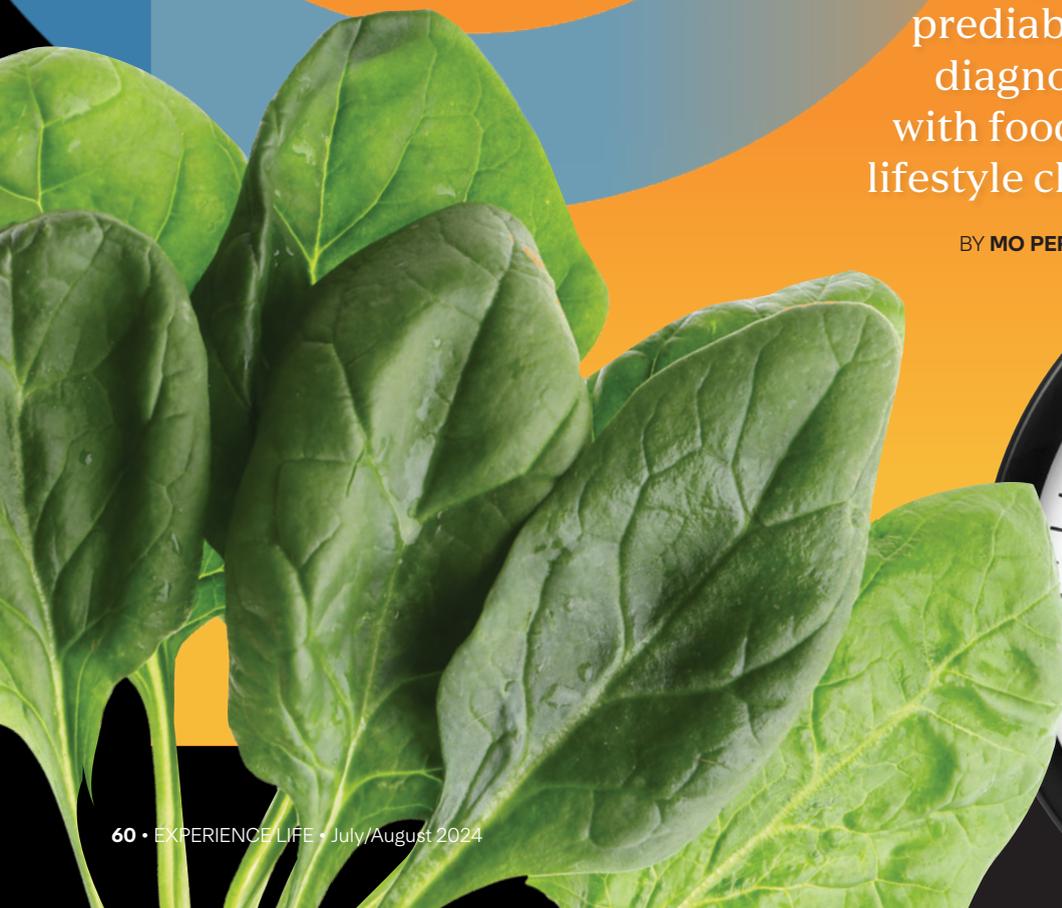
For strength and mobility moves to complement basketball and cardio kickboxing, visit [ELmag.com/levelup](https://www.ELmag.com/levelup).

ALL ABOUT

# A1C

Guidance for  
managing a  
prediabetes  
diagnosis  
with food and  
lifestyle choices.

BY MO PERRY





## DURING ROUTINE LAB TESTS,

many otherwise healthy people are surprised to learn their hemoglobin A1C — a snapshot of their average blood-sugar level over the past few months — is higher than it should be. Depending on the number, this could mean a diagnosis of type 2 diabetes or its more common precursor, prediabetes, a condition in which blood-glucose levels run high but don't qualify as diabetes just yet.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 38.4 million Americans live with diabetes. More than 90 percent have type 2, the version that's usually associated with lifestyle factors (though genetics can play a role); only 5 to 10 percent represent those with type 1, an autoimmune condition. And an estimated 97.6 million American adults — that's nearly 38 percent — have prediabetes.

Neither a prediabetes nor type 2 diagnosis is welcome news, but plenty of evidence supports the use of diet and lifestyle strategies for course correction. Prediabetes, especially, can be a useful wake-up call.

“There's so much that people can do in the prediabetes stage to prevent progression

into type 2 diabetes,” says Elizabeth Boham, MD, MS, RD, a functional-medicine physician in Lenox, Mass.

The right strategies may not only prevent A1C levels from rising further, but they can also help lower them into a healthy range. And there are many reasons to make that a priority, Boham notes. “Even prediabetes that never turns into diabetes increases risk of heart disease, multiple cancers, dementia, stroke, weight gain, and fatigue.”

## What Is A1C?

Our bodies are constantly working to keep our blood-sugar levels in a healthy range. This helps ensure our cells receive a steady supply of energy. Yet sometimes the complex interplay of hormones and other physiological processes — as well as the quantity, quality, and timing of the food we eat — destabilizes these levels.

If blood glucose falls too low, we may feel dizzy, fatigued, and shaky, or we may even pass out. High blood sugar — a hallmark of diabetes — can lead to extreme thirst, excessive urination, blurred vision, nausea, and headaches. If high blood sugar becomes chronic, it can result in nerve and organ damage, heart disease, and stroke.

Routine lab work during a doctor's visit often includes a fasting glucose test; this measures how much glucose remains in the blood after an eight-hour fast. A level less than 100 milligrams per deciliter is considered normal. A higher reading might prompt your doctor to order an A1C

test, which reveals the body's blood-glucose levels over time.

Here's how the test works: Glucose binds to hemoglobin, a protein in red blood cells that carries oxygen throughout the body, in a process called glycation. The A1C test measures the percentage of hemoglobin that is glycated.

Because red blood cells live for about three months, the test reflects the average blood-glucose levels over that period. “The higher your blood sugar is, and the longer it is high, the higher your A1C will be,” explains Jill Weisenberger, MS, RDN, author of *Prediabetes: A Complete Guide*.

An A1C level below 5.7 percent is considered normal. A level of 5.7 to 6.4 percent is classified as prediabetes, and a level of 6.5 percent or higher indicates diabetes.

## Insulin Resistance Explained

If the body's ability to regulate blood sugar is routinely strained by trying to digest high-glycemic foods or by an excess of visceral fat, this can lead to insulin resistance.

Insulin is a hormone the pancreas produces to help regulate blood sugar. It ushers glucose from the blood into cells in the muscle, fat, and liver, where it can be used for energy. If those cells reach their glucose-carrying capacity, they stop responding to insulin. Picture them hanging a No Vacancy sign and ignoring the insulin knocking at the door.

When this happens, excess glucose stays in the bloodstream, and the pancreas pumps out increasing



A1C LEVEL (%)

NORMAL

BELOW 5.7

PREDIABETES

5.7-6.4

DIABETES

6.5 OR ABOVE

amounts of insulin, trying to overcome the resistance in the muscle, fat, and liver cells. Eventually, the pancreas can't keep up with the demand for insulin, and blood sugar rises even higher.

"The way to understand insulin resistance, prediabetes, and diabetes is that it's the same essential problem, which is that your body has too much sugar," explains nephrologist Jason Fung, MD, author of *The Diabetes Code*. "When you put food in the refrigerator to eat later on, you can reach a point where you have too much food. Similarly, if we put too much glucose into storage, when we get more, it can't get into the cell and it stays out in the blood."

Unfortunately, it's still possible to have issues with insulin even if your blood sugar is in a healthy range. "The body works really, really hard to keep blood sugar normalized," Boham notes. "Someone's blood sugar might look completely normal because they're producing two, three, four times the usual amount of insulin to regulate it."

Excessive production of insulin can create its own problems, including weight gain, fatigue, and fatty liver. "Insulin is a storage hormone," Boham explains. It causes fat to accumulate, particularly around the midsection. "That fat is an active organ that's producing a lot of inflammatory markers. These markers can drive a vicious cycle of inflammation and further weight gain."

Because blood-glucose readings may not reveal simmering insulin resistance, Boham looks for other clues. Waist-to-hip ratio is a useful tool to measure belly fat, a hallmark of the condition. Ideally, the ratio should be 0.9 or lower for men and 0.8 or lower for women, though certain ethnicities may be at risk with lower ratios (more on the role of genetics later).

In women, irregular periods, hair growth on the lower face, and hair loss on the head can also signal issues with insulin sensitivity. Other warning signs for everyone include skin tags in the armpits or around the neck; acne; and dark, velvety patches of skin on the neck, armpits, or groin.

## Type 2 Diabetes: A Growing Challenge

The CDC estimates that 10.3 percent of American adults were living with a form of diabetes between 2001 and 2004. That number rose to 13.2 percent for 2017 to 2020. Combined with the estimated 38 percent of American adults who meet the criteria for prediabetes, more than half the adult population now has some version of the disease.

Type 2 diabetes in particular has become a global problem. Between 1980 and 2020, rates rose from less than 1 percent to 11.2 percent — a greater than tenfold increase.

Today, the countries with the highest rates of type 2 diabetes are Pakistan, French Polynesia, and Kuwait.

**"There's clearly something environmental — whether it's the foods we're eating or the lifestyles we're living — that's increasing the risk for all of us."**

Type 2 diabetes was once unusual in children, but that, too, is changing. "Unfortunately, we're seeing it in very young children now," notes Fung.

Why are so many more people now at increased risk of developing metabolic dysfunction?

On an individual level, genetics can play a role. Those with a family history of type 2 diabetes are more likely to develop it. Research suggests several gene variants may contribute to increased risk, particularly those involved in the regulation of insulin production, insulin action, or glucose metabolism.

