

Experience Life

MARCH/APRIL 2026

HEALTHY. HAPPY. FOR REAL.

BEYOND DIGESTION

9 WAYS THE
GUT MICROBIOME
INFLUENCES HEALTH

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THE FOOD ISSUE

GATHER ROUND THE TABLE

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How Food
Connects Us
to Healing, Nature,
and Each Other

WITH GEETA MAKER-CLARK, MD

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March/April 2026

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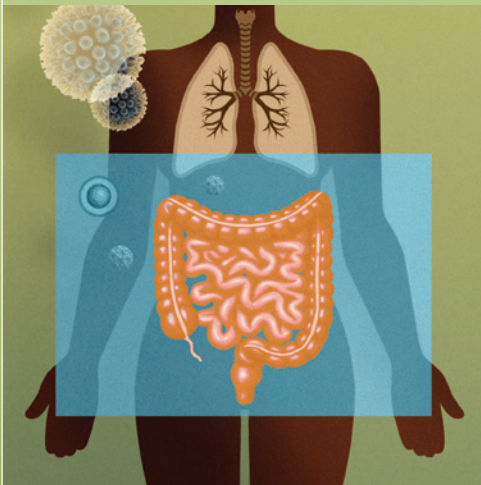
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ELmag.com/perinataldepression



5 Recipes to Make With Tinned Fish

Nutritious, eco-friendly, and affordable, tinned fish can be the base for some seriously delicious meals. They make great on-the-go snacks too.

Ready to elevate these classic pantry staples? We've put together five recipes — including Anchovy Butter Crispy Rice, Smoked Oyster Skillet Pizza, and Clams and Oven-Baked Patatas Bravas — that can transform your humble tinned selection into something special.

Scan the QR code or go to ELmag.com/tinnedfish to get the recipes.



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When your digestive system acts up, you might try to identify and cut out problem foods. But experts say that once you've removed trigger foods, it's essential to focus on what you *can* eat. Even if you suffer from ulcers, acid reflux, or IBS, you can choose foods that promote healing, fortify digestive health, and support the entire gastrointestinal ecosystem. Our guide features seven powerful gut-healing foods — including bone broth, ginger, dandelion greens, and cabbage juice — along with tips for incorporating them into your diet. Scan the QR code or go to ELmag.com/guthealingfoods to download the guide.





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LIFE TIME
HEALTHY WAY OF LIFE

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EASY TO DIGEST

IN JOURNALISM, a few fundamentals hold true: You have to know the who, what, when, where, why, and how if you're going to craft a compelling story.

Most of us learned the five Ws and one H early in our English language arts education. Consciously or not, we've likely referred to them countless times throughout our lives; they support reading comprehension and serve as helpful writing tools, whether we're crafting an email, an article, a paper, or a book.

They're also good for summing up complex topics. As I reviewed this edition of *Experience Life* — our eighth annual Food Issue — I realized that the five Ws and one H made it easy to abridge our food and nutrition philosophy. With that in mind, and in an order that makes sense to me, here's what we stand for, in a nutshell:

WHO: We all need to eat, and the better we understand food's role in our overall well-being, the more likely we are to create habits and behaviors around it that support optimal health and wellness.

WHAT: As food writer Michael Pollan says, "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants." Most of those foods, ideally, are the types our ancestors would recognize — vegetables, fruits, beans, nuts, and seeds — rather than the ultraprocessed and hyperpalatable ones (see page 40 for more on those) that dominate our modern diets and food culture.

It's also important to aim for a healthy balance of macronutrients, complemented by essential vitamins and minerals and strategic supplementation. (For our fitness-focused take on this, see "The Big Rocks of Fitness Nutrition," page 52.)

WHY: The food we eat influences every aspect of our health — physical, mental, emotional, and social. It's a source of pleasure *and* a tool for healing, as integrative physician Geeta Maker-Clark, MD, explains in "Food as Medicine" (page 16). For instance, food intimately affects gut health — which has body-wide ramifications for cardiovascular and respiratory function, skin health, cognitive wellness, and more (see "The Mighty Microbiome," page 58). It affects hormone and reproductive health, too (see "Eating for Fertility," page 48).

WHEN: Fueling our bodies is a daily necessity for survival, and prioritizing eating healthy and nutritiously *most* of the time helps us thrive. There are also periods when specific dietary interventions can drive health improvements. For example, protein builds not only muscle but also neurotransmitters, which may provide relief from depression and anxiety (see "Protein and Mental Health," page 75).

WHERE: Cooking and eating the majority of our meals at home is one of the best ways to control the quality — and the quantity — of our food. When we dine out, we don't always know the specific ingredients being used, and we may eat more because portion sizes tend to be bigger. (Of note: Restaurants are the most common setting for exposure to foodborne illness; more on that on page 46.)

HOW: Eating mindfully and without distraction encourages us to slow down and take pleasure in food while also supporting digestion and metabolism. Set devices aside, step away from the desk, take a few deep breaths, and tune in.

Dining with family and friends has benefits, too (see "Let's Eat Together," page 64). Beyond enhancing various aspects of our health, it's an opportunity to create shared experiences that are the foundation for memories, traditions, and deeper, more meaningful connections — and those are the kinds of seconds that really matter.

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. Follow her on Instagram @jamiemartinel.



Eating mindfully and without distraction encourages us to slow down and take pleasure in food while also supporting digestion and metabolism.



YOUR THOUGHTS?

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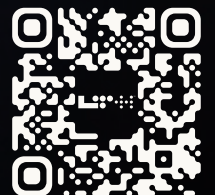


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TALK TO US

A PATH OUT OF PEOPLE-PLEASING

📍 The people-pleaser article (“How to Stop Being a People-Pleaser,” November/December 2025) resonated with me and brought me to tears. I lost my parents early in life, and then I wanted to please everyone so they would stay with me or like me. It took me a long time to find myself and realize it was OK to express myself and not have to please everyone around me. @2fit2gether_fitness

FLAVOR — AND FOOD — FEEDBACK

📍 Salt is essentially unnecessary, with only a few exceptions (“6 Common Kitchen Mistakes (and How to Avoid Them),” November/December 2025). In the United States, anyway, most food has way too much salt. When I stopped using salt, everything tasted bland for about three weeks. Then I noticed that I could actually taste ingredients, instead of just salt. I’m no chef, just a home cook, but I never add salt when I cook, and people seem to like my cooking pretty well, [often commenting] on how flavorful it is.

And that is not to mention all of the people who have been told by their doctors to reduce their salt intake (I have not been told that — yet). That said, I must agree that fat is flavor. Larry T.

📍 These (“Marinated Tomatoes,” September/October 2025) are amazing! This recipe is on repeat because we have tomatoes by the hundreds from our garden this past year. Cathy

📍 I made this (“Sweet Potato Casserole With Pecan Granola,” November 2021) for Thanksgiving. The granola was a welcome change from too-sweet marshmallows. Laura B.

ANOTHER OPTION FOR TREATING DEPRESSION

[On “Can Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation Treat Chronic Depression?,” July 2025]

📍 TMS was one of the best things I ever did to help with my severe clinical



depression. I had to go through two treatment sessions of 12 weeks each — the first in 2020 and the second in 2022 — and I have not had any severe depressive symptoms since then. I still take antidepressants because they definitely keep me in check. I highly recommend trying the treatment, which is often covered by insurance. Tess S.

📍 I am doing TMS now. I did it about a year ago, and it really helped me through a pretty rough depression. It does not cure depression, but it most certainly helps. My depression is not as strong as it was last year, but my weekly

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Letters to the Editor

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sessions with a psychologist and the TMS have helped me come a long way. I would highly recommend it for anyone who is even thinking about it. Ellie

SQUAT OPTIONS

📍 Some of the squats in this workout are not recommended for those with bad knees (“6 Hip Stretches to Improve Mobility and Strength,” December 2020). What can those of us who have been told to skip squats do instead? Cheryl C.

From Maggie Fazeli Fard, Experience Life’s editorial director of fitness: Great question! Because squatting isn’t automatically contraindicated for people with knee issues, your best first step is to ask some questions of the professional who advised against it: Should I avoid any knee flexion? Could I perform partial squats? With clearance from a professional, you could make adjustments that allow you to complete this workout. Alternatively, perform only the nonsquatting movements.

Then, ask which hip-strengthening exercises are safe for you. Hang-back step-ups, glute bridges, hip thrusts, Romanian deadlifts, and cable kickbacks — as well as machines like the leg press, standing multi-hip, and hip abduction/adduction — could all have a place in your routine.

Whatever you do, protect your knees (and other joints) by appropriately warming up and working within a pain-free range of motion.

FREE TO GROW

📍 This is so true (“How Adversity Can Lead to Personal Growth,” January 2018). I am a complex posttraumatic stress disorder survivor. I have created a life I could only dream of. I retired at 53 and moved to a hot country; [I now] live by the sea and paint full-time. I express the positive outcomes of trauma through my art — self acceptance, compassion, close relationships, inner strength. I now have a happy, fulfilled life, and I wish the same for anyone going through or healing from trauma. The healing process is painful but there is so much freedom at the other side. Keep going. Betty G.

SUPPORT YOUR BRAIN'S GLYMPHATIC SYSTEM



YOUR BODY RELIES on its lymphatic system to circulate immune cells and antibodies to protect you from infections. In 2012, researchers discovered that the brain has a separate but similar operation: the glymphatic system, and it's key to safeguarding you from neurodegenerative diseases and cognitive decline.

The glymphatic system serves as a sort of washing machine for the brain. Its waste-clearance process removes proteins, metabolites, and neurotoxins from the central nervous system through cerebrospinal fluid. It also supplies the brain with the glucose, lipids, amino acids, and neuromodulators it needs to function.

"Keeping your glymphatic system healthy is important for maintaining your cognitive powers and preventing against decline," says functional neurologist Jeremy Schmoe, DC, DACNB, founder and director of the Functional Neurology Center in Minnetonka, Minn. "But it's especially essential if you've had a concussion or traumatic brain injury or are dealing with Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, or other forms of dementia."

Experts explain how you can support your glymphatic system:

- **Sleep:** Good sleep hygiene is vital for brain health, notes Schmoe. This is partly because "the glymphatic

system [functions] mainly during sleep and is largely disengaged during wakefulness," according to a research review coauthored by neuroscientist Maiken Nedergaard, MD, DMSc, one of the two people who discovered the system. (Find helpful sleep tips at ELmag.com/qualitysleep.)

- **Physical activity:** The lymphatic system relies on external processes like muscular contraction to move lymph fluid throughout the body. Similarly, the glymphatic system depends on bodily actions to keep its fluids moving.

In fact, research into what powers the system's flow is so new that scientists don't yet fully understand it.

"Slow oscillations in a neurotransmitter known as noradrena-

line make the blood vessels in the brain contract and expand," explains

neuroscientist Natalie Hauglund, PhD, in a University of Copenhagen news release. "They work like a pump, removing waste products from the brain." Hauglund is the lead author of a 2025 study on the glymphatic system published in *Cell*.

Exercise improves glymphatic flow. It also supports the function of glymphatic vessels in the brain and in the spinal cord's protective membrane, according to a recent study in *Nature Communications*.

This flow may be a key mechanism underlying the neuroprotective effects of exercise in humans, the authors observe. "Our results highlight the importance of long-term, regular exercise interventions in the general population, as well as in patients with dementia."

Regular cardiovascular activity and even respiration may also help keep fluid moving, but muscular contractions caused by physical activity appear to have the greatest effect.