"In general, your risk is higher if you have a higher body mass index," Fung says, "but many people with a normal BMI still develop diabetes."

People of African, Hispanic or Latino, Native American, Asian,

and Pacific Islander descent may be particularly susceptible to diabetes and metabolic dysfunction, even with a low BMI.

Still, heritable factors only account for so much. "The genetics of the human population have not changed in the past 20 years," Fung says, yet disease prevalence has skyrocketed. "There's clearly something environmental — whether it's the foods we're eating or the lifestyles we're living — that's increasing the risk for all of us."

## The Broader Context

There's no doubt that diet and lifestyle are key contributors to the rising prevalence of type 2 diabetes. Smoking, sedentariness, sleep deprivation, chronic stress, and a nutrient-poor inflammatory diet have all been implicated.

Recent research suggests the health of your microbiome may even play a part. Certain gut bacteria produce inflammatory molecules that can increase insulin resistance. An imbalanced microbiome may host more of these kinds of microbes, as well as fewer beneficial bugs that produce short-chain fatty acids known to increase insulin sensitivity.

"The microbiome affects how you respond to carbohydrates," Boham explains. "Some people will have a cup of beans and be perfectly fine, and for somebody else it will spike their blood sugar." Differences in their microbiomes may be one of the reasons.

Environmental toxins are another likely contributor, including bisphenol A (BPA), a component of the plastic used for water bottles and found in the lining of some water-supply pipes. (It's now rarely found in the lining of food cans after an effort to replace the chemical.) Studies show that Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange have significantly higher insulin resistance compared with veterans who were unexposed.

Toxins may increase insulin resistance by harming mitochondria, the energy-producing parts of our cells, Boham says. "When mitochondria don't work as well, then the whole process of keeping us insulin sensitive is damaged."

## 6 Strategies to Manage High Blood Sugar

Even though we can't control all the risk factors for insulin resistance, there are still plenty of ways to improve our metabolic health. Consider these evidence-backed lifestyle tactics for preventing — and reversing — high blood sugar and insulin resistance. They can be used safely alongside prescription drugs that control blood sugar (such as Metformin and supplemental insulin) and may help reduce or eliminate the need for prescriptions over time.

# 1.

### EAT BALANCED MEALS

The simplest way to manage blood sugar is to consume less glucose. “If you eat a lot of glucose — and that’s not just sug-

ary foods but starchy carbohydrates like bread, rice, and potatoes — then your blood glucose goes up,” Fung says.

The glycemic index (GI) ranks carbohydrates based on their impact on blood-sugar levels. Foods with a low GI tend to be absorbed more slowly, causing a more gradual, modest rise in glucose.

Still, the GI can only serve as a general guide because responses to glucose are highly individual. Genetics, the microbiome, body composition, and portion size all affect that response, which is why two people can have completely different reactions to the same food. (This is why a continuous glucose monitor can come in handy; more on that in a bit.)

Restrictive eating can lead to problems of its own, however, so rather than focusing exclusively on cutting down on carbohydrates, Weisenberger advocates for taking a broader view of a healthy diet. “Too often, people focus only on calories for weight, carbs for blood glucose, sodium for blood pressure, or fat for cholesterol,” she notes. “This myopic view of health and diet rarely leads to good outcomes.”

Instead, emphasize variety. Make sure every meal contains combinations of different nutrients. This can naturally curb an over-emphasis on carbs. “Having a balanced meal tends to lead to better blood-sugar control than a carbohydrate-heavy meal without some protein or fiber,” Weisenberger says.

Protein is typically more filling than carbohydrates, so it can help reduce over-eating and snacking. It also slows the absorption of carbohydrates, moderating their effect on blood sugar. Healthy fats (think nuts, seeds, avocados, and olive oil) produce a similar moderating effect on carbohydrates.

Fiber — both soluble and insoluble — is crucial here too. “Having a couple of foods at every meal with different types of fiber is going to be beneficial,” Weisenberger explains. “Some fibers slow down the release of glucose into the blood, and some are food for the good bacteria that produce helpful compounds that reduce insulin resistance.”

Finally, try eating your carbohydrates after some fiber, fat, and protein. “When you go to a restaurant, they start by bringing you bread, which is the worst thing to eat first,” Boham says. “Instead, start with salad with some olive oil. Starting with fiber, protein, and fat really helps with balancing blood sugar.”

# 2.

### MOVE MORE

When we exercise, we increase our body's sensitivity to insulin, which decreases insulin resistance. And anything that decreases insulin resistance is going to help manage blood glucose.

Both cardio and strength training offer benefits here — and a combination of the two is best. “The increased insulin sensitivity following exercise could last for a couple of hours or a couple of days, depending on the duration and intensity of the exercise,” Weisenberger says.

Boham recommends two strength-training sessions and at least 150 minutes of cardiovascular exercise per week — and not all the cardio needs to be intense. “Going for a walk after you eat dinner is a wonderful activity that can help improve blood sugar after a meal,” she says.

Strength training helps build lean muscle mass, which is crucial for absorbing glucose. “The preferred place for blood sugar to go after eating is to the muscle, but if we don't have a big muscle, we don't have a big repository for that sugar to enter,” Weisenberger explains.

She compares muscles to small and large buckets in a rainstorm — the big ones are going to hold a lot more rain. “That's why we don't want to lose muscle mass as we age; we want to build as much muscle as we possibly can.”

The very act of exercising helps remove glucose from the blood, even if you're insulin resistant. “If you're actively using your muscles, they don't need those messages from insulin in order to take up sugar,” Weisenberger says.

Though longer bouts of exercise are most effective, simply moving around throughout the day also counts. Research shows that breaking up long periods of inactivity helps improve insulin sensitivity. The American Diabetes Association recommends three minutes of movement for every 30 minutes of extended sitting.

“That could just be walking to the bathroom, moving the laundry from the washer to the dryer, or getting up and doing some squats and stretches,” Weisenberger notes.



# 3.

## TRY TIME-RESTRICTED EATING

Time-restricted eating (TRE) is a moderate form of intermittent fasting in which you eat only during

a specific window of time each day. Usually that window is between four and 10 hours long. Studies indicate that TRE can lead to a reduction in fasting insulin levels, improved insulin sensitivity, and better glucose tolerance.

“If the underlying problem in prediabetes is too much glucose, you can either put less glucose into the system or let your body burn off the excess, which is what intermittent fasting does,” Fung says. “It’s the most powerful natural therapy for type 2 diabetes.”

Fung compares a body with too much glucose to an overflowing sink. “The strategy we have right now is that when the sink overflows, we get mops,” he says, referring to the medications used to manage type 2 diabetes. “But the best strategy is to turn off the tap and let the water drain out. Let your body burn off the glucose.”

During fasting, the body uses stored glucose, which is primarily glycogen from the liver, to meet its energy needs. As glycogen stores diminish, the body starts to burn fat for energy. This may help improve insulin sensitivity.

If you decide to try TRE, keep in mind that the body becomes more insulin resistant as the day goes on. “If you eat the same meal at noon or at 8 p.m., you’ll produce a higher amount of insulin after the later meal,” Boham notes. “[Eating] earlier is better when it comes to insulin resistance and prediabetes.” (To learn if you’re a good candidate for TRE, see [ELmag.com/intermittentfasting](http://ELmag.com/intermittentfasting).)

“If we activate the parasympathetic, calming nervous system, we can actually bring down our blood sugar.”

# 4.

## CONSIDER A CONTINUOUS GLUCOSE MONITOR

If you’re curious about your individual response to carbohydrates, a continuous glucose monitor (CGM) can be a useful tool. This device measures blood-sugar levels in real time with a sensor placed under the skin. A CGM may be prescribed by a doctor if you have type 1 or type 2 diabetes, but you can also find over-the-counter brands.

“CGMs give you information that you couldn’t get otherwise,” Fung says. “We know what the average response to any given food is, but we don’t know what your personal response is going to be. The CGM gives us personalized information about what foods are doing to us.”

A CGM may also offer insight into how sleep, stress, and meal timing are affecting your blood sugar, Boham adds. Still, she cautions that a CGM is best used for a short time, to avoid focusing too much on one kind of metric, and with the support of a provider who can help you interpret the information.

# 5.

## REDUCE INFLAMMATION

“Prediabetes is an inflammatory disorder,” Boham says, so training your focus on reducing inflammation can yield big benefits.

The simplest way to cool inflammation is by eating fewer inflammatory foods, especially hyperprocessed fare and known allergens like dairy and gluten. Increasing inflammation-fighting compounds from fresh, whole plant foods also helps.

“There’s been great research on phytonutrients and how they can help decrease inflammation after a meal,” Boham explains. “So, in addition to protein, fats, and fiber at each meal, think about including colorful plant foods. Just adding more spices to your meals can be really helpful.”

Regular relaxation also helps calm the system. “When we’re in a state of stress, our blood sugar goes up,” she says. “It makes sense. If you’re running from a tiger, the body wants more glucose in the blood so it can use it to run away.”

The reverse is true as well. “If we activate the parasympathetic, calming nervous system, we can actually bring down our blood sugar.”

Weisenberger adds that poor sleep is a type of physical stress on the body. “One night of poor sleep will increase insulin resistance even in healthy people. But if somebody habitually gets bad sleep, then we can see a big difference in insulin sensitivity.”



# 6.

## EXPERIMENT WITH COLD THERAPY

A small body of research suggests that cold therapy — such as cryotherapy, polar plunges, ice baths, and cold showers — can lower fasting glucose and insulin levels and improve insulin sensitivity.

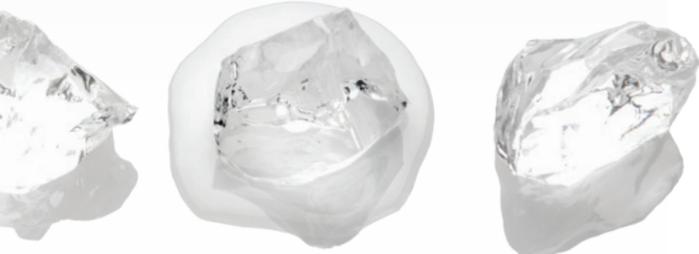
It may confer some of these benefits by creating what's known as brown fat. "When we think of fat, we usually think of white fat, which stores calories. But there's also brown fat," Fung explains.

Brown fat stores energy in a smaller space than white fat; it also generates body heat and burns caloric energy.

Regular cold exposure helps generate more brown fat. "If it's burning energy, that's going to be useful in the treatment of prediabetes because it's using up glucose," Fung says, adding that more research is needed.

**As always**, the most sustainable way to manage your blood glucose is a personalized, holistic approach that suits your individual needs. If your A1C is running high, it's worth the time to learn what works for you. Building supportive diet and lifestyle habits can mean the difference between managing a progressive metabolic disease or turning the tide for good. 🍷

**MO PERRY** is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.



## A BRIEF LOOK AT SEMAGLUTIDES

Various drugs have long been used to help manage diabetes, including the commonly prescribed Metformin. More recently, in 2017, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved a semaglutide drug — part of a class of medications known as glucagon-like peptide 1 receptor agonists — with the brand name Ozempic for the treatment of type 2 diabetes.

Since then, semaglutide has also been approved for weight management under the brand name Wegovy. These injectable medications lower blood-sugar levels, increase feelings of fullness, and delay the emptying of the stomach after eating.

"The major reason these drugs work is that they cause you to lose your appetite," explains nephrologist Jason Fung, MD. "But if you don't pair that with proper dietary habits, then it's just a temporary fix because as soon as you stop taking the drug, all the changes reverse."

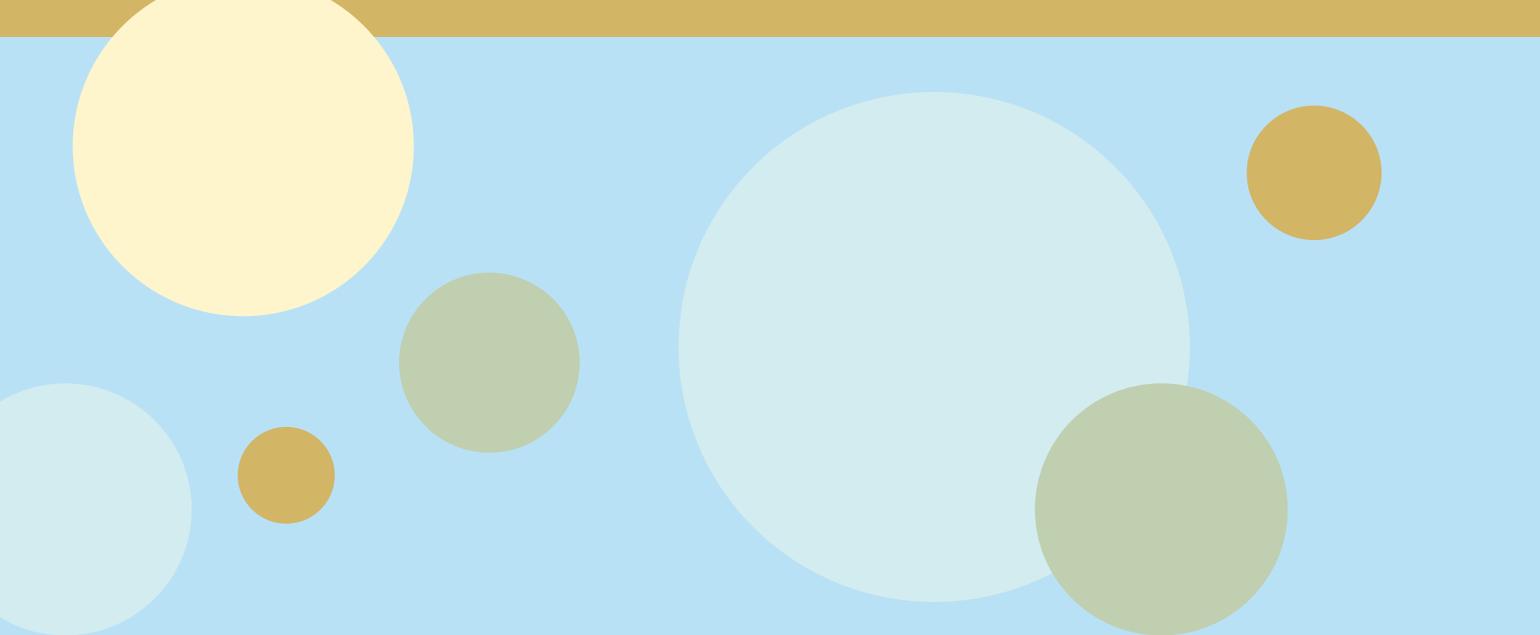
A 2023 analysis of pharmacy claims found that two-thirds of people who were prescribed weight-loss drugs like Wegovy stopped taking them within one year. Cost may be a factor, especially for people paying out of pocket. Side effects are another. These can include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and, more rarely, stomach paralysis, bowel obstruction, and pancreatitis.

Fung notes that curbing your appetite may be a blessing in the short term, but it loses its appeal. "These drugs take away hunger, but they also take away the pleasure of eating. If you take that away for six months, people are happy because they're losing weight and getting healthier. But take that enjoyment away for two, three years, and it leads to poor compliance. And when you stop taking it, the problems multiply."

"The biggest concern with these medications is that we're seeing too much loss of lean muscle mass," explains functional-medicine physician Elizabeth Boham, MD, MS, RD. "Whenever you lose lean muscle mass, your metabolism decreases." Studies show that lost muscle mass also contributes to frailty in older adults.

Furthermore, the weight people regain after stopping the medication generally comes back as fat instead of muscle.

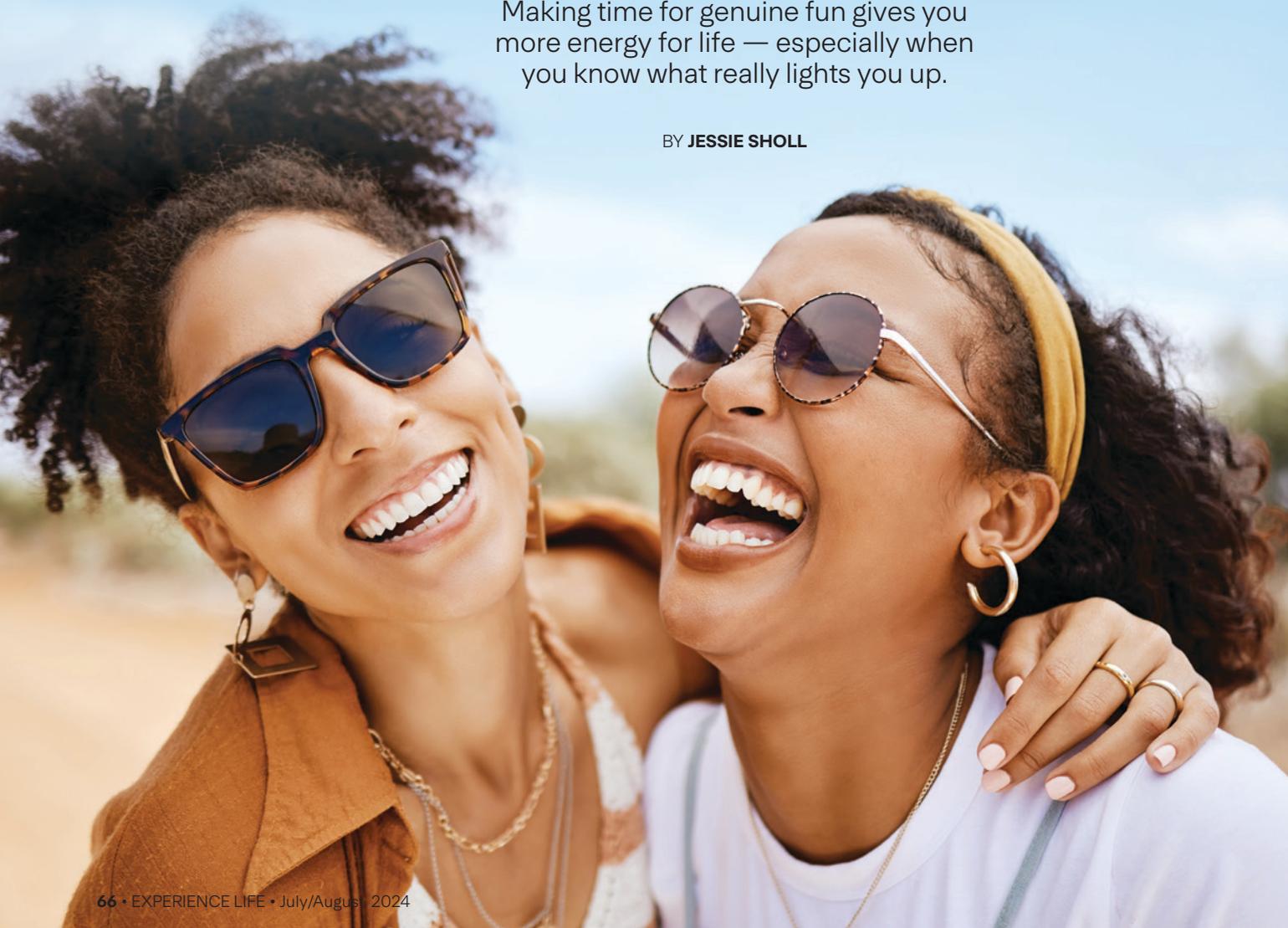
A personalized risk-benefit analysis may come out in favor of semaglutide for some people facing certain or extreme health challenges. "If it helps someone not have gastric bypass surgery, there may be a net benefit," Boham says. Regardless, anyone who opts to take semaglutide will benefit from working with a personal trainer to minimize loss of lean muscle mass.