- **Specific exercises and massage:** Modern yogic practices promote the mind-clearing and restorative benefits of the cat-cow pose. Some neuroscientists now suggest that the calming breath awareness and spinal flexion and extension of this asana enhance circulation of cerebrospinal fluid, which is central to the glymphatic system's function. Qigong and tai chi may offer similar benefits. (For instructions on doing cat-cow, see ELmag.com/catcow.)

Gentle head tilts and turns can help stretch your neck, says Schmoe. He adds that eye exercises — like looking at a fixed point while moving your head — can help the lymph system's flow. All this supports your glymphatic system too.

Light facial massage can also aid lymph drainage. (For more on self-care massage, see ELmag.com/lymphatic.)

— MICHAEL DREGNI

"Keeping your glymphatic system healthy is important for maintaining your cognitive powers and preventing against decline."

FATIGUE: IS IT AGING OR ANEMIA?



NUTRITION FOR PROSTATE HEALTH

As we age into our 60s and beyond, it's tempting to chalk up episodes of fatigue to the aging process. You reach a certain vintage and your body simply begins to lose energy.

But William Ershler, MD, believes that many seniors — and their doctors — are overlooking another possible cause for fatigue: anemia.

U.S. National Health and Nutrition survey data indicates that some 12.5 percent of Americans over 60 may suffer from anemia, but a recent study Ershler coauthored suggests the numbers could be much higher in some populations. And anemia goes undiagnosed in a significant portion of seniors — even when their blood tests reveal low hemoglobin levels.

"The patients come to the clinic and get the blood tests, and nothing happens, particularly if the anemia is mild," says Ershler.

When he and his research team reviewed the health records of 1,992 seniors, they found that about 20 percent had hemoglobin levels below the World Health Organization's threshold for anemia: 13 grams per deciliter for

men; 12 for nonpregnant women. But only about a third of them had been diagnosed with the condition.

The lack of attention to that marker may be partly due to anemia's many potential causes. These include a lack of iron or another nutritional deficiency; blood loss from the internal bleeding of ulcers and polyps; iron-sapping surgical procedures; and heart disease, kidney failure, inflammatory bowel diseases, and other chronic illnesses.

Treating an iron deficiency with supplements or infusions is often effective, but for up to 40 percent of older patients with anemia, nothing seems to work.

"We've done everything, and we have no idea what's causing it," George Kuchel, MD, a University of Connecticut geriatrician, tells *The New York Times*.

That shouldn't deter seniors from asking their doctors to pay attention when their hemoglobin levels are low, he adds. "If it's really outside the normal boundaries, or it's changed compared to a year ago, you need to ask questions."

(For more on iron deficiencies, see ELmag.com/iron.)

— CRAIG COX

Anemia goes undiagnosed in a significant portion of seniors — even when their blood tests reveal low hemoglobin levels.

Prostatitis and benign prostatic hyperplasia are nearly as common as the common cold. BPH affects about 50 percent of men by age 60 and 80 percent of men over age 70.

Prostatitis is an inflammation of the prostate gland; BPH is an enlargement that often accompanies aging. In both, the prostate presses on the urethra, often causing frequent urination and, for some, sexual dysfunction.

Medical experts do not completely understand the causes — or how to best treat them. But recent research suggests that nutrition might counter these conditions.

• **Tomatoes** provide a wealth of prostate-health-preserving micronutrients, according to a recent report. Eating ripe or cooked tomatoes may help prevent and manage aging-related prostate enlargement.

Among the tomato's most powerful phytonutrients is lycopene, an anti-inflammatory carotenoid. But lycopene's benefits depend on the fruit's full complement of phytonutrients. "In conjunction with the other micronutrients in the whole tomato, lycopene efficiently interferes with the major biochemical pathological pathways leading to and fueling benign prostate enlargement," says Pier Giorgio Natali, MD, one of the report authors.

• **A plant-based diet** rich in vegetables, fruits, nuts, legumes, fish or other sources of omega-3 fatty acids — in addition to less red and processed meat — may reduce prostatic growth and smooth muscle tone, improving prostate symptoms.

• **Herbal treatments** like saw palmetto are often taken for prostate symptoms, according to functional-medicine practitioner Chris Kresser, MS, LAc. He also notes that rye-pollen extract, which has anti-inflammatory properties, has been shown to reduce pain in men with prostatitis.

— MD



MEN SUFFER FROM BRITTLE BONES TOO

Since osteoporosis — the loss of bone mass — was defined as a disease in the 1990s, most clinical attention has focused on women, whose bone densities tend to decline with hormone loss at menopause.

While plenty of evidence now suggests that older men are also susceptible to the condition, recent research shows that few are diagnosed, leaving them vulnerable to life-changing fractures.

By some estimates, about 20 percent of men over 50 will sustain an osteoporotic fracture during their later years; among seniors, men account for about a quarter of all hip fractures — and the results can often be fatal.

By some estimates, about 20 percent of men over 50 will sustain an osteoporotic fracture during their later years.

“A 50-year-old man is more likely to die from the complications of a major osteoporotic fracture than from prostate cancer,” geriatrician Cathleen Colón-Emeric, MD, tells *The New York Times*.

Women routinely begin bone-density testing at age 65, yet most men are tested only after a fracture occurs.

When Colón-Emeric screened 866 elderly male veterans with dual-energy x-ray absorptiometry (DEXA) scans, the results revealed signs of osteoporosis or osteopenia in 51 percent of them.

The results were published in *JAMA Internal Medicine*.

Many osteoporosis risk factors apply to men as well as to women, according

to the Bone Health and Osteoporosis Foundation. Those factors include family history, taking steroid medicines, lack of exercise, smoking, high alcohol consumption, and low testosterone levels.

But most physicians do not order DEXA screening for men because, as Colón-Emeric puts it, “clinical practice guidelines are all over the place.”

Some professional organizations recommend scans for men over 50 who have at least one risk factor, as well as for all men over 70, but the American College of Physicians and the United States Preventive Services Task Force have concluded that there isn’t enough evidence to recommend screening for men who have not yet had a fracture.

While those organizations await more persuasive research, it’s up to men to raise the issue with their doctors.

— CC

YOUR MANY MICROBIOMES

Your gut isn’t the only part of your body with its own microbial ecosystem. Other areas host distinct bacterial communities that are in constant communication with the one in your gut.

Skin: These microbes form a protective barrier, help regulate inflammation, and keep harmful organisms in check. (For more, see [ELmag.com/skin](https://www.ELmag.com/skin).)

Eyes: The eye’s surface hosts a small but important collection of microbes that help protect it against infection and support immune defenses. (For more, see [ELmag.com/eyes](https://www.ELmag.com/eyes).)

Mouth: The oral microbiome aids in digestion, protects teeth and gums, and is a critical defender against unwanted pathogens that enter the mouth. (For more, see [ELmag.com/mouth](https://www.ELmag.com/mouth).)

Lungs: The community of microbes in the lungs supports respiratory health, modulates immune responses, and helps protect against airborne pathogens. (For more, see [ELmag.com/lungs](https://www.ELmag.com/lungs).)

Vagina: The vaginal microbiome — often dominated by the *Lactobacillus* species — helps maintain a healthy pH and protect against infections. (For more, see [ELmag.com/vagina](https://www.ELmag.com/vagina).)

Ears: Our ears have microbiomes in the middle ear, ear canal, and inner ear. And these microbiomes all work together to support the overall health of our ears, including by helping us hear. (For more, see [ELmag.com/ears](https://www.ELmag.com/ears).)

— MO PERRY

HOW KETAMINE CAN HELP TREAT DEPRESSION AND PTSD

JACQUELINE had gone through therapy and been on antidepressants for years, yet she still felt stuck and numb. She was struggling to move past childhood trauma and had become disengaged from her emotions.

Ketamine proved a game-changer.

Synthesized in 1962, ketamine has been used as a surgical anesthetic and at times misused as a recreational psychedelic. Today, it shows promise in treating acute and chronic depression, as well as addiction and PTSD.

Jacqueline, a patient of mine who asked we use only her first name, went through several preparation sessions but was still wary when she arrived for ketamine-assisted psychotherapy (KAP).

“There’s no good way to describe what happened next,” she says. “I felt like I was in a happy daydream. It was the first time I’d felt joy in years.”

The real impact came the next day, when she opened up to her husband in ways she’d never been able to before. She felt as though the emotional blockage was finally melting away.

HOW KETAMINE WORKS

To appreciate how and why ketamine works, it’s helpful to understand how and why traditional antidepressants work — and why they often don’t.

Ketamine operates differently from traditional antidepressants, says psychiatrist John Lichtsinn, MD. For people who don’t produce enough feel-good “fuel” naturally, antidepressants top off the neurotransmitters dopamine, serotonin, and norepinephrine at certain signaling pathways in the brain.

But when someone lacks healthy neuropathways, the effect of the antidepressants can be limited.

Ketamine enhances those neural networks, maintaining and rebuilding pathways in the brain.

Lower doses stimulate a psycholytic state: The patient experiences an altered state of consciousness yet remains in touch with the present moment. They can still interact with their therapist, but they do so with a looser state of mind.

A psychedelic state, which involves higher doses, is more transcendent — an out-of-body experience that can give rise to powerful memories, images, and sensations.

This sense of psychological expansiveness can provide a breakthrough for patients who’ve been feeling stuck. Yet the effects fade over time, so ket-

amine is best used as one tool alongside other modalities, says Lichtsinn.

CONSIDERATIONS AND PRECAUTIONS

Ketamine is not a good fit for everyone. People with a history of or genetic risk for psychosis or who have certain medical conditions, including uncontrolled hypertension or cardiovascular disease, may want to avoid it.

Though it can be a helpful component of addiction treatment, ketamine is generally not recommended for anyone with an active substance use disorder, in part because there’s a risk of addiction to ketamine itself.

KAP AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

Jacqueline and I met a few days after her initial KAP treatment to explore ways she could build on her newfound mental flexibility.

“Trauma and depression trick you into thinking that’s all you’ll ever feel; ketamine woke me up from that,” Jacqueline says. “I remembered that I’ve felt joy before, and more importantly, I realized that I could feel it again.”

While she credits the ketamine for opening mental paths, she considers the psychotherapy component equally important.

“It helped me clarify what I wanted to get from the experience so I could go in with a clear intention. And more importantly, having built that therapeutic relationship allowed me to trust that I could surrender to whatever happened.”

— ALEXANDRA SMITH, MA, LPCC

“Trauma and depression trick you into thinking that’s all you’ll ever feel; ketamine woke me up from that.”



DELVE DEEPER

For more on ketamine, including how it’s administered, see [ELmag.com/ketamine](https://www.ELmag.com/ketamine).

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Food as Medicine

Integrative physician
Geeta Maker-Clark, MD,
explains how food can
become medicine. It's
about more than what's
on your plate.

BY COURTNEY HELGOE



WHEN GEETA MAKER-CLARK

was 19, she knew she wanted to practice medicine, but beyond that she wasn't so sure. Then she traveled to the Indian state of Rajasthan to learn more about her ancestral and agricultural roots. It was there that she met an elder healer who would shape her perspective for decades to come.

"She was very steady, grounded, and attuned to the people who came to her for guidance," recalls Maker-Clark, MD, now an integrative physician and clinical professor at the University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine. "She was the wise elder of the community, never in any rush to make a judgment or a diagnosis, and very centered in deep listening with her whole being."

After reflecting on Maker-Clark's concerns about her future, the healer provided her with a clear framework: "She told me to not focus on fixing what's broken but rather on nourishing what has been forgotten."

Restoring forgotten connections — to ourselves, to nature, to one another — is now the centerpiece of Maker-Clark's healing work.

"My approach to medicine is both integrative and ancestral," she explains. "It's a spiritual path that is connected to the earth, to nature, and to humanity. When I was in my training, I realized that the science that I loved in medical school and the traditional wisdom that I had been steeped in were not opposites. They were both very much part of a larger paradigm of ancient wisdom that I could see very clearly."

She believes one of the simplest ways we can recover our sense of connection and belonging is through food. That might mean learning where our food is sourced, discovering our ancestral food traditions, or growing some edible



plants. Even a pot of herbs on a windowsill is enough to slow us down and remind us that we and our food belong to the same connective web.

"Almost everyone has some relationship in their childhood with an herb or plant, whether it was grown in a pot in their house or in their family garden, or just a plant that was used often in their cuisine — maybe an herb or a seasoning," says Maker-Clark. "I ask folks to think about what brings them some comfort and what they're drawn to when they think of certain plants. Then I invite them to notice how their bodies are responding to that."

"We all have incredibly sophisticated physiologic systems that connect our body, mind, and spirit. Restoring and supporting those connections to ourselves, our communities, and the living world that sustains us — that's what I'm interested in."

We asked Maker-Clark, who is also codirector of the Culinary Medicine program at Pritzker, to talk with us about her philosophy of food and connection. This is some of what we learned.

"We all have incredibly sophisticated physiologic systems that connect our body, mind, and spirit."

Q&A

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WITH GEETA MAKER-CLARK, MD

EXPERIENCE LIFE • How do you understand food as medicine?

GEETA MAKER-CLARK • To me, food as medicine is literal, in that the nutrients we take in through food are the foundation of our cellular growth and integrity. Food influences inflammation, immunity, our risk of disease, even our mood.

On a deeper level, food as medicine is profoundly personal. Food is also about care and culture. It's a carrier of memory. And the ways we cook and share food influence how we feel nourished. I often tell people that even if you're not eating the most perfect nutrient-dense meal, if you're eating it amongst people who you love, or with great joy and connection, that's also medicine.

EL • You've noted that in wisdom traditions like Ayurveda and Traditional Chinese Medicine, there's no "one true way" to eat. Can you say more?

GMC • There is a trend toward all of us conforming to one pattern of eating. Right now, it's a push toward eating lots of protein. I think these global prescriptions are problematic, because the idea that there's one perfect diet for everyone is a modern illusion.

Real nourishment is responsive to your own needs. It's flexible and adaptable. Both Ayurveda and Traditional Chinese Medicine are rooted in an understanding that health is contextual. What's healing for one person in one season might be unbalancing for another. There is never just one way to eat well.

Ayurveda teaches us to align with cycles, with nature's rhythms, with our own constitution, and even with the seasons of our own lives. What we need to eat as a younger person might be different from what we need when we're moving into another chapter of our life.

EL • You teach a class called *Food Is Power* to middle-school students in Chicago. What do they learn from you?

GMC • We teach on everything from vitamins and minerals to food justice. I want students to learn that they have power in their food choices — that they

don't have to just listen to people telling them what to eat, or to eat whatever is given to them.

One lesson covers what's called the "bliss point" in processed foods. So, if they choose, let's say, a bag of Doritos, we teach that it isn't a lack of willpower if they end up finishing the entire large bag. It's because the food was created by a food scientist who crafted a flavor that makes it very difficult to stop eating it. They learn that these processed foods have been crafted for them to eat and finish, and that they don't contain the things that they need to stay full and feel focused for the whole day.

To me, that knowledge is what the class is about. I'm saying, "We are giving you the power of this knowledge, and what you do with it is always going to be your choice."

EL • How can we learn to approach food as medicine in our daily lives?

GMC • I think slowing down with your food is a good place to begin. When we slow down and eat mindfully, we can remember that every meal is information for the body, an opportunity to nourish ourselves. Food has become somewhat transactional. We're eating quickly, eating on the go, to keep ourselves fueled up so we can move on to the rest of our day. But in all our ancestral cultures, eating was a time that you slowed down. You sat down. You took time for blessings, and you enjoyed either the company of yourself or the company of others.

EL • For those of us who have a hard time slowing down, are there any practices you recommend?

GMC • Before you take the first bite, pause for one slow inhale and exhale. This activates the "rest and digest" response and primes your body for eating. You don't have to eat the whole meal slowly. Just savor the first three bites — notice texture, warmth, aroma, and taste. This can shift your pace for the rest of the meal.

Another ordinary ritual I love is making tea, because it's so simple to boil water, and it also takes a little bit of time. So, while you're waiting for the water to boil, stop and ask yourself, *What do I really need right now from this? Do I need grounding? Do I need calm? Do I need warmth, physical or emotional?* And then you can decide what kind of tea you might like.

That ritual — boiling the water, checking in with yourself, smelling the tea, pausing to breathe — is all part of the medicine.

EL • Your book, *Medicine for All People: Science and Ancient Wisdom for Revolutionary Healing*, is due to be published in August. It focuses on the many everyday forms of medicine available to us. What are some of them?

GMC • Practices like dancing, being in nature, making simple food, being of service, and having a regular gratitude ritual help us remember who we really are. These are the medicines of the spirit and for this moment, when so many of us are feeling disconnected from ourselves and from one another. Ancestral wisdom teaches us to always return to reciprocity and to relationships, and to remember that healing is always a collective pursuit, not an individual one.

We already carry the wisdom we need to heal. We don't need to seek it anywhere else. We have it. It is free and accessible and part of our inheritance. We just need to remember it and nourish it every day. 🌱

COURTNEY HELGOE is
Experience Life's executive editor.

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¹Holzer R, et al. Continuous glucose monitoring in healthy adults—possible applications in health care, wellness, and sports. *Sensors*. 2022;22(5):2030

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What's on YOUR TOAST?

EL staffers share their favorite toast toppers.

Hands down, my **FAVORITE COMBO** is avocado, fresh cherry tomatoes, a drizzle of high-quality olive oil, and everything bagel seasoning. Sometimes I'll add a schmear of cream cheese too.

— **Jamie Martin**, editor in chief

My **TOAST ENSEMBLE** sounds high-maintenance, but it's worth the effort: toasted sourdough (always), mashed avocado, goat cheese crumbles, everything bagel seasoning, microgreens, over-easy egg, and chili crisp oil.

— **Courtney Lewis Opdahl**, managing editor

Butter, then peanut butter, then sliced super-sour dill pickles. **FAT AND ACID!**

— **Courtney Helgoe**, executive editor

Coconut oil, natural peanut butter, honey from **A FRIEND'S APIARY**, and sliced banana.

— **Christy Rice**, digital content specialist/special projects coordinator

It depends on the occasion. Am I eating eggs and sausage? I want half butter, half jam. Am I running late for something? Then it's crunchy peanut butter. Am I traveling? I'll use whatever fruit butter I can get my hands on. **I LOVE TO FEEL FANCY**, even through a humble piece of toast.

— **Cole Luskey**, business and circulation specialist

Thick, cold slabs of Kerrygold butter, preferably on lukewarm toast so the butter doesn't melt and **I CAN BITE INTO IT**.

— **Anjula Razdan**, senior director—digital

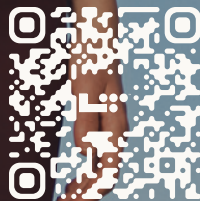
Strawberry jam! Ideally, it would be the homemade jam made by two friends of mine. But I also like other **LOCALLY CRAFTED** jams and preserves — the kind you can buy at farmers' markets in small towns.

— **Brett Fechheimer**, fact checker/copy editor



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Never Too Late

Fitness competitions aren't just for the young. I became a HYROX world champion at age 77.



BY PETE LANGSJOEN

Clockwise from top left: Pete competing in a triathlon in 2004; at his first HYROX event in 2024; with Jen Walter in Nice, France, in 2024.

I SPENT MY childhood trying nearly every sport my dad and his brothers were good at: football, baseball, basketball, wrestling, gymnastics. But none of these stuck for me. I wasn't all that coordinated, and I was quiet and shy.

In high school, I fell in love with distance running and continued running throughout college. After graduating in 1969, I enlisted in the Air Force, and my strong finishes during Officer Training School intramural races earned me the title of team captain.

I ran on and off through adulthood, finishing four marathons and eight half-marathons. When I was sidelined with plantar fasciitis in my 50s, my wife encouraged me to work with her personal trainer. I took it as an opportunity to get stronger, which benefited my running when I got back to it. A few years later, I decided to pivot from long-distance running to sprint triathlons.

Later, in the fall of 2023, I was doing burpee broad jumps at Life Time when a training group (that included small-group training coach and personal trainer Jen Walter) began cheering me on. They called out, "You should train for HYROX with us!"

At the time, I was too winded from the broad jumps to do more than chuckle and shake my head. I assumed the competition was for young people at the peak of their athletic abilities.

There's no way I can do that, I thought. I may be in good shape for 76, but that's ridiculous.

THE NEXT FITNESS FRONTIER

Even though I didn't take the invitation seriously, I was intrigued enough to do some research. I learned that HYROX competitions consist of running 1 kilometer before each of eight workout stations. At these stations, athletes perform, respectively, 1,000 meters on the SkiErg, a 50-meter sled push, a 50-meter sled pull, 80 meters of burpee broad jumps, a 1,000-meter row, a 200-meter farmer's carry, 100 meters of sandbag lunges, and 100 wall balls.

I wondered how others my age had done in the competitions. I found a spreadsheet listing everyone who had completed the race to date. Sorting the age field, I discovered no one my age was listed. That's when the goal took hold: *Maybe I could be the first.*

I started training with Jen as my coach and joined the group preparing for an upcoming race in Anaheim,

Calif. It was a qualifying event for the 2024 world championships, and I only had to finish to qualify for a spot because there wasn't anyone else in my age group.

Still, I knew finishing wouldn't be easy, and I had just two months to train.

Because I was familiar with almost all the exercises and equipment (only wall balls were new to me), I focused on endurance. I needed to make sure I could run and transition right into an exercise, and vice versa, even when I was already out of breath.

At my age, improvements don't come easy. Recovery is tricky too. So I made sure my foundation was strong by taking days off and getting good sleep. Jen encouraged me to stay hydrated and increase my protein intake to at least 150 grams a day.

Although preparing for HYROX was physically different from training for running races and triathlons, the mentality of committing to a goal — with its routine and challenges — felt familiar and energizing.

THE FIRST OLDER CHAMPION

Thanks to my training, I was able to improve my strength and endurance in time for the May competition in Anaheim. I knew I would be slower than my younger counterparts, but I

felt confident that I could finish — I just didn't know how quickly. The average finish time for the men's open division is about an hour and a half; my goal was two hours.

Early in the race, I struggled with the sled push, which felt harder than I'd expected. Then I got into a groove and ticked off each station. I'd been working nonstop for nearly two hours when I got to my toughest exercise: wall balls.

At this point, the announcer came over and asked for my name and age. He shared that with the crowd and focused everyone's attention on me. As I struggled to finish, the crowd chanted, "Pete! Pete! Pete!"

I was so gassed from the effort that I had to stop for nearly 30 seconds to catch my breath. I was embarrassed by all the attention while I was doing nothing. I felt like I was letting the crowd down.

In the end, I finished in a little over two hours. And because I finished, I was invited to compete at the world championships in Nice, France.

I accepted the invitation, even though the competition was only three weeks away. I barely had time to recover between events. But since no one else my age was competing, my goal, once again, was to just finish the race.

In France, I started in the last wave of the day. When I completed the wall balls and turned to cross the finish line,

cheering spectators formed a reception line with their hands in the air. One of the race officials said, "Grab my wrist" and pulled me through the line while the video screen flashed "New World Champion."