# Joie de Vivre!

Making time for genuine fun gives you more energy for life — especially when you know what really lights you up.

BY JESSIE SHOLL



**A FEW YEARS AGO**, Catherine Price had a minor crisis. She was sitting on her couch, in the middle of a 24-hour break from screens, and her young daughter was napping. She could do whatever she wanted.

“I had a glorious free hour in front of me — and I realized that without any screens to fill my time, I had no idea what I wanted to do,” she recalls. “And I totally freaked out.”

Price was shocked to find that somewhere between graduate school and this moment, she’d forgotten how to have fun.

So she asked herself a question she’d posed to research subjects for her book on screen addiction: *What’s something you say you want to do but supposedly don’t have time for?*

“My answer was, *Learn to play the guitar,*” Price says.

After several weeks of guitar classes, she sensed a change in herself. “The lessons gave me this boost of energy, this feeling of nourishment, that really carried through for the whole week.”

One dictionary definition of fun is “lighthearted pleasure or enjoyment,” yet the lessons had a deeper, more lasting impact on Price. She decided to give a name to what she’d felt each week at guitar class: *true fun*.

Since then, she’s made fun her mission — and, being a journalist, her new research project. Her most recent book is *The Power of Fun*, and her Substack newsletter is called *How to Feel Alive*.

Most of us know what true fun feels like — a buoyant, joyful, sometimes silly energy. It connects us to the present moment. It can arise during a belly laugh or a goofy Zumba class. It can show up in quiet moments of concentration during shared activities, such as assembling a puzzle.

Like a refreshing breeze, true fun is mostly visible in its effects: We feel better after experiencing it than we did before.

So why do we so often neglect to make time for fun? This is what some experts think is behind the abandonment.



## FUN AS FOUNDATION

Most adults have been misled about fun. We’ve been taught that it’s a waste of time or something we deserve only once we’ve accomplished enough of the hard stuff.

But fun is not frivolous. Silliness and joy are good for your health, your relationships, and even your career.

“Those who incorporate fun into their lives are not just happier in the moment,” says Mike Rucker, PhD, a behavioral scientist and organizational psychologist who writes about the science of fun in his book, *The Fun Habit*. “They are also better at pursuing long-term objectives, balancing their emotional states, and nurturing their mental health.”

Fun gives us more than immediate gratification, he adds. It helps us build “a foundation for a more fulfilled, balanced, and resilient life.”

Yet many of us feel as Price once did: We’re no longer sure where to start.

Fun often comes easily to us as children, when we typically have fewer responsibilities. As we grow older and have more obligations, however, many of us become vulnerable to a stringent work ethic, Rucker says. “This tired cultural norm emphasizes hard work, discipline, and frugality, often at the expense of well-being.”

Some cultures are more vulnerable to this type of thinking than others — American culture being one of them. A 2022 poll conducted for the American Psychological Association found that 27 percent of Americans are “so stressed they can’t function,” a likely indicator that life has become all work and no play.

Still, observes Price, if we make it a habit to seek out playfulness, connection, and flow, we are on our way to having more true fun.



# A Recipe for True Fun

**IN THE POWER OF FUN**, Price identifies five conditions for true fun: total engagement, the absence of self-consciousness, going all in, detachment from outcome, and the presence of other people. To cut loose and feel joy, we usually need a little help from our friends.

Similarly, Price discovered that true fun typically involves the confluence of three factors: playfulness, connection, and flow. This is how each one contributes to true fun.



## 1. PLAY

**PLAYFULNESS** is a good antidote to worry — and the first component of true fun.

Opportunities to be playful are everywhere once you start to look for them. Sarah Routman, a certified laughter yoga teacher, recounts a recent trip to the movies with her family. As they realized they were the only ones in the theater, Routman began walking up and down the aisles, saying, “Excuse me, excuse me, pardon me for blocking your view,” which made them all laugh.

She had expected an enjoyable night but found that some playfulness made it truly fun. “Yes, we liked the movie,” she says, “but what was fun is that we weren’t expecting to be the only people in the movie theater, and so we did goofy things.”

Routman is comfortable with her family, so playfulness comes easily.

She’s learned from facilitating corporate workshops how much trust enables fun. “You don’t usually allow yourself to do silly things unless you’re with someone you feel comfortable with,” she says.

Self-consciousness, she notes, is one of the greatest obstacles to fun, and it’s a common hurdle for team-building exercises.

She suggests practicing silliness with someone you trust. Intentionally partaking in a playful activity together can help you bypass those self-conscious reflexes.

“Take yourself to a playground with a friend. And swing,” she advises. “When you swing or skip, those activities remind us of childhood. And when you allow yourself to become that child, you find your arms swinging back and forth, you’re fully present, not thinking about anything else.”



## 2. CONNECT

**THE COMPANY OF OTHERS** is often vital to true fun, Price says. These others don't have to be close friends or family. Just think about the last time you cut loose in a Zumba class or played a pickup basketball game. You may not have known anyone's name, but the presence of others engaged in the same activity helped create an environment for true fun to emerge.

Price thinks it is possible to have fun alone, but most of the stories she heard about fun during her research involved other people. And when she asked subjects if anything in their own answers surprised them, she often heard comments like this: "I'm a self-proclaimed introvert, but all the stories I just told you involved another person."

"Think about the times you've laughed really hard," Routman adds. "You don't usually laugh really hard while alone."

Although most of us don't need convincing on this point, science does affirm the social dimension of fun. The title of a study published in 2016 in the *Journal of Positive Psychology* says it all: "Fun Is More Fun When Others Are Involved."



## 3. FLOW

**FEW THINGS** feel as good as becoming utterly absorbed in an activity. It could be anything — cooking, playing Frisbee, swimming laps. Deep engagement is a hallmark of a flow state, which is the third part of Price's true-fun trifecta.

The late University of Chicago psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, PhD, introduced the concept of flow in the 1970s, defining it as a state in which you're so engrossed in an activity "that nothing else seems to matter."

"Flow states are fun," says Mark Congdon, author of *The Ideal Life*. "Across all types of people, they're identified as the most enjoyable moments of their life."

One way to uncover flow, Congdon says, is by practicing a new skill that's neither too easy nor too hard. To achieve flow, we need to do something difficult enough to keep us

engaged, but not so hard that we get frustrated.

"When you deliberately practice a new skill and push yourself out of your comfort zone, you're elevating the levels of cortisol in your blood system, but not enough to make you distressed," Congdon explains. "You're actually getting the optimal level of good stress to allow yourself to be successful and develop the skill."

Any activity that brings us into a state of flow that's also playful and communal is almost sure to produce true fun. This is what Price experienced while learning guitar with a bunch of other adults: It was just hard enough to keep her engaged, silly enough (adults learning a new

instrument!) to be playful, and communal enough to build trust.

It's the same when we play a team sport with a reasonable level of skill or get totally absorbed in a board game with friends or family.

Still, Price notes, plenty of activities that don't qualify as true fun sustain us in other ways.

"Many things that are just enjoyable or nourishing in some way might not lead to the active, energized state of playful, connected flow," she says — things like reading, solitary walks, or long baths. "But those activities are really important, too."

# Find Your Fun

**IF YOU FEEL** like you really don't know where to find fun in your life, try setting a modest stretch goal that pushes you out of your comfort zone, Congdon suggests. It doesn't even have to be something that sounds especially fun; you're seeking the satisfaction that comes from pursuing a new skill. Then you can build on that feeling of full engagement.

"So, rather than put too much pressure on the result, focus on the process that leads to the result," he says. "That's much easier to control, and it's going to result in the outcomes that you want."

You can also do what Price calls a "fun audit." Conjure up some memories of playful, silly, engaging experiences, then write down the ones that stand out.

These don't need to be profound. One of Price's interview subjects shared a memory of going out in the rain with their grandfather when they were a child, no umbrellas. They allowed themselves to get soaked. "I love that," she says, "because it shows how fun can be mundane but also deeply meaningful."

You might also write about the last time you laughed hard, smiled so much that your face hurt, or felt really alive. Where were you? Who was there? What were you doing?

As you start to build out your own personal fun history on paper, search for themes. Most likely, you'll find some activities surfacing repeatedly — certain people and settings too.

Price calls those activities, people, and places your "fun magnets," and they're clues to your own personal "fun type." Understanding what type of fun appeals to you makes it easier to find more of it and to take a pass



on activities that you know won't light you up. (For more information about fun types, take the quiz at [bit.ly/3QrXQcy](https://bit.ly/3QrXQcy).)

In addition to fun magnets, we all seem to have "fun factors" as well. These are the characteristics that make certain things feel fun to us, she explains, and each of us has a different collection.

Maybe you're drawn to physical activities, like dancing or playing sports, or to intellectual ones, like Scrabble or witty wordplay. Maybe you have the most fun when you're in nature or while cooking or eating with people you love.