On social media, HYROX World posted a video of the finish and later shared that it was the organization's most memorable moment of the year. I was far from the fastest competitor, but at 77, I was the oldest. I was proud to become the first HYROX world champion in the men's ages 75–79 category.

FITNESS FOR MY FUTURE

I've since finished two more HYROX events. In December 2024, I competed again in Anaheim, and this time

I had competition. I was able to beat my competitor and finish with a personal record of two hours and four minutes.

I then had six months to train for the next world championships, in June 2025. This time, my training was

hampered by sore knees, arthritis in my neck, and plantar fasciitis in my right foot. I wasn't

sure I'd be able to finish, but coach Jen encouraged me to go anyway and treat the event like a victory lap rather than a competition.

I was one of three competitors in my age group at the event, a sign of the sport's increasing popularity. It's good to see that some of the growth includes more older people giving it a try.

Unfortunately, I did not finish that race. The sled push took me three times longer than normal to finish and just killed my legs. I dropped out during the lunge portion of the event when my legs said, "No more." I later learned that some of the sled lanes had problems, which led to many other competitors not finishing too.

Despite failing to defend my title last year, I'm happy to have made my mark as the first HYROX world champion in my age group. I'd like one more chance to improve my time by finishing in under two hours, and that's what I have in mind as I continue to train. 🏃

I was far from the fastest competitor, but at 77, I was the oldest.
I was proud to become the first HYROX world champion in the men's ages 75–79 category.



Pete (front row, far right) pictured with the 1967 cross-country team at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minn.

Pete's Top Takeaways

1.

Stay active. "Moving your body at any age is important, and any activity is better than none," Pete says. "Find something you enjoy doing and stick with it."

2.

Find a fitness partner. "Sharing your fitness activity with someone not only makes it more enjoyable but also increases the likelihood that you'll stay committed."

3.

Don't be afraid to try something new. "You never know until you try," Pete says, recalling his first foray into group fitness. "I went for it and never looked back."



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REAL FITNESS

A **LEISURELY WALK** after a meal isn't a groundbreaking innovation, yet this simple routine can support digestion by stimulating gut motility and helping to relieve gas and bloating. Turn to **page 35** for tips on making postmeal walks a sustainable habit.

SUPERSIZE YOUR SUPERSETS

Amp up your strength routine with the muscle-building post-exhaustion method.

BY LAUREN BEDOSKY

TO BUILD STRENGTH, you have to overload the muscles — this is a core tenet of resistance training. It's not enough to simply go through the motions: Strength training is supposed to be hard.

You can increase strength in several ways. The usual routes are to add to the weight you lift or change tempo to increase the time under tension. Another approach, explains Life Time strength and running coach Mike Thomson, involves increasing fatigue through a protocol known as post-exhaustion.

Post-exhaustion training is a twist on superset training. It pairs two exercises to push a particular muscle or muscle group close to failure; this stimulates adaptations that increase muscle endurance, strength, and size.

A post-exhaustion set typically starts with a compound, multijoint exercise followed by a less complex movement that isolates specific muscles. The first exercise is performed for fewer reps with a heavy weight (see "Defining 'Heavy'" on page 29), while the second move is performed for more repetitions at a lighter weight.

Words like "exhaustion," "failure," and "overload" might sound intimidating, but they are essential elements of a progressive strength-training program.

Who can benefit from this post-exhaustion approach?

"Everybody!" insists Thomson. "It could be for bodybuilders, those that want to improve their aesthetics, or anyone with performance-based goals to grow the size of their muscles. Athletes in a competitive phase of training can add this about eight weeks out for a couple weeks before their last peaking phase prior to their competition."

It's also appropriate for all ages, says Thomson: "I coach a 76-year-old woman and just had her go heavy on a seated-row machine followed by a lighter, banded biceps curl to exhaust those muscles."

Words like "exhaustion," "failure," and "overload" might sound intimidating, but they are essential elements of a progressive strength-training program. By pushing closer to the edge of your strength capacity without going past it, you can stimulate positive muscle adaptations associated with performance, athleticism, and longevity.

Thomson designed the following post-exhaustion workouts to target every major muscle group for growth. Do each workout once per week, taking one or two days off in between. Repeat for four weeks.

WORKOUT No. 1

In each superset, move quickly from the first exercise to the second. After completing the second move, rest two minutes. Perform four or five sets total, then continue to the next superset.

SUPERSET A



A1: HEX BAR DEADLIFT

Select a challenging weight and perform five reps.

Press through your feet to stand tall and lift the weight. Hinge your hips back to lower it with control.

A2: DUMBBELL ALTERNATING REVERSE LUNGE

Perform 10 reps per side, alternating legs each time you step back.

At the bottom of each rep, lower your back knee to hover just above the floor and track the front knee over your middle toe.



SUPERSET B



B1: TRICEPS DIP

Perform five reps.

Use a resistance band or your feet for support, as needed, to lighten the overall load.

B2: INCLINE DUMBBELL CHEST PRESS

Perform 12 reps with the bench at a slight incline.

Focus on pressing straight up toward the ceiling, not diagonally away from your chest.



SUPERSET C



C1: BENT-OVER ROW

Select a challenging weight and perform five reps.

Keep your hips hinged back and your back straight throughout the movement.

C2: DUMBBELL BENT-OVER REVERSE FLY

Perform 12 reps.

Squeeze your shoulder blades together to raise the weights with control; avoid "jumping" the weights up or otherwise using momentum.



WORKOUT No. 2

In each superset, move quickly from the first exercise to the second. After completing the second move, rest two minutes. Perform four or five sets total, then continue to the next superset.

SUPERSET

A

A1: BARBELL FRONT SQUAT



Select a challenging weight and perform five reps.

Rest the barbell on your shoulders and use your fingers for support only. Keep your arms parallel to the floor with elbows facing straight ahead.

A2: DUMBBELL ALTERNATING FRONT LUNGE

Perform 10 reps per side, alternating legs each time you step forward.

At the bottom of each rep, lower your back knee to hover just above the floor and track the front knee over your middle toe.



SUPERSET

B

B1: BARBELL BENCH PRESS



Select a challenging weight and perform five reps.

Fine-tune your start position with setup tips at ELmag.com/strongstarts.

B2: DUMBBELL NEUTRAL-GRIP SHOULDER PRESS

Perform 12 reps.

Grasp the dumbbells with a neutral (palms-in) grip to protect your shoulders as you raise and lower the weights.

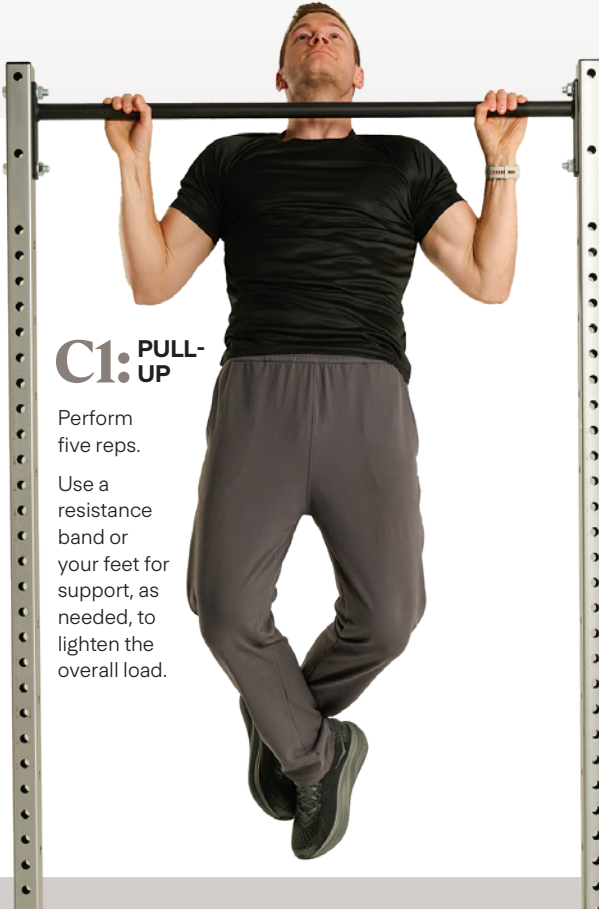


SUPERSET
C

C1: PULL-UP

Perform five reps.

Use a resistance band or your feet for support, as needed, to lighten the overall load.



C2: STANDING EZ-BAR CURL

Perform 12 reps.

Keep your torso still and your elbows in place at your sides throughout the movement.



DEFINING “HEAVY”

“Heavy” is a subjective — and important — marker in strength training. Lifting a heavy enough weight can mean the difference between an effective workout and an ineffective one.

So how can you know if a weight is heavy?

“There is no absolute number that corresponds to a heavy weight in any exercise,” says Life Time’s Mike Thomson, a strength and running coach. “What counts as heavy is relative. It’s what is heavy for you.”

To determine how much weight to use for post-exhaustion supersets, Thomson suggests lifting with effort in mind. “For the first exercise in each set, ‘heavy’ is something you can do five times with solid form, with just a couple of reps in reserve.”

This means that when you finish the set of five, you could potentially do a sixth and maybe a seventh rep but no more. If you could

do that weight eight or more times, consider it a sign to add load. Conversely, if you were to struggle to get all five reps without your form breaking down, drop some weight.

Adding and subtracting weight to locate your heavy sweet spot is fairly straightforward when using free weights and machines. But body-weight movements — like the triceps dip in Workout No. 1 — may require more maneuvering.

If body-weight triceps dips are too challenging for five reps, add support from the machine; if using a dip attachment, try a resistance band or your feet for assistance. If the move is not challenging enough, increase weight by wearing a weighted vest, holding a dumbbell between your legs, or adding plates to a belt.

It might take a little trial and error to find your sweet spot, but the results are well worth it. ➔



PERFORM THE WORKOUT

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THE KETTLEBELL SWING

Three cues to fine-tune your form.

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

THE KETTLEBELL swing is a dynamic move that builds full-body strength and explosive power, working the posterior chain as well as the upper body. Follow these tips to help you nail your next swing session.



1. Set up strong. Position the kettlebell 1 to 2 feet in front of you so that when you hinge your hips back you can reach the handle with both hands. Ensure that your back is flat and your weight is evenly distributed across your feet.

2. Channel your power. On each downswing, aggressively push the kettlebell down and back behind you, aiming it for the triangle between your knees and pelvis.

3. Get weightless. On the upswing, powerfully thrust your hips forward to launch the weight up; don't use the strength of your arms to lift the kettlebell. It should feel as if the weight is almost floating at the top of the swing.

MAGGIE FAZELI FARD,
RKC, MFT-1, ALPHA, CSMC,
is *Experience Life's* editorial
director of fitness.





BE THE CHANGE

You've built healthy habits. Now comes the real challenge: making them last.

BY SARAH TUFF

BIG FITNESS GOALS aren't typically achieved with one workout, and lasting change rarely occurs from a single, inspired decision. Change of any kind takes time and effort. And it tends to involve a multistage process of thinking, stepping forward, stumbling backward, and, sometimes, starting over.

Typically, the weeks, months, and even years dedicated to a goal will lead to a choice: Keep going — staying diligent and consistent with new habits, even in the face of obstacles and unanticipated challenges — or give up.

Starting is often considered the hardest step in behavior change. But “the decision to persist,” says Life Time Mind director Brie Vortherms, MA, LMFT, “is where the real work happens.”

This phase of behavior change is known as maintenance. It comes after you've started acting toward a goal but before your new behaviors have become habits.