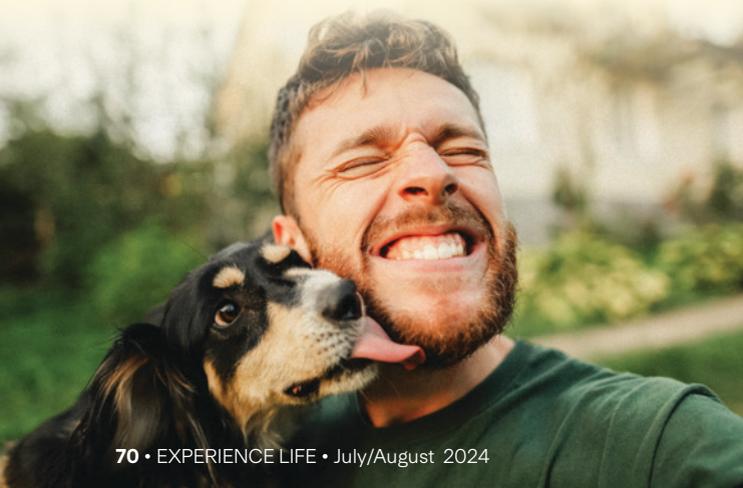
Finally, Price suggests cultivating a fun mindset. This is less about identifying preferences and more about opening yourself to possibilities. A fun mindset helps you seek chances to "create — or appreciate — humor, absurdity, playfulness, connection, and flow," she writes.

It also enables you to have fun in nearly any context. "I've had fun in doctor's appointments," Price says. "You [can have fun] chatting with an Uber driver or in other random moments."

In short, knowing ourselves and what we enjoy can help us have more fun. We don't have to wait for permission or perfect conditions either. Playful, connected, engaged fun can almost always coexist with whatever else we have going on. We just need to be willing to drop our guard and let it in. 🎯

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**JESSIE SHOLL** is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.



## SPARK FUN

Catherine Price, author of *The Power of Fun*, created a framework with the acronym SPARK to help guide people to their “personal fun North Star.”

The first step is to make **space** for fun, by clearing mental and physical clutter. This might mean clearing out the garage to have room to roller skate, but it can also mean freeing up time, mental bandwidth, or emotional space bogged down in resentments.

Next is to **pursue** passions. “Hobbies and interests tend to result in relaxation or pleasant engagement,” Price says, but passions invigorate us. “They’re essentially interests or hobbies that have been turbocharged.” Set aside any embarrassment and pursue a passion you’ve harbored. Who cares if the neighbors don’t like accordion music.

Consider how you can **attract** fun. Opportunities for playfulness, connection, and flow surround us all the time, she says. “The better we are at attracting and appreciating them, the more fun our lives will be.”

Think about the fun people you know. Are they spontaneous? Fearlessly silly? Vulnerable? Consider ways you can open up and let yourself play a little bigger to attract more fun.

**Rebel** — within reason. In the proper doses, writes Price, “irresponsibility and indulgence (and pushing ourselves out of our comfort zones) are very good for us.” She’s not recommending anything illegal; there are many ways to rebel, including playfully. If you’re raising teenagers, pretty much everything you do will break one of their rules — so wear those ‘90s jeans proudly and let them win. Consider it practice.

**Keep at it.** We need to continue to prioritize fun, she argues, so it doesn’t become lost in the sea of things competing for our attention and time. “And we need to commit to [making fun a priority], not just for the next day or the next week but for the rest of our lives.” In the end, we’ll be glad we did.



## THE SIREN SONG OF FAKE FUN

Phone scrolling, binge watching, and needless online shopping are all examples of what author Catherine Price calls *fake fun*. These “fun impostors” can be tricky, because we associate them with relaxation, and we may very well lose track of time while we’re doing them. But fake fun is really just spacing out.

That’s fine if it’s what you mean to do, Price says, but spacing out won’t satisfy your soul the way true fun will. Fake fun is likely to leave you drained and dull, while true fun makes you feel energized and renewed.

We have skillful engineers to thank for how much of our time gets consumed by fake fun. Social media apps, including TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram, are designed to hold our attention. Scrolling has no automatic off-ramp. Likes and other notifications give us quick dopamine hits, convincing us that whatever is on the screen is more rewarding than what’s in the room.

All of this amounts to a state of distraction, which goes hand in hand with disconnection. MIT professor Sherry Turkle, author of *Reclaiming Conversation*, has pointed out how leaving a cellphone out on a table during a meal is likely to prevent the conversation from going too deep — when we know we can be interrupted at any moment, we stick to shallower topics.

“True fun and distraction are like oil and water,” Price adds.

She shares plenty of strategies for reclaiming your attention in a previous book, *How to Break Up With Your Phone*, such as putting a rubber band around your phone to make it more noticeable when you pick it up. You can also remove time-sucking apps from the home screen.

Overall, anything you can do to remain present — including noticing when you grab your phone to distract yourself — can help you stay in control of your own attention.

(For more ideas on how to break free from tech, visit [ELmag.com/mindfultech](http://ELmag.com/mindfultech).)

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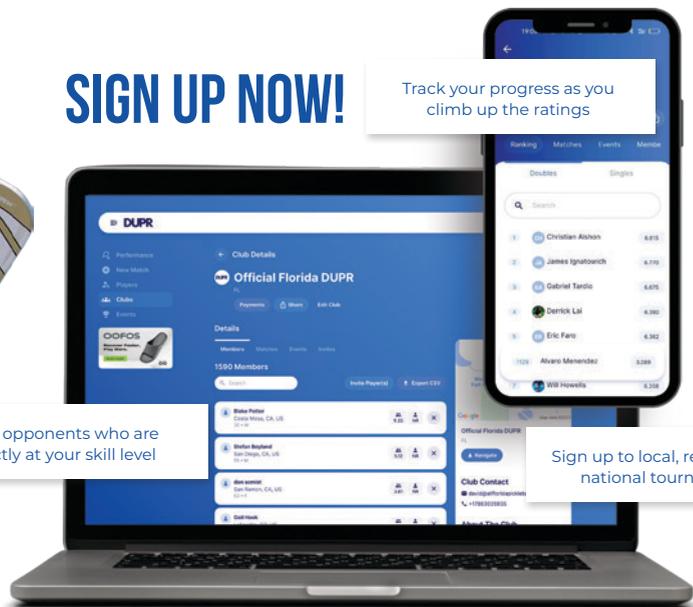
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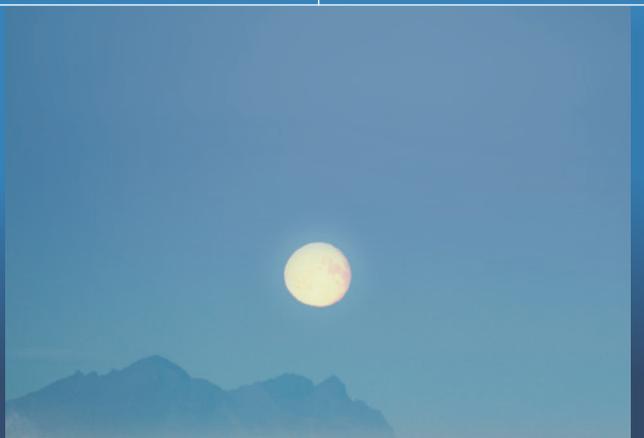
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# REAL LIFE



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**CYCLES ARE EVERYWHERE IN NATURE** — think of the sun, the moon, the tides, the weather, the seasons. But we humans are more likely to ignore or even fight the natural cycles that govern our bodies. Tuning in to and aligning ourselves with nature's cycles can deliver true benefits for our health. Learn more on page 77.



## Overwhelmed by Overfunctioning?

If you tend to micromanage in certain relationships, it might be time to take a step back. Create more balance in your life with this advice.

BY KARA DOUGLASS THOM

**SAY YOUR KID** comes home complaining of a bully on the bus. You don't want them to suffer, so you start driving them to and from school — even though it requires you to arrive late to your office, leave early, and work into the evening at home.

Or perhaps you take over for your partner who's in the middle of cooking dinner. Even though it's their turn, it will simply be easier if you do it.

These examples illustrate a behavioral pattern known as overfunctioning, in which someone takes on the responsibilities of those around them to manage their anxiety within that relationship. Those who overfunction often minimize their own needs to attend to someone else's problems. And though the overfunctioner probably means well, they ultimately keep those around them from becoming stronger and more capable.

### DIFFICULT DYNAMICS

In the mid-1960s, psychiatrist Murray Bowen, MD, employed the term “overfunctioning” to describe family dynamics. Today, Bowen family systems theory is applied in various therapy settings with the central concept of differentiation: the degree to which a

person is able to maintain their own independent thoughts and feelings.

People with lower levels of differentiation can be prone to overfunctioning for others, explains Randall Frost, MDiv, director of the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family in Washington, D.C.

Psychologist Harriet Lerner, PhD, brought the concept from clinical circles into popular culture with a series of best-selling books, including *The Dance of Anger* and *The Dance of Intimacy*. In the latter, Lerner says that those who overfunction tend to believe they know what's best, and they have difficulty allowing friends and family to work through their own problems. By focusing on those around them, these people avoid worrying about their own troubles and goals.

This might sound similar to a type A personality or perfectionist, but those concepts are more descriptive of how a person operates as an individual, explains marriage and family therapist Jane McCampbell Stuart, MA, LMFT, CPCC, RMFT. Overfunctioning, on the other hand, is about “how someone is interacting within a relationship.”

It's also subtly different from codependence. “Both describe an

individual overoccupied with someone else at the expense of their self,” McCampbell says, but the stance is different. “A person who is codependent makes themselves small and allows the other person to take up more space. The dynamic is maintained by fear of harm or abandonment, and the energy feels desperate and powerless.”

The inverse is true in overfunctioning, she explains. “The overfunctioner is taking up more space than is theirs, and the dynamic is maintained by a belief that the other person is incapable of stepping up. The energy is fueled by anxiety and a need to control and can sometimes feel martyrish or secretly contemptuous.”

It's also a relationship dynamic, not a diagnosis or a personality trait. If you overfunction in one relationship, that doesn't necessarily mean that you behave that way with everyone.

People who overfunction are great at helping others, Lerner explains, but they're not adept at sharing vulnerability or accepting help for themselves — which can lead to exhaustion and burnout. “When overfunctioners do collapse under the strain of rescuing and fixing others, they can do so in a big way.”



## HOW TO STOP OVERFUNCTIONING

Start with awareness. Those who are overfunctioning may struggle to see their part of the reciprocal pattern, especially when it's driven by anxiety. They may wonder, *If I don't do it, who will?* It can help to ask instead, *When do I do too much for others and too little for myself?*

Notice, too, if your body is showing signs of stress, which is what happened to functional-medicine practi-

tioner Sara Gottfried, MD. "My overfunctioning led to eating to change my emotional state, high cortisol, high insulin, high glucose, and low libido," Gottfried explains.

And what she saw in herself became something she recognized in her patients, who often presented with autoimmune conditions, prediabetes, or leaky gut. "The effect of all that stress from overfunctioning is measurable."

### Recognize the roots.

Lerner notes that a dynamic of overfunctioning/underfunctioning can have roots in previous generations and is often modeled to us as children. McCampbell adds that culture and gender norms can contribute to the "stuckness" of such patterns.

For instance, one partner might overfunction with money, which alleviates their anxiety but shuts their partner out of important decisions. The other partner may overfunction as the caregiver, shutting their partner out of important relationships, she notes. "We feel an obligation to do what society expects of us."

**Modify behavior.** Once Gottfried noticed how she was overfunctioning in her relationships, she practiced showing up differently. "Let go of the need to be right," she suggests. "Determine how you'd like to behave. What is your ideal for functional behavior?"

"Rushing in to offer advice — like rushing in to cheer someone up — may reflect

our own inability to remain emotionally present in the face of another person's problems and pain," Lerner explains. "Advice-giving is also of dubious value to people who say they want your advice but consistently fail to heed it. If you feel angry when the other person doesn't follow your advice, it's a good indication that you shouldn't be giving it."

**Expect resistance.** "People are used to you stepping in and doing what you've always done," says Frost. "If this is a long-standing pattern, the change won't be quick or easy, but eventually the underfunctioner will start to pull up."

He advises that you try not to be reactive, get mad, or distance yourself. Rather, stay present with yourself and with the other person, and know that this change will ultimately serve you both.

Gottfried adds that it can be difficult to allow others to be responsible for themselves. "It may feel like you're sitting on the razor's edge,"

she says. "Yes, it's easier to do it all yourself, but that's what got us into this mess. Look for opportunities in your most important relationships to enter into this discomfort."

### Maintain boundaries.

Someone who overfunctions allows their identity to be so wrapped up in others that they minimize their own desires and needs. They operate with an inflated sense of control and diffuse boundaries. This also harms the other person, who is cast as less capable.

People may still come to you with problems, especially if they're accustomed to relying on your advice. To practice staying out of fix-it mode, try asking questions like "Can you tell me more about that?" or "What is that like for you?"

Over time, maintaining these boundaries will be healthier for you and your relationships. "As we become less of an expert on the other, we become more of an expert on the self," Lerner writes. "As we work

toward greater self-focus, we become better able to give feedback, to share our perspective, to state clearly our values and beliefs and then stand firmly behind them."

### Empower yourself and others.

Getting clear about your own needs will help you find better ways to manage your anxiety and leave those you love to manage theirs.

"If we move in too quickly with solutions, we unwittingly rob those we love of the opportunity to struggle with their own problems and find their own solutions. Being a good listener and creative questioner goes a long way to put people in touch with their own competence and inner resources," Lerner says.

Shifting the dynamic may feel challenging at first, but know that it's ultimately the best choice for you and your loved ones, Gottfried adds. "I've learned that one of the best gifts you can give the people you love is to take a step back and let them function for themselves." 🧠

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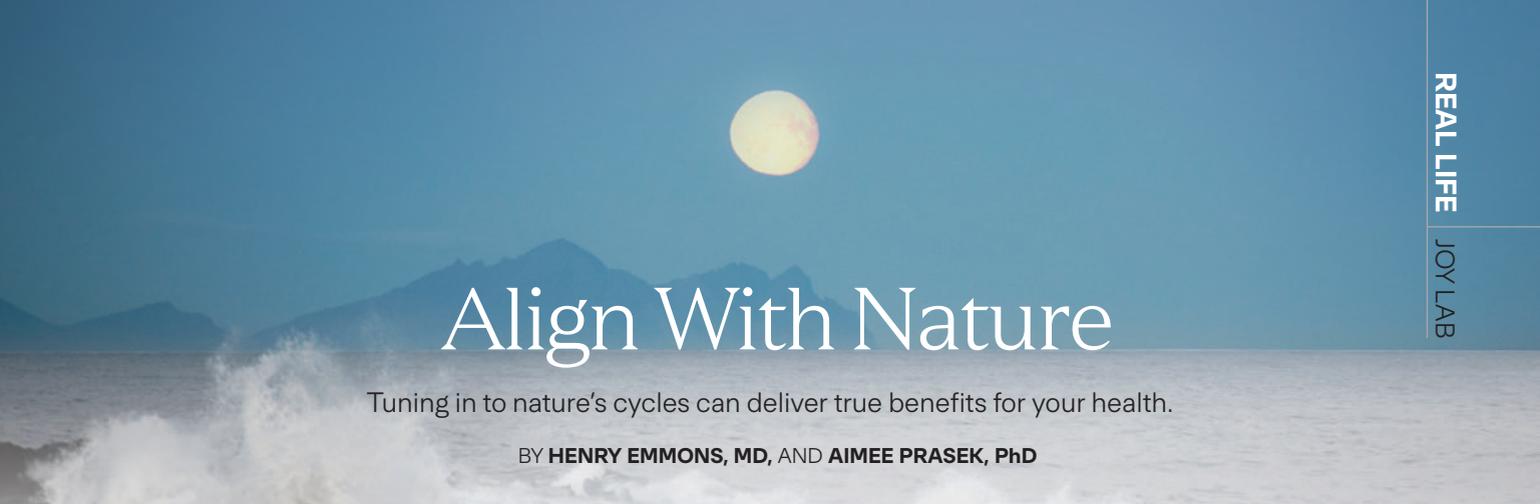
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# Align With Nature

Tuning in to nature's cycles can deliver true benefits for your health.

BY HENRY EMMONS, MD, AND AIMEE PRASEK, PhD

## CYCLES ARE EVERYWHERE

in nature: the sun, the moon, the tides, the weather, the seasons. Plants and animals follow these rhythms, adjusting their eating and behavior patterns accordingly.

Humans are more likely to ignore or even fight the natural cycles that govern our bodies. We pull all-nighters instead of going to sleep when it gets dark; we go south in the winter instead of adapting to darkness and cold.

These responses make sense for our linear lifestyles, but they come at a cost. For physical and mental health, respecting natural cycles really does matter.

Our bodies are sensitive to three natural rhythms: ultradian, circadian, and infradian. And working with instead of against them can make a difference in our well-being.

Our bodies are sensitive to three natural rhythms: **ultradian, circadian, and infradian.**

## ULTRADIAN RHYTHMS

These short cycles are the easiest to overlook, but they affect our daily lives more than the others because they happen with greater frequency. Consider your workday: Do you really stay focused and productive for eight to 10 hours? We doubt it.

We've become so tied to clock time that we tend to ignore the microrhythms in our bodies. Our brains can sustain an intense focus for only about 90 minutes, at which point our attention wanders and our energy drops. If we push on, we're likely to miss how we're starting to get spacey and make mistakes.

This is when we often turn to sugar or caffeine for a quick, artificial boost. But what our bodies really need is a pause, just for 20 minutes or so. This is a time to rest, move, or eat a healthy snack.

Other refreshers might include a brief meditation or chat with a friend — anything that gives the brain a break can help us return to our tasks with renewed focus.

During the workday, we recommend thinking about managing your energy rather than managing your time. Consider this a mindfulness practice: You learn to notice when you're starting to fade, and then you honor what your body needs.

## CIRCADIAN RHYTHMS

Of all bodily systems governed by 24-hour circadian rhythms, sleep is the most obvious. Respecting this cycle and ensuring we develop a regular sleep schedule is the best way to stabilize mood. Research has shown that when people coping with depression and sleep problems treat both at once, they greatly improve their chances of recovery from depression.

Our endocrine systems are also responsive to circadian rhythms. In a well-regulated body, the stress hormone cortisol rises and falls over a 24-hour period. It declines in the evening, allowing us to enjoy our deepest sleep.

Around 3 a.m., cortisol typically starts to rise, preparing us to wake up. Cortisol

continues to rise until about 8 a.m., when many of us are most focused, then slowly drops off throughout the remainder of the day and evening. This pattern gives us energy in the morning and allows us to unwind in the evening.

Pushing through these natural dips in energy causes the adrenal glands to stop listening to signals from the brain, and the normal rhythm of cortisol is disrupted — it either stays elevated, causing anxiety, or flatlines, leading to exhaustion.

This scenario is sometimes called adrenal fatigue. The best way to avoid this type of burnout is to honor circadian rhythms by protecting sleep.