It can be a tricky step to work through. Experts share some tips to help you improve your chances of success.

STUCK IN THE MIDDLE

Maintenance is the fifth stage in the transtheoretical model of change, or TTM, a process conceived by psychologists James O. Prochaska, PhD, and Carlo DiClemente, PhD, ABPP. To understand why this challenging phase is so important, it helps to grasp the stages that come before and after it: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and termination.

Precontemplation is characterized by a lack of desire to change or a state of denial. For example, you may have fallen out of your fitness routine and are ignoring how this makes you feel.

In the contemplation phase, you're thinking about change but remain on the fence about getting started. You might not know where to begin or don't feel quite ready to take on the challenge.

During the preparation phase, you feel motivated to make a change and are formulating a plan. You might research some health clubs or gyms, gather supplies and gear, and maybe even recruit a workout buddy.

The action phase is when you implement your plan: You join a gym,

meet with a trainer, maybe attend that first group fitness class.

This phase is juicy, exciting, and full of potential. It feels like a fast track to the sixth and final stage, termination (a.k.a. adoption), when the change simply becomes a habit. A lifestyle.

We'd all like to jump from action to termination, but first we have to make it through that critical fifth stage: maintenance.

SHIFTING GEARS

During the maintenance phase, there's less chance of giving up on a new behavior than when you first took action. But there's still a chance.

Stress, grief, boredom, loss of support, a progress plateau, or a major life event can all derail your progress. Think back to a time when you felt well on your way to realizing a goal but got sidelined. Chances are at least one of these factors was at play.

Yet maintenance isn't about creating a life free of obstacles. It's the training ground on which you learn to navigate them without giving up on your goals. “It's not ‘*either* my goal *or* the rest of my life,’” says Vortherms. “This is your chance to find how you can have both.”

That requires shifting your mindset from doing to being, she explains. We all have a manager part of our personality — the part that makes plans, sets goals, and pushes us to achieve them. “Without a new goal to pursue, that part can feel lost.”

Instead of constantly chasing the next milestone, your primary objective during the maintenance phase is to focus on embodiment.

This means stepping into the version of yourself who doesn't simply *do* an activity but *is* active. It's a subtle but powerful difference.

“Let the manager rest,” she advises. “Protect the investment of hard work with grace.”

What follows are three practices designed to help you succeed in the maintenance phase — and embody the movement goals you've worked so hard to reach.

THE MAINTENANCE MINDSET

1.

TWEAK YOUR INTERNAL NARRATIVE.

Habits are more than muscle memory. For them to be sustainable, your internal narrative about yourself has to catch up with your external experience.

Affirmations are a useful tool here. They fill your mind with positive thoughts and can help reshape your beliefs about who you are.

“The mind has a powerful effect on the body,” says Vortherms. “Your thoughts can dictate which neurochemicals are released, creating different cascades with distinct effects on your mind and body.”

Try repeating affirmations that align with who you want to be: “I am strong and healthy.” “I am capable and good at change.”

The right affirmations are unique to the individual, Vortherms notes. Spend time finding the words or phrases that inspire and support you.

2.

SEE IT TO BE IT.

Visualization is a mental-training technique that involves picturing yourself engaging in your chosen activity. Visualization, like an affirmation, can help bridge the gap between what you do and who you are.

Mental rehearsal may activate the visual cortex, even while you're doing something else. This can dramatically improve your performance, says Vortherms, and it can help your changing identity settle into your body.

Try tapping into your senses with the guided-imagery technique: If you're a swimmer, imagine the smell of chlorine. If you're a gravel cyclist, think of the sound of riding over crushed rock. If you're a dancer, feel your weight shift in your feet.

Conjure these sensations while doing laundry, walking to work, or lying in bed.

3.

KEEP IT FRESH.

Once you have a routine in place, seek out opportunities to take on new challenges and expand your skills. This might mean signing up for a race or athletic event, jumping into a dynamic group fitness class, learning to use a new-to-you piece of equipment, or challenging yourself to master, say, a handstand.

“Look for something that will keep you engaged in your fitness journey without falling into the ‘change for change’s sake’ trap,” suggests Kristin Green, CPT, a fitness instructor in Boulder, Colo.

For scratching the novelty itch, Green likes group fitness classes. In addition to being dynamic and exciting, the classes have the benefit of a built-in support system. (Learn more about the power of working out in a group at ELmag.com/groupworkout.)

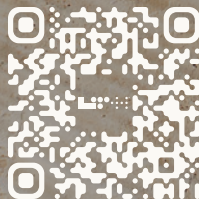
The trick with maintenance is finding variety without losing consistency and purpose. Remember: These suggestions are side quests on the way to your final destination, the phase known as termination. When you reach that stage, the behavior you've worked so hard to adopt is integrated — no longer something you have to do, it's now just who you are. 🏆

SARAH TUFF is a Colorado-based outdoors, health, fitness, and nutrition writer.





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Postmeal Walks and Digestion

True or false: Walking after eating can improve gastrointestinal function.

BY LAUREN BEDOSKY

TRUE. Going for a stroll after eating helps stimulate the digestive process.

Walking promotes gastrointestinal motility, the process by which food, fluids, and waste products move through the digestive tract. It encourages the muscles to contract and relax, pushing food forward. This is a simple way to alleviate bloating and prevent constipation.

“Especially if you feel really full after eating, gentle movement like walking can help with that by moving things along,” says gastroenterologist Shanti Eswaran, MD, a clinical professor at the University of Michigan Medical School.

Researchers put postmeal walks to the test in adults with a history of bloating. Those participants who walked for 10 to 15 minutes after each meal for a month reported noticeable improvements.

Walking can also help prevent or alleviate heartburn and other symptoms of acid reflux by keeping food from lingering in the stomach for too long, notes Eswaran. (For more tips on managing acid reflux, visit ELmag.com/acidreflux.)

In addition to improving digestion, walking has the benefit of boosting mood, which can keep stress and anxiety from disrupting motility. That’s because the brain and digestive system talk to each other through a two-way communication network known as the gut-brain axis.

A stressed brain can send messages to the gut that cause stomach upset, bloating, or indigestion, just as a stressed gut can send messages to the brain that cause anxiety. A leisurely stroll around the block can help.

“When your mind is clear and relatively chill, the gut-brain axis is more regulated, which may help with GI symptoms and therefore digestion,” Eswaran says. (Find more tips for calming your mind and boosting digestion at ELmag.com/mindfuldigestion.)

Beyond the digestive and mental health benefits, walking after a meal may help regulate blood sugar and stabilize insulin levels. (Learn more about the many health benefits of walking at ELmag.com/walking.)



TIPS FOR TAKING A DIGESTIVE STROLL

To make postmeal walks a sustainable habit, do what feels manageable for your schedule and lifestyle. You might not be able to squeeze in a walk after every meal, but even one postmeal walk a day is beneficial, says Eswaran.

These four considerations can help you make the most of your effort.

TIMING: If you can take a short walk after each meal, that’s great. But if you can make time for only one postmeal walk a day, take it after your biggest meal, Eswaran advises. “Most people eat their largest meal in the evening,” she says. A postdinner walk can help relieve fullness and bloating as well as prevent digestion-related sleep disruptions.

Aim to head off as soon as possible after your meal, says Eswaran. “Let those dishes soak in the sink!”

DURATION: When considering a walk after eating, the old adages apply, says Eswaran: Something is better than nothing, and a little goes a long way. Research shows that 10 to 15 minutes of leisurely walking has positive benefits. Still, if five minutes is all you have, take that time.

INTENSITY: To reap the digestive benefits of a postmeal walk, don’t rush. Aim for a conversational pace and avoid the temptation to turn

this outing into a workout. Strenuous exercise just after a meal can actually slow digestion and cause cramping, nausea, and vomiting.

“When people exercise in more strenuous ways, like running or high-intensity cycling, all the blood goes from their GI tract toward their muscles,” Eswaran explains.

In addition to slowing your pace, take deep belly breaths and avoid bracing your abdominal muscles. You want to be relaxed enough that you could easily pass gas, if needed.

VARIETY: Walking is the usual go-to for postmeal exercise because it’s accessible, engages all the major muscle groups, and keeps you — and your GI tract — upright. You can also experiment with other light activities, such as a slow bike ride or a mobility routine. (For a digestion-promoting yoga flow, visit ELmag.com/yogafordigestion.)

LAUREN BEDOSKY is a Minnesota-based health and fitness writer.



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The Connection Between Visceral Fat and Aging

Fat stored deep in the abdomen can wreak havoc on your health. Learn how exercise can help.

BY JESSICA MIGALA

AN INCREASE in belly fat is a common complaint among aging adults. And while body fat is not automatically a cause for concern, an accumulation of abdominal fat — especially visceral fat, the type that surrounds the internal organs deep within the abdomen — can be a harbinger of potential health issues.

Too much abdominal fat “sets you up for a powerful proinflammatory state,” explains women’s health expert Pamela Peeke, MD, MPH, author of *The Hunger Fix*.

This inflammation, in turn, is associated with an increased risk of suppressed immunity as well as conditions like heart disease, certain cancers, insulin resistance, and dementia.

The reasons that visceral fat is more nefarious than other types of body fat — and why its dangers increase with age — are still being studied. But experts agree that movement is one of the most effective interventions.

“Exercise reduces visceral fat, even without weight loss, and more weekly activity leads to greater visceral fat loss,” says Rob Glick, Life Time senior director of group fitness programming and innovation and cocreator of Life Time’s ARORA programming.

Here are answers to some common questions about visceral fat — and how to mitigate its unwanted health effects as you age.

WHY IS BELLY FAT SUCH A BIG DEAL?

We all have two primary kinds of abdominal fat: subcutaneous fat, located under the skin, and visceral fat, which surrounds our internal organs. Certain levels of both types of fat are important and necessary, Peeke says. Together, they help cushion vital organs and store fuel.

But too much visceral fat is associated with negative health outcomes, she notes. Visceral fat is metabolically active, so it can break down fatty acids and other hormonal substances. These are directly metabolized by the liver and released into the body, where they cause inflammation. No other type of fat, including subcutaneous fat, has the same systemwide effects.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE TOO MUCH VISCERAL FAT?

Visceral fat is difficult to measure because it’s contained in the abdominal cavity under the muscles. Medical guidelines have traditionally reflected waist circumference and waist-to-hip ratio as go-to measurements. But those numbers don’t accurately distinguish between passive subcutaneous fat and active visceral fat.

A better tool might be your mirror, suggests Peeke. Is your midsection protruding and hard? Is your belly hard to grasp between your fingers? If you lie down on the floor on your back, does your abdomen stick up like a ball? “The firmer your belly fat, the more likely it is to be an indication of excessive visceral fat,” she says.

WHY DOES VISCERAL FAT INCREASE WITH AGE?

Research has found that visceral fat can more than double in men and almost quadruple in women between the ages of 25 and 65. Weight gain and muscle loss are common among older adults but don’t fully account for the shift in fat distribution to the midsection.

Meanwhile, age-related declines in sex hormones seem to play a role. Low testosterone in men, and the sharp decline in estrogen and progesterone in women during the menopause transition, are associated with increased visceral fat.

HOW CAN EXERCISE HELP?

Older adults report the highest levels of sedentary behavior, says Glick. “Without regular activity, metabolism slows, insulin sensitivity declines, and fat storage shifts inward.”

Staying active with a combination of aerobic and resistance training can help slow, prevent, or even reverse the dangerous accumulation of visceral fat. Notably, even without weight loss, exercise has been shown to redistribute fat storage away from the deep abdominal cavity.