One easy way to do this is by respecting light and dark cycles — exposing yourself to bright light earlier in the day and dimming the lights at night. Because artificial light lets us override signals from nature, we believe it may be part of the reason mental health problems have increased over the last century.

## INFRADIAN RHYTHMS

Infradian rhythms are any natural cycle lasting longer than 24 hours. These offer a powerful organizing principle for our bodies. Menstruation is one example. This monthly cycle involves time-sensitive symptoms such as changes in mood and increased need for sleep. These cycles may even work in concert with cycles of the moon. The evidence on this isn't definitive, but many notice a connection.

A lot of women find their menstrual cycles less stressful when they pay attention to the rhythm of their symptoms, especially if they document them. This practice helps reveal the pattern behind what can feel like random occurrences. If a dark cloud of depression descends, a journal can confirm the same thing happened last month, at nearly the same time.

Such attunement can help release any judgment of one's body; these ups and downs are signs of an infradian rhythm in good working order. Everything happens in time.

**HENRY EMMONS, MD**, is an integrative psychiatrist and cofounder of Natural Mental Health. He is the author of *The Chemistry of Joy*, *The Chemistry of Calm*, and *Staying Sharp*. **AIMEE PRASEK, PhD**, is an integrative-therapies researcher and CEO of Natural Mental Health.



# The Challenge of Body Grief

How to cope with the distress and loss that often come with living in a body that's constantly changing and won't always meet your expectations.

BY JON SPAYDE

**WE ALL EXIST** within a body we did not choose for ourselves. And though we may appreciate many aspects of our physical selves, we may dislike or resent features that don't align with our expectations or desires.

Similarly, our bodies evolve with time and use, in ways that we like — as well as in ways that we don't. These perceived shortcomings or undesirable changes can stir up a complex of fraught emotions. Those feelings have a name: body grief.

Meredith Nisbet-Croes, MS, LMFT, CEDS-C, RYT-200, is a family therapist and eating disorders specialist who serves as the national clinical response manager for the Eating Recovery Center and Pathlight Mood and Anxiety Center. She defines body

grief as “feelings of inadequacy, frustration, sadness, anger, or fear related to the natural state of our bodies, or to body changes.”

Like other forms of grief, she says, it's a response to a loss: either the loss of a prior physical state (such as a stronger, more youthful state or a state prior to pregnancy or the development of a chronic illness) or the sense of loss that we may feel if we struggle to accept some characteristic of our bodies (like a physical disability or peculiarity).

The way to keep body grief from overwhelming us, she suggests, is to challenge the cultural bias that says that only one kind of body is healthy, attractive, and optimal — and to accept the fact that our bodies are always changing.

## STRESS SOURCES

**Feeling uncomfortable in your body.** This is body grief: You're inhabiting a body that, in Nisbet-Croes's words, “doesn't feel like your own.” She notes that people experiencing body grief might share similar emotions with people experiencing gender dysphoria, but she points out that the two differ in significant ways.

Gender dysphoria describes a condition in which one's body does not reflect one's gender identity. Body grief is a broader term that refers to the difficult emotions that arise when our bodies don't align with our expectations or when they change in unwelcome ways.

**Disappointment that your body doesn't coincide with the cultural ideal.** Nisbet-Croes notes how the social pressure to fit today's American body ideal — small-bodied, able-bodied, young, fit — can be overwhelming. The pressure can lead to feelings of inadequacy and severe self-judgment.

**Difficulty reconciling the reality of your body with the memory of what it used to be.** “This is something I speak with patients about pretty often,” says Nisbet-Croes. “They'll say, ‘Oh, this picture came up from a holiday or a birthday several years ago, and I find myself looking at that photo and thinking, *Gosh, I wish I still looked like I did then.*’”

**Feeling judged.** Friends, family, or other people in your life may make remarks that imply you aren't taking care of your health or that you aren't working hard enough to lose weight, to “overcome” your disability, or to become a vigorous “super senior.”

**Feeling triggered when you hear others disparage their bodies or talk about diets, workouts, and physical abilities.**

Body talk is ubiquitous, and even when it's not directly judgmental toward you, it can be upsetting.

**Choosing not to participate in or enjoy certain things because of your body.**

“Maybe you are no longer doing things you've always done that bring you joy because of body grief,” says Nisbet-Croes. “You don't want to wear a bathing suit at the beach. You quit going to the gym. You dread the coming of warm weather because you want to keep your body covered. Maybe your life is starting to shrink.”

## SUCCESS STRATEGIES

**Feel the grief.** As with any grieving process, trying to stuff it away or avoid it won't work, Nisbet-Croes notes. We need to feel it and talk about it as well as take steps to keep it from immobilizing us. "I don't think we've established stages of body grief," she says. "But we know that it's a process, often one step forward, two steps back. We're not going to feel it in the same way every day."

When emotions arise, take a moment to pause and reflect on them. Ask yourself nonjudgmental questions, including *What am I feeling?* and *What triggered the emotion?* Jotting some notes in a journal may help you process and release some of the emotions.

**Accept physical change as a fact of life.** "If there's one constant that you can count on, it's that your body's going to change," Nisbet-Croes says. "We don't necessarily know in what ways, but we know it's going to. We're sold this idea that our bodies shouldn't change, or if they do, it has to be in one specific, acceptable way."

Practicing body-scan meditations — training yourself to feel present in your body and aware of how it feels — can help ground you when you're feeling unsettled or disconnected. "If we can lean into the change, go on the journey accepting our humanity and the inevitability of change, then those days when it feels hard to be in our physical form become a little easier."

**Challenge distressing thoughts and beliefs.** A great way to get back on an even keel when you're feeling body grief is to consider the wider context. "When you look at that picture of the thin, or prepregnancy, or able-bodied younger you," she says, "you can ask yourself, *What about the miserable relationship I was in then? How about the fact that I have created and raised a wonderful daughter? What about the friends I have today?* Your life is greater than your body."

**Diversify your social media, avoiding content that triggers you.** Many of the most-followed social media

accounts feature thin, able-bodied, cisgender, straight, and white bodies, which reinforces the idea that only these bodies are attractive and desirable.

"You need to ask yourself, *How can I diversify the content I'm taking in so that I get used to seeing bodies that aren't the same as the 'ideal'?*" Nisbet-Croes advises. "Doing that helps your brain

points out. "Marketing has decided that health is only weight and appearance," she says.

"What I encourage people to do is step back and ask, *What are all the things that make up health?* Moving your body is important. Eating healthily means eating a variety of food, eating foods you enjoy, [and] eating regularly, in adequate



learn there is bodily variety, and you can start to combat some of that marketing messaging that says you have to look a certain way to be worthy."

**Set boundaries around body talk.**

If people who really care about you are engaging in body talk, Nisbet-Croes suggests, set boundaries gently. "You can say, 'Hey, it's really hard for me when you talk about how we've got to take a walk to work off this food that we just ate. I'm working hard to neutralize my relationship with food. Could we talk about something else?' If the other person is less receptive to that approach, by all means excuse yourself to visit the bathroom, or go outside to call a friend."

**Define health broadly.** The idea that any body is unhealthy by definition needs to be challenged, Nisbet-Croes

points out. "Marketing has decided that health is only weight and appearance," she says. "What I encourage people to do is step back and ask, *What are all the things that make up health?* Moving your body is important. Eating healthily means eating a variety of food, eating foods you enjoy, [and] eating regularly, in adequate

**Appreciate what your body can do and find ways to move that feel good.**

Everyone has their own unique strengths and growth opportunities. Engaging in fun, enjoyable movement that supports your health can help you feel more present in your body and grateful for what it can do — which can also help you separate from the grief and loss.

"If we can step back from our negative emotions," Nisbet-Croes says, "we can find that there's newness there that can be joyful and fulfilling, just maybe in a different way than we pictured." 🌟

**JON SPAYDE** is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.



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# What Is Cupping?

People have used this healing modality for centuries. Here's how it works.

BY COURTNEY HELGOE

**AT THE 2016** Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, swimmer Michael Phelps showed up with his back covered in round, purple bruises. They were the result of a recent cupping treatment, a traditional healing technique using heated cups on the skin to increase circulation and remove toxins from the tissues below.

Media were aflame over Phelps's use of "alternative" medicine, but today an athlete bearing the same telltale round bruises doesn't cause so much as a ripple.

Professional athletes celebrate cupping for its range of benefits, especially in improving recovery time, but they're not the only enthusiasts. Today you'll see cupping as an add-on service in many spas and bodywork studios, where the practice produces bruises just as vivid as those sported by Phelps. These marks fade in a week or so, but any bodywork modality involving mild disfigurement deserves some examination.

## TRADITION AND TODAY

Cupping has been practiced for more than 5,000 years. Today it's often used in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) as a complement to acupuncture. In this context, the practitioner develops a treatment plan based on the client's current complaints. The goal can be as general as increasing energy or as precise as healing a persistent cough.

Cupping works directly on connective tissue, so it can feel especially good on sore muscles. "It is helpful for breaking up adhesions in the tissue, dredging and elimination of

toxins, and increasing circulation of qi and blood," explains acupuncturist and educator Bridgette Shea, LAc, MACOM, in *Handbook of Chinese Medicine and Ayurveda*. "The power of cupping can reach up to four inches into the body," giving it access to the lungs for respiratory issues, she adds.

Cleveland Clinic experts note cupping may also help ease rheumatoid arthritis, back pain, carpal tunnel, irritable bowel, headaches, and high blood pressure.

Professional athletes celebrate cupping for its range of benefits, especially in improving recovery time.

The process typically involves a practitioner placing a set of cups (glass, plastic, silicone, or rubber) on the back, chest, and limbs. They're affixed with a vacuum action, creating a slight pulling sensation. This suction draws blood to the skin's surface, ushering it to or from a specific part of the body. The practitioner may slide the cups around to increase sensation, then leave them for 20 minutes or less.

If you're seeing a TCM practitioner, or a bodyworker with some traditional training, they'll set the cups near acupoints and meridians. If you're seeing someone without this training, they may simply place cups

on muscles that feel tight. Either way, the sensation is intense — and for many people, intensely comforting.

"I feel like the cups help get blood into areas that have been frozen for a long time," says Laine Bergeson, a Minneapolis-based writer. "When some area of my body is so tight that it feels like stretching won't make a dent, cupping will get new energy into that part of my body. Then it feels like I can actually stretch it. The cups create a tension that, when it's released, feels really good."

This is a common reaction, according to Shea. "Cupping tends to grant a sense of relief and release to the client." And if a broader health condition improves with repeated sessions, then the relief becomes part of a larger experience of healing.

## BEFORE YOU GO

Do not confuse cupping for a relaxing spa treatment. Some people may find it claustrophobic. But if you can tolerate the sensation, the results can be powerful — especially if you see a traditional practitioner.

"While [casual cupping treatments] are great," Shea notes, "they're usually not as strong a stimulation as one would receive from a Chinese-medicine practitioner."

And if you're addressing a health condition beyond muscle soreness, she recommends patience. The broader effects of cupping may take time, but the relief will come.

**COURTNEY HELGOE** is the *Experience Life* features editor.

# Get More Bike in Your Life

Simple ideas for making your days —  
and your world — more bikeable.

BY MICHAEL DREGNI

**SO MUCH MAY BEGIN** with a bike ride. The wind on your cheeks, the sun on your back, and soon, a smile on your face. Your legs spin, your blood flows, and next thing you know, your cares are left behind.

The personal benefits of bicycling are old news: better cardiovascular fitness; boosted muscle strength and flexibility; stronger bones; improved joint mobility; decreased body fat; lower stress levels; and reduced anxiety and depression.

New research suggests that for a whole community, the benefits of

biking are even more far-reaching. In technical talk, it's called "bikeability" — how suitable a place is for biking. If more people climb on their bikes, the personal health benefits add up to a huge plus for public health.

There's less traffic, for instance, which makes for better air quality. And this can contribute to lower healthcare costs for all, as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention noted in a case study on preventing chronic disease.

That's just the start to the economic benefits, the advocacy group

Blue Zones notes in a 2022 report. More bike lanes and paths, more bicycle parking, and more cycling infrastructure are wise investments in a town's, city's, or neighborhood's economic health.

"The world's longest-lived people don't pump iron, run marathons, or join gyms," says Blue Zones founder Dan Buettner. "Instead, they live in environments that constantly nudge them into moving without thinking about it."

So, how can you make your life — and your community — more bikeable? We've gathered some ideas.



### MAKE IT EASY

The simpler you make it to just jump on your bike and go, the more apt you are to do it. Create space to park your bicycle, remembering that it gets dirty and that it needs to be lockable so your ride doesn't get stolen. And consider a nearby storage spot for your related gear — helmet, shoes, tire pump, and whatever else you need.

Keep an eye out for fun places to ride, such as bike paths and trails, or a specific destination — a coffee shop, a café, a glorious view, or a cool playground for the kids. You can research rides at bike shops, which often have local maps and advice to share, or via online chat groups.

### DRESS FOR SUCCESS

Keep the gear you need at hand: a comfortable helmet that you'll want to wear, high-vis clothing, bike lights, and a lock. Consider adding a rack to your bike for toting groceries — or a seat for hauling kids. And be prepared to make repairs: You can learn to fix flats or tune up your ride in group classes at bike shops, from books, or on YouTube.



### SHIFT IT UP A GEAR

The more you shape your daily life and surroundings in bike-friendly ways, the easier it becomes to ride more — a truly virtuous cycle. You might consider an e-bike for grocery runs, transporting children to school, or commuting to work.

In the last few years, and coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic, e-bikes have boomed in usability and reliability, with a wide range of options for racks, multiple-person seating, and weather protection. Try other modes of biking, such as road racing, mountain biking, gravel riding, or long-distance touring. And if you live in a land of snow or sand, you might learn to love a fat-tire bike.



### FIND YOUR PEOPLE

Studies show that one of the best ways to inspire yourself to get out and exercise is to have a fitness buddy. Whether it's for serious workouts or just to get you biking more often, keep a lookout for like-minded cyclists. Bike shops are good places to find group rides of various levels.

Or join a local or national club, such as Black Girls Do Bike, The Black Foxes, or International Cycling Club. And seek out a cycling mentor, someone who knows bikes and can provide advice on buying or maintaining your two-wheeled friend.

### CONSIDER COMMUTING

A fine way to make sure you ride regularly — and wash away the stress of work at the end of the day — is to commute via bike, if it's possible. Less than 1 percent of Americans use bicycles for active transportation, according to the Alliance for Biking and Walking. But the fact that Portland, Ore., and Minneapolis, two cities with major-league inclement weather, consistently top the lists for the most bicycle commuters year after year proves it can be done.

Research safe routes. Secure a suitable parking space at both ends of your trip. And last but not least, plan ahead on how to freshen up and carry or store work clothes.



### ADVOCATE FOR BIKEABILITY

Your bike ride is just the start. You can help your community become more bikeable by working with organizations that advocate to add bike lanes to roads, create bike paths, install bike racks at businesses, and promote bicycling in other ways.

Volunteer for a biking audit, aiding your city in counting the number of riders to assess bikeability. Help your kids' school become more bikeable by lobbying for bicycle parking, searching out safe routes, and creating a "bike train" of kids for safe riding. And if you're commuting, recommend that your workplace add a bicycle room for parking and changing clothes — ideally with a shower area.

As bicycling advocate Elly Blue writes in *Bikenomics*, "The bicycle may not be able to save either the economy or the world that we have now. But it is one means by which we may be able to get through whatever comes next with grace and meaning. And it provides us with the opportunity to build ourselves lives, communities, and an economy that we can truly afford for the long run." 🚲

**MICHAEL DREGNI** is an *Experience Life* deputy editor.



# Summer Eats, Simplified

Make the most of the season's abundant fresh produce — and save time in the kitchen!

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# An Unwavering Vision

BY **BAHRAM AKRADI**

**OVER 30 YEARS AGO**, Life Time started as a vision, imagined as a place that would encompass all aspects of health, including physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. We envisioned it as a third space where people could spend time on their own, as well as connect with others in the community. We dreamed it would make an impact by supporting healthy people, a healthy planet, and a healthy way of life.

Our ambitions were massive, but we had to start somewhere. Guided by our mantra — “think big, start small, move fast” — we broke ground on our first club in Eagan, Minn., in 1993 and opened its doors on Labor Day in 1994.

Many people thought we were in over our heads — and maybe even a bit crazy (though we prefer to think of it as tenacious) — but we didn’t let that stop us. We knew we were onto something. Today, there are more than 170 Life Time athletic country clubs across the United States and Canada and more than 1.5 million members who turn to us to help them reach their healthy-living goals.

With a member-centric point of view guiding us, we’ve innovated and led the way in the health and wellness category. Our comprehensive ecosystem delivers programs and offerings that provide something for everyone, whether they’re 90 days or 90 years old.

Like all organizations, we’ve experienced our share of ups and downs. COVID-19, for instance, presented many challenges, but it also came with an unexpected gift: When our physical clubs closed, we had to quickly reconsider how we were serving our members from afar. The result was the Life Time app.

Born of necessity, this at-your-fingertips technology is what’s

enabling us to make more significant progress toward our vision of empowering individuals everywhere to lead healthier, happier lives.

An encapsulation of years of experience and knowledge about all things fitness, nutrition, and wellness, the app is free of charge as of earlier this year. It features our best classes taught by top performers, our proven fitness and nutrition coaching programs, our informational and inspirational podcast, and full access to the award-winning content from this very magazine.

**Many people thought we were in over our heads, but we didn’t let that stop us. We knew we were onto something.**

There are also meditations for better sleep, focus, stress management, and mindfulness, plus ways for athletes to register for races and view their results.

The app allows us to reach and support more people (whether they live near a Life Time or not) as they pursue health and wellness on their terms.

Author, *New York Times* columnist, and cultural commentator David Brooks uses the analogy of two mountains to describe how we move through our lives. The first mountain represents the individual focus we have as we strive to make it in the world; it’s about what we can accomplish and the skills we can build as we search for success.

The second mountain represents the quest for deeper purpose and the



fulfillment that comes from contributing to something bigger. The question we ask as we move between the mountains shifts from “What can I get?” to “What can I give?”

A flowing river offers a similar analogy. As it makes its way toward the sea, with tributaries pouring into it, there’s a natural equilibrium of give and take.

Like the river and that second mountain, we’ve reached a point at Life Time where we can focus more on giving. We can do this because, after the challenges of COVID, our organization is once again thriving thanks to the love and loyalty of our members and the commitment to excellence by our team members. Our clubs are busier than ever, with many now having membership waitlists (and we expect more to have them in the months ahead).

Three decades of hard work have brought us to a place where each additional action we take can have a broader impact, affecting substantially more people for the better. The complimentary Life Time app is the latest effort to contribute to the greater good on a grander scale.

We are beyond grateful for the opportunity to continue to serve in this capacity. Every day, we say a prayer: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.



**BAHRAM AKRADI** is the founder, chairman, and CEO of Life Time — Healthy Way of Life.

“Only those who will risk going  
too far can possibly find out  
**how far one can go.**”

— T. S. Eliot



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