WHAT’S THE BEST EXERCISE PROGRAM FOR LOSING BELLY FAT?

The best program, regardless of your goal, is the one you will do, says Glick. Once you have the OK from your doctor, engage in physical activities that you enjoy most days of the week.

From there, he recommends that older adults do two days of resistance training, ideally using proper progressive-overload principles (through activities like weight training, with special emphasis on form and posture), and one day of high-intensity interval training.

The rest of the week, simply aim to move more throughout each day. Maybe that means taking the stairs instead of the elevator, walking your dog down the block, shopping for groceries instead of ordering grocery delivery, or adding a brief after-dinner stroll. (For more on the benefits of walking after a meal, turn to page 35.)

“Small choices add up,” Glick says. “With the right mix of strength, cardio, and daily movement, you can protect your health and stay strong for life.”



HIIT IT

For a beginner-friendly, high-intensity workout designed for older adults, visit [ELmag.com/beginnerhiit](https://www.elmag.com/beginnerhiit).

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REAL FOOD

FERTILITY IS INFLUENCED by a host of factors, many beyond our control. But we can adjust our nutrition, and doing so may substantially improve reproductive health. Check out three fertility-friendly dishes starting on **page 48**. And find this Wheat-Germ Gremolata Pasta at ELmag.com/fertilityrecipes.



The Lure of HYPERPALATABLE FOODS

Grocery stores are full of food products engineered to leave us wanting more. Discover how they hook us — and how to favor more whole foods.

BY CATHERINE GUTHRIE

FOOD IS SUPPOSED to taste good. When paired, certain flavors encapsulate some of life's greatest pleasures — like the marriage of salty and sweet that creates the simple joy of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. But some food scientists have been wondering: Is it possible for food to taste *too* good?

They're not talking about the first bite of a juicy peach, a seared steak, or a ripe tomato. They're referring to food products designed to hijack the brain's reward system and override the body's fullness cues.

"Eating should be an enjoyable experience, but you want to be able to stop," says Tera Fazzino, PhD, associate director of the Cofrin Logan Center for Addiction Research and Treatment at the University of Kansas. "These foods can push you to eat more than you want."

Experts call these delectables "hyperpalatable." They are engineered to deliver combined doses of fat, sugar, sodium, and carbohydrates at thresholds that don't exist in nature. These calorically dense combos light up the brain's reward system, also known as the hedonic pathway, evoking feelings of pleasure in much the same way alcohol, nicotine, and opiates do.

In all, almost 70 percent of the foods available in the United States are hyperpalatable, according to a 2022 paper published in *Public Health Nutrition*. The most common offenders are frozen and ready-made meals, snack foods and desserts, processed meats, school lunches, and even food products marketed to help people lose weight.

And because hyperpalatable foods are not designed to be eaten

in moderation, we're all vulnerable to the effects of a diet oversaturated with them, which include nutrient deficiencies, systemic inflammation, and microbiome disruption.

THE HYPERPALATABLE THRESHOLD

Hyperpalatable foods are distinct from ultraprocessed foods, but the overlap is significant. Roughly 80 percent of ultraprocessed foods (UPFs) are hyperpalatable, but not all hyperpalatable foods (HPFs) are ultraprocessed.

As the term suggests, UPFs contain industrially extracted nutrients and additives not typically used by home cooks, like sodium benzoate and carrageenan. (Learn more about UPFs at ELmag.com/ultraprocessed.)

Hyperpalatable foods, meanwhile, are often common snacks or



prepared meals made with added sugar, salt, and fat to turbocharge their flavor and texture. If you can't stop eating it, most likely it's a hyperpalatable food.

HPFs can be classified into three groups based on ingredient pairings: added fat and sugar (think cakes, cookies, and ice cream); carbohydrates and salt (such as in crackers, pretzels, and popcorn); and fat and salt (found in processed meats and cheese products).

Any of these nutrient combinations makes food more palatable, says Filippa Juul, PhD, MSc, a nutritional epidemiologist at SUNY Downstate in Brooklyn, N.Y. But specific ratios of these nutrient pairs can make it downright irresistible. "Over certain thresholds, the ingredients become more reinforcing, and it will be harder to stop eating them."

Research has shown that when a food reaches a particular ratio of fat and salt, for example, people eat up to 30 percent more of it.

"When the aim of food processing is to hedonically amplify flavors we already find rewarding, food becomes too potent for many of us to consume in moderation," explains Ashley Gearhardt, PhD, a psychology professor at the University of Michigan.

"These formulations bliss us out in ways nothing in nature can compete with."

That expectation of a reward may lead people to eat just for pleasure (hedonic eating) rather than to satisfy hunger or provide energy (homeostatic eating),

says David Wiss, PhD, RDN, IFMCP, a mental health nutritionist in Los Angeles. "People start to eat for the neurochemical reward rather than metabolic need."

THE INDUSTRIAL PALATE

A knock-on effect of having so many hyperpalatable foods in the food supply is that more-nutritious options — vegetables, fruits, legumes, and whole grains — get crowded off our

plates. Whole foods like fresh berries or unsalted nuts derive much of their flavor from a single nutrient, such as sugar or fat. The flavorful nutrient is paired with a slow-digesting nutrient, like fiber or protein. That balance is key for steadying blood sugar and giving the brain time to register when the stomach is full.

In contrast, hyperpalatable foods have amped-up combinations of flavorful added ingredients, but they're stripped of nutrients that slow digestion and create a sense of fullness. And because they're so widely available, many of us have developed a preference for these hedonically amplified, nutrient-poor foods. Food historian Amy Bentley, PhD, refers to this as "the industrial palate."

Gearhardt adds: "The brain is not designed to recognize appealing food as a threat. That's how food companies use our biology against us."

In preindustrial times, famine was a threat to survival — so humans were highly motivated to find calorie-dense nutrients, like carbohydrates and fats, she explains. A food's appearance, smell, and taste could override feelings of fullness, so people could overeat in

"The brain is not designed to recognize appealing food as a threat. **That's how food companies use our biology against us.**"

times of plenty to endure the lean times to come.

These instincts were challenged by the industrialization of the food supply in the mid-20th century, when companies began manufacturing increasingly cheap, novel, and highly palatable foods. Between 1985 and 1998, the number of new food products in the United States nearly doubled. Food companies started “reformulating their products to maximize palatability,” says Juul — all to grow their bottom lines.

FED BY BIG TOBACCO

“Bliss point,” a term used by the food industry, refers to the levels of salt, sugar, and fat that the brain perceives as “just right” and that make a food irresistible to our taste buds. When we eat a food that satisfies our bliss point, the brain’s hedonic pathway is activated, releasing a surge of dopamine that reinforces the behavior.

“That dopamine rush is what drives us to crave the food again and again,” says Laura Schmidt, PhD, MSW, MPH, professor of health policy at the University of California, San Francisco. “The dopamine-driven reward system in the brain responds more quickly to sugars than [to] nicotine.”

In the 1980s, when Big Tobacco was facing increased federal regulation, tobacco companies decided to diversify into food products. Within the decade, Philip Morris bought and consolidated General Foods and Kraft, which included

household names like Oscar Mayer, Jell-O, and Post. R. J. Reynolds purchased Nabisco and its blockbuster hits Oreo cookies, Ritz crackers, and Fig Newtons. “They took product development and marketing tools that worked for cigarettes and applied them to food,” Schmidt says.

Beyond flavor, a food’s color, packaging, and texture — even the sound it makes — are all engineered to cue cravings. Consider the sharp, crisp *pop* you hear when opening a can of soda and how your brain anticipates that first cold, bubbly sip.

“Companies realized they could get their food’s color, flavor, and even packaging linked to the moment when the brain’s reward system kicks in,” she says.

Schmidt spent years sifting through the 19 million internal documents released by Big Tobacco as part of a legal settlement in the 1990s. She learned that tobacco companies had created sophisticated tools to measure people’s response to flavors, colors, and additives in cigarettes, and then applied that same knowledge to making food more pleasurable.

“That’s the word they used — *pleasurable*,” she notes. “It comes straight out of many decades of making cigarettes more pleasurable to smoke.”

By 1989, Philip Morris’s Kraft General Foods was the largest food company in the world. And from the

late 1980s until the early 21st century, Big Tobacco continued to influence the food industry. In 2024, a study published in the journal *Addiction* found that foods once produced by Big Tobacco were up to 80 percent more likely to be hyperpalatable compared with products from non-tobacco companies.

Even after tobacco companies sold their food subsidiaries, in the early 2000s, the number of hyperpalatable food products available in the United States climbed another 7 percent. “The market became saturated as other food companies likely raced to catch up,” Fazzino explains.

Mapping Big Tobacco’s involvement in cooking up hyperpalatable products was a light-bulb moment for Fazzino in understanding the industrial palate: “It brought me full circle back to the addiction realm.”

These days, Fazzino is researching what threshold of salt, sugar, fat, and carbohydrates in various foods spurs addictive behaviors. “If I can take a heavy-hitting HPF like potato chips and test if dropping sodium below a certain threshold reduces its addictive nature, that’s a start,” she says. “It could be a harm-reduction approach similar to what worked with tobacco.”

“The dopamine-driven reward system in the brain responds more quickly to sugars than [to] nicotine.”

CATHERINE GUTHRIE is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.

5 Ways to RECLAIM YOUR PALATE

Many of us have grown accustomed to living in a hyperpalatable world and have perhaps even acquired a preference for artificial flavors and ingredients. Mental health nutritionist David Wiss, PhD, RDN, IFMCP, saw this in real life when his toddler tasted processed food for the first time. "As soon as her brain

registered the reward of hyperpalatable foods, there was an expectancy that made regular food taste boring," he says.

But whole foods aren't boring. With a little awareness and creativity, you can wrest your palate back from the food industry. Wiss shares these tips.



1.

Swap foods strategically.

Because hyperpalatable foods are calorically dense, swapping them for low-calorie fare can leave the body feeling undernourished, says Wiss. "If the brain senses too big of a dopamine drop, it interprets a threat and intensifies the cravings."

Instead, he advises, keep yourself nourished with minimally processed, calorically dense foods. For example, add an avocado to your salad, top your fruit with nut butter, and opt for full-fat dairy.



4.

Release perfectionism.

Wiss tells his clients not to get caught up in "being on or off the wagon." Instead, move at your own pace, even if it means using hyperpalatable

foods as a bridge to healthier choices.

If you find salads inedible, for instance, crunch up a small bag of your favorite chips and pour the crumbs over your bowl of greens. The next day, he says, maybe use half the bag of chips, and then use less over time. "Tapering is key."

2.

Engage your senses. Your brain is drawn to a food's sensory pleasures. Consider Peanut M&M's: The colorful shell makes a satisfying crackle when you bite into it; your teeth sink through the sweet chocolatey interior before crunching into a salty peanut.

"It's important to re-create sensory effects," Wiss says. At home, add texture to yogurt with crushed macadamia nuts and blueberries, or sprinkle pumpkin seeds on an omelet or grain bowl. Improve the visual appeal of a meal by topping your plate with crumbled feta, a swirl of hot sauce, or a sprinkle of microgreens.



3.

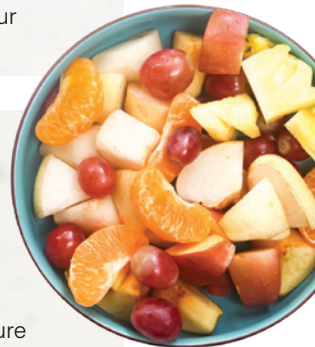
Rediscover chewing. Many hyperpalatable foods are designed to melt in your mouth, making it difficult for the brain to track how much you've eaten. Chewing is a key part of the cascade of healthy digestion and satiety signals. Look for whole foods that give your jaw a workout, like nuts, apples, or steel-cut oats — and chew them thoroughly.

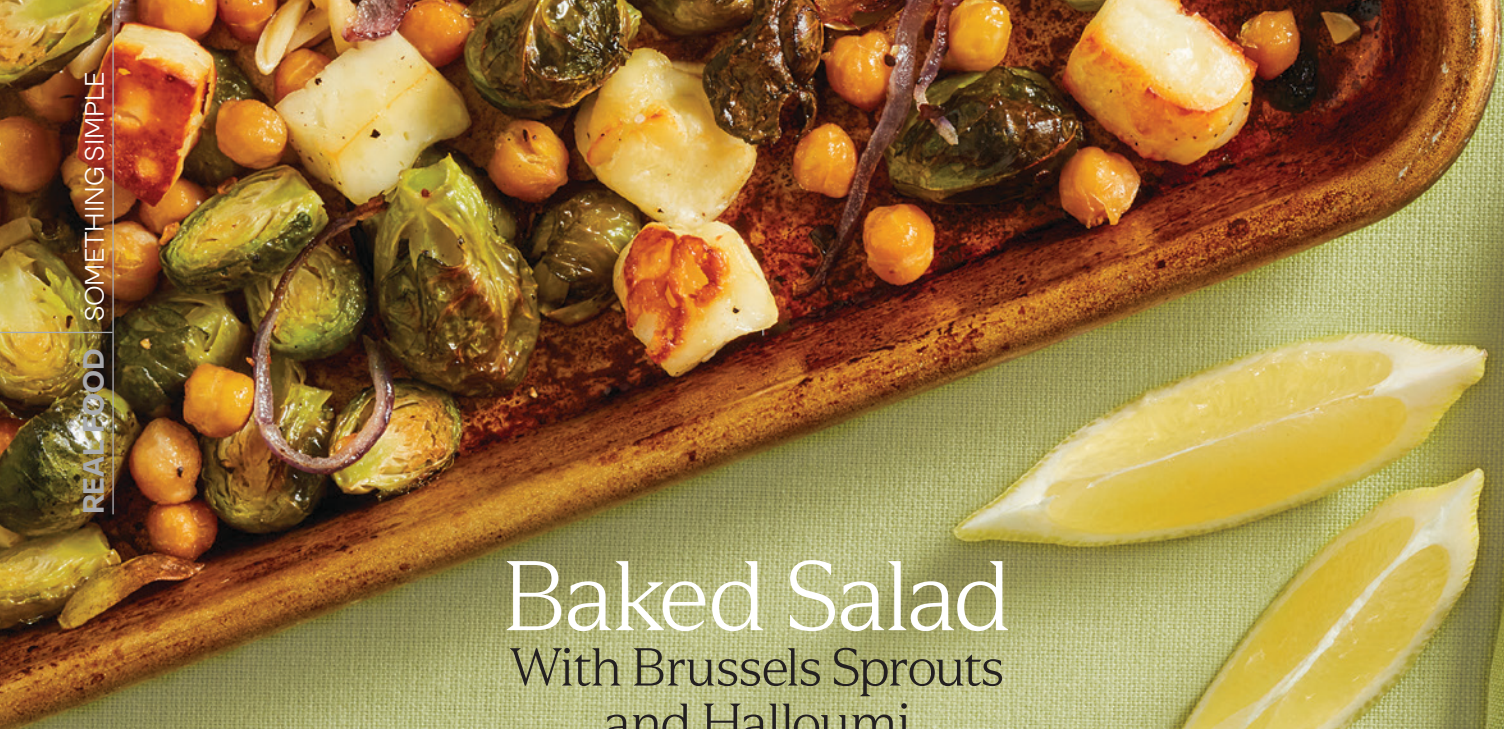
"The goal is to have favorable bidirectional communication between the gut and the brain, and that's what hyperpalatable foods override," Wiss says. "You need to be able to trust your hunger and satiety cues."

5.

Find your own bliss. Search for whole foods or recipes that scratch your bliss-point itch. These bliss-point doppelgängers don't have to be complicated. "If you stop and pay attention, a slice of cool tropical fruit can be pure bliss on a hot summer day," Wiss explains.

Plus, food can be a catalyst for other feel-good hormones. Serotonin, for example, is activated by a sense of purpose and meaning. That can come from sharing a meal with people you care about, having a heartfelt conversation over the dinner table, or helping to prepare food or clean up, he adds. "It's not just the brain but the terrain — the human — that matters."





Baked Salad With Brussels Sprouts and Halloumi

When you want something green but also want to feel warm and cozy, this sheet-pan recipe is the perfect solution.

BY KAELYN RILEY

EVER SINCE I moved to Minnesota, more than 11 years ago, I've tried to fast-forward through March. Winters here can be intense. The days are short and dark and often dip into subzero temperatures, and the season itself sometimes feels like it will go on forever.

Still, as an honorary Minnesotan, I've learned to embrace the cold. I bought the good boots. I'm getting fair to average at downhill skiing. And I've discovered the joys of hibernation — flames in the fireplace, a pot of soup simmering on the stove, and my precious cat purring in my lap.

But once March rolls around, frankly I'm kind of over it. I'm ready for spring, and unfortunately it's not due for another month or two. I want to move on from stews and mulled ciders, but the weather hasn't gotten the memo. I'm dreaming of a bowlful of vegetables, and yet a cold salad of raw greens just doesn't seem right.

Enter the baked salad — a warm meal where some (or all) of the ingredients are roasted on a sheet pan, which gives me the veggies I need along with the coziness I still crave this time of year. My personal formula includes at least two kinds of

vegetables, plus some protein, topped with something crunchy, tossed with some salt, fat, and acid.

In this recipe, Brussels sprouts and red onion turn tender and sweet when roasted in the oven. If you have bad memories of the bitter Brussels sprouts of your youth, it might be time to give them a second chance.

The vegetable once had high concentrations of plant compounds called glucosinolates, which were responsible for the sulfurous odor of cooked Brussels sprouts. In the 1990s, Dutch scientists were able to find heirloom varieties of Brussels sprouts with lower levels of these bitter-tasting compounds. They then crossbred the older plants with modern, high-yield ones, creating a new generation of significantly less sulfurous sprouts.

And they're still quite good for you: Brussels sprouts are rich in antioxidants, dietary fiber, and potent phytochemicals — including carotenoids for eye health and anti-inflammatory kaempferol, as well as those glucosinolates.

Halving the sprouts allows them to become crispy on the outside but tender inside. Be sure to rinse and dry them thoroughly first — any water left

behind would encourage the sprouts to steam rather than roast, and while they'd still be delectable, you'd miss out on the golden-brown edges. The same goes for the chickpeas: Rinse and dry them with a kitchen towel to ensure they get crisp.

But the real star of this recipe is the halloumi. A semi-hard brined cheese from Cyprus, it has a high melting point that allows it to be baked without losing its shape. In this recipe, the cheese gets brown and crispy alongside the vegetables — and it adds a bit of extra protein.

The best thing about a baked salad is that the recipe can be flexed according to the season or your personal preferences. In the fall, I like to use butternut squash in place of Brussels sprouts. If you eat meat, diced bacon is a delicious addition. If you want a little more heft, swap the almonds for cubes of sourdough bread, or serve the salad over quinoa or brown rice.

Because it's so easy to make it your own, a baked salad is a great meal for any time of year. But this is the one I like to eat in March, while I wait not-so-patiently for spring to finally arrive.



Makes four servings
 Prep time: 15 minutes
 Cook time: 25 minutes



1 15-oz. can chickpeas, drained, rinsed, and dried



1 lb. Brussels sprouts, rinsed, dried, trimmed, and halved



½ medium red onion, sliced



8 oz. halloumi cheese, cut into ½-inch cubes



¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil



¾ tsp. sea salt



¼ tsp. freshly ground black pepper



¼ tsp. red-pepper flakes



¼ cup slivered almonds



1 lemon

Preheat the oven to 425 degrees F. Add the chickpeas to a large bowl with the Brussels sprouts, red onion, and halloumi. Drizzle with the olive oil, then add the salt, pepper, and red-pepper flakes. Stir to coat everything with the oil and seasonings.

Spread the mixture onto a sheet pan and bake until the vegetables have softened and the cheese has started to turn slightly golden at the edges, about 15 minutes.

Remove the sheet pan from the oven and sprinkle the almonds over the top. Stir the mixture on the pan, then

return the pan to the oven for 10 more minutes, until the almonds are toasted and the chickpeas are crispy.

Remove the sheet pan from the oven and top with the zest and juice of half of the lemon. Cut the remaining lemon half into wedges and serve the baked salad with lemon wedges on the side. 🍋

What You Need to Know About Food Recalls

Foodborne-illness outbreaks might be more prevalent than official statistics suggest. Learn how you can stay safe.

BY STEPHANIE SOUCHERAY

FOOD SAFETY is a growing concern for many Americans, and for good reason: In 2024, the United States saw its deadliest outbreak of foodborne illness in more than a decade, when 10 people died of listeria linked to deli meat from a Boar's Head plant in Virginia. In total, 60 people from 19 states were hospitalized, making this the largest listeria outbreak since 2011.

Foodborne illness is surprisingly common. Each year, approximately one in six Americans gets sick from contaminated food. Most manage the symptoms of gastrointestinal distress at home without seeking medical care.

Barbara Kowalczyk, PhD, MA, director of the Institute for Food Safety and Nutrition Security at George Washington University, explains that many cases are sporadic, meaning that they are not associated with an outbreak. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines an outbreak as occurring when two or more people are sickened by the same contaminated food or drink.

Contamination can come from bacteria, viruses, or parasites that get introduced to food before it makes its way to your plate. Raw or undercooked animal products are a frequent source of foodborne illness, in part because animals can often harbor harmful bacteria, like *E. coli*, without showing signs of disease.

But animal products aren't the only vector. Vegetables and fruits can be contaminated in the field by way of fertilization or from being washed with unclean water. And

restaurants and processing facilities can spread foodborne illness due to inadequate sanitation, cross-contamination, or sick employees.

Although larger outbreaks, like the one from Boar's Head, are relatively rare, they demonstrate that foodborne illness can be deadly. And while fewer nationwide food recalls were issued in 2024 than in the previous year, the number of hospitalizations and deaths associated with outbreaks nearly doubled — suggesting that contaminated food may be passing through gaps in food-safety surveillance.

FOOD SAFETY AT RISK

Many food outbreaks are detected through PulseNet, a nationwide laboratory network created in 1996 by the CDC. Samples are collected from sick people who seek medical care, and bacterial DNA “fingerprints” are uploaded to a server to quickly identify illnesses with a common source.

If a common source is identified, a recall is issued, and the product is pulled from market. Recalls are often voluntarily performed by the manufacturer or distributor when they're made aware of unsafe products, but a recall can also be coordinated through either the U.S. Department of Agriculture or the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. The USDA handles recalls of meat, poultry, and egg products; all other recalls are coordinated through the FDA.

Still, the vast majority of the 48 million Americans who get sick each year from a foodborne illness do not have an identified outbreak source,



7 Tips for Food Safety

While food safety can seem like an overwhelming problem that's outside of your control, there are vital steps you can take to protect yourself and your loved ones.

according to Kowalcyk. "That doesn't mean they are not part of an outbreak," she explains, "but [that] we haven't been able to put those pieces of the puzzle together."

That puzzle is only becoming more challenging. Citing recent cuts at both the CDC and the FDA, Kowalcyk warns that the ability of government agencies to communicate quickly and effectively is at risk — which could prolong outbreaks. "I'm concerned that we're going to see a weakening across the entire system," she says.

One of the targets of these cuts is the CDC surveillance network FoodNet. Here, the CDC, FDA, USDA, and various state health departments once worked together to track eight common foodborne pathogens; now, that surveillance has been reduced to only two pathogens: *Salmonella* and Shiga toxin-producing *E. coli*.

Kowalcyk predicts that these changes could lead to the identification of fewer outbreaks, which may be more widespread than hampered tracing efforts are able to determine. "A lot of food safety is prevention," she explains. "But it's hard to see prevention, so it gets cut quickly."

Government agencies don't directly control food safety, explains Penn State University senior food-safety extension associate Martin Bucknavage. That responsibility rests with companies that process, prepare, and distribute food. "Government inspection is still important," he says, "and I have faith in the people who work for these agencies in doing a good job."

1. UNDERSTAND YOUR RISK.

Some people are at greater risk of severe complications from foodborne illness. These cases occur most often among those with weakened immune systems, pregnant or elderly people, young children, and people taking immunosuppressive drugs. If you or someone in your home falls into one of these categories, it's worth taking extra care around food safety.

2. KNOW THE MOST COMMON SOURCES.

Some foods are more frequently tied to foodborne illness than others. Raw meat, poultry, seafood, and eggs should be handled safely to avoid cross-contamination, and they should be cooked thoroughly to kill any hazardous bacteria.

Avoid unpasteurized dairy products, which could harbor dangerous pathogens even if they look, smell, and taste just fine. One 2017 study found that raw dairy caused 840 times more illnesses and 45 times more hospitalizations than pasteurized milk, which is heated to eliminate harmful bacteria.

3. COOK AT HOME. One recent study found that restaurants were by far the most common setting for exposure to foodborne illness, accounting for nearly 40 percent of reported outbreaks between 2021 and 2023. "There's only so much a consumer can do to protect themselves from illnesses that come from prepared food," says Kowalcyk.

While cooking your own food at home doesn't eliminate your risk, it can significantly reduce it — especially if you're careful about washing your hands, surfaces, and tools as you move through food prep. (Get more tips for at-home food safety at [ELmag.com/foodsafety](https://www.ELmag.com/foodsafety).)

4. WASH YOUR FRUITS AND VEGETABLES.

The CDC estimates that 46 percent of foodborne illnesses can be attributed to produce. Unlike

dairy, fresh vegetables and fruits don't undergo pasteurization — and, unlike meat, they're often eaten raw and not heated to a temperature that would kill most bacteria. It's important to wash and scrub all produce under running water to remove any surface contaminants, and to store cut, peeled, and cooked fruits and vegetables at 40 degrees Fahrenheit or lower to limit bacterial growth.

5. GET A KITCHEN THERMOMETER.

This relatively inexpensive tool is the only way to ensure that foods, especially animal protein products like poultry and beef, are cooked to a temperature adequate for killing common pathogens. "Cooking without a thermometer is like driving without a speedometer," says Bucknavage. "You need to use one."

6. USE COMMON SENSE. You can avoid a lot of unnecessary risk simply by trusting your instincts when it comes to food safety. "If a food doesn't look right, don't eat it," Bucknavage advises. "If there's a loss of temperature control, throw it out. If a restaurant doesn't seem sanitary, don't go there."

7. CONSIDER THE BIGGER PICTURE.

As consumers, we all have to determine our own individual risk tolerance and decide how to balance any fears we may have about food safety within the bigger picture of our overall health. For instance, leafy greens have been a source of pathogens like *E. coli* and *Campylobacter* — but they're also incredibly nutritious.

"Overall, there is a very low probability of foodborne illness when you consider the wide usage of these products," says Bucknavage. "And I would never recommend that someone avoid eating leafy greens. We cannot become paralyzed by concern." 🍴

STEPHANIE SOUCHERAY is a health journalist based in St. Paul, Minn.

EATING FOR FERTILITY

Whether you're trying to get pregnant or aiming for better hormonal balance, these foods can support your reproductive health.

BY KATE MORGAN

OUR BODIES are made up of complex networks, and our reproductive system is one of them. Fertility is influenced by an almost incalculable number of circumstances, including lifestyle factors, like exercise and stress; environmental inputs, such as pollution and pesticide exposure; genetic issues, like chromosomal abnormalities and inherited disorders; and more.

Many of these circumstances are out of our control, but one key contributor to reproductive health is relatively straightforward: nutrition.

Research consistently finds that a healthy pre-conception diet can support a healthy pregnancy. And there's evidence to suggest that consuming specific vitamin-, mineral-, and nutrient-dense foods can balance hormones and improve the function of your reproductive system.

Studies show that omega-3 fatty acids, like those in walnuts and eggs, may improve ovarian function. Lentils and quinoa are both loaded with folate, a vital nutrient for a healthy pregnancy. Sweet potatoes are high in beta-carotene, which can help balance progesterone and other hormones. And antioxidant-rich foods, like wheat germ, may improve sperm motility.

Whether you're planning a pregnancy or simply want to restore balance to your hormones, these recipes can bring more fertility-friendly foods to your plate.



Lentil and Crisp-Quinoa Salad

Makes four servings

Prep time: 10 minutes

Cook time: 45 minutes

- 1 cup dry French lentils, rinsed
- ½ cup dry quinoa, rinsed
- 1 tsp. sea salt, divided
- 1 red or orange bell pepper
- 2 tbs. plus ⅓ cup extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- ¼ cup apple-cider vinegar
- 1 garlic clove
- 1 tsp. honey
- 1 large cucumber, seeded and diced
- ½ cup finely diced red onion
- ½ cup fresh mint, minced

Add the lentils to a saucepan with 2 cups of water and bring to a rapid simmer. Cook, uncovered, for 20 to 30 minutes until tender, adding more water as needed to keep the lentils submerged. Drain the remaining liquid and rinse the lentils with cool water.

While the lentils cook, make the quinoa. In a second saucepan, bring 1 cup of water and ¼ teaspoon of the salt to a boil, then add the rinsed quinoa and cover. Turn the heat to low and simmer for 15 to 20 minutes, or until the quinoa is tender. Remove from the heat and allow to rest for 10 minutes.

Meanwhile, prepare the bell pepper. Preheat the broiler, then halve the pepper and remove the stem and seeds. Place the pepper halves on a baking tray, cut side

down, and broil until blackened spots begin to form on the skin, about five to seven minutes. Remove from the oven, place in a bowl, and cover with a towel so the pepper continues to soften.

Heat a skillet over medium. Add the 2 tablespoons of olive oil, then add the cooked quinoa and sauté over medium heat, stirring often, until the quinoa is crisp — approximately 10 minutes. Stir in ¼ teaspoon of the salt and set aside to cool slightly.

To make the dressing, combine in a blender the bell pepper, remaining ½ teaspoon salt, ⅓ cup olive oil, vinegar, garlic, and honey. Blend until smooth.

Mix the lentils and quinoa with the cucumber, onion, and mint in a large bowl. Toss with the dressing just before serving.

Black Bean and Sweet Potato Quesadillas

Makes four servings

Prep time: 10 minutes

Cook time: 35 minutes

- 2 large sweet potatoes (about 2 lb.), peeled and diced into 1-inch cubes
- 1 tsp. sea salt, divided
- 1 15-oz. can black beans, drained and rinsed
- 1½ tsp. ground cumin
- 1 tsp. dried oregano
- ¼ tsp. garlic powder
- ⅓ tsp. chili powder, plus more to taste
- 5 oz. queso fresco, crumbled or diced
- 5 oz. white cheddar cheese, grated
- 4 tsp. extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- 8 8-inch tortillas (corn, flour, or other)
- ½ small white onion, diced

In a large saucepan over medium heat, add the sweet potatoes and just enough water to cover them. Stir in ½ teaspoon of the salt, then cover and bring to a simmer. Cook until the potatoes are fork-tender, about seven to 10 minutes. Drain and transfer to a large bowl to cool slightly before roughly mashing with a fork.

Add the beans, cumin, oregano, garlic powder, chili powder, remaining ½ teaspoon salt, and cheeses to the mashed sweet potatoes. Stir to combine.

Heat a skillet over medium, then add 1 teaspoon of the olive oil. Lay one tortilla in the pan, then cover it with a layer of the sweet potato mixture. Sprinkle with the diced onion, then top with a second tortilla. Cover and cook until the cheese has melted, about three minutes.

Uncover the skillet and carefully flip the quesadilla, then cook, uncovered, until both sides are golden brown and the edges are starting to crisp, about three minutes more. Repeat with the remaining olive oil, tortillas, and sweet potato mixture.

Allow the quesadillas to cool slightly before cutting into wedges and serving.



COOK WITH EASE

Download a mobile-friendly version of these recipes — plus one for Wheat-Germ Gremolata Pasta — at ELmag.com/fertilityrecipes.



Garlic-Walnut Chicken Thighs

Makes four servings

Prep time: 10 minutes

Cook time: 45 minutes

- 1 cup walnuts
- ½ cup cilantro, loosely packed, plus more for garnish
- ½ cup baby spinach, loosely packed
- 3 cloves garlic, roughly chopped
- 2 tbs. lemon juice
- 2 tsp. gochujang
- 1 tsp. smoked paprika
- 1 tsp. ground coriander
- 1 tsp. dried thyme
- ¾ tsp. sea salt
- 1 tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- 6 boneless, skinless chicken thighs
- ¼ cup chicken stock
- Cooked rice, for serving

Preheat the oven to 300 degrees F and line a sheet pan with parchment paper. Spread the walnuts on the pan and roast for seven to 10 minutes, until fragrant and toasted.

Transfer the walnuts to a food processor and pulse until they're the consistency of a chunky nut butter. Add the cilantro, spinach, garlic, lemon juice, and gochujang. Process into a paste and set aside.

Increase the oven temperature to 350 degrees F. Mix the paprika, coriander, thyme, and salt in a small bowl, and sprinkle the mixture evenly over the chicken thighs.

Place a large oven-safe skillet over medium heat, then add the oil. When the oil is hot, brown the chicken thighs for about three minutes on each side, then remove from the pan. Add the walnut paste and chicken stock to the pan and stir to combine with chicken juices, then turn off the heat.

Place the chicken thighs back in the skillet in an even layer, turning to coat with the paste. Bake for 18 to 20 minutes, or until the internal temperature of the chicken reaches 165 degrees.

Garnish with cilantro leaves and serve over rice. 🍴



KATE MORGAN is a Pennsylvania-based writer and recipe developer.



THE BIG





ROCKS

OF FITNESS NUTRITION

IF YOU'RE FEELING OVERWHELMED BY NUTRITIONAL ADVICE, FALL BACK ON THESE FIVE FOUNDATIONAL GUIDELINES.

BY ANDREW HEFFERNAN, CSCS

CURIOS ABOUT plant-based diets or intermittent fasting? Eager for info on nutrient timing or post-workout recipes? Want to know more about the seemingly endless stream of supplements promising to make you stronger, faster, and fitter? If you're interested in fitness nutrition, it's easier than ever to access a deep well of data, facts, and opinions with a few simple keystrokes.

But this hyperavailability of information comes at a cost.

"One of the epidemics I'm seeing today is 'infobesity,'" says Ashley Koff, RD, author of *Your Best Shot* and founder of The Better Nutrition Program. "We're overwhelmed by information."

Information overload can make it difficult to understand an issue, make decisions, and stick with a plan. In the world of nutrition, this might look

like jumping from one food hack to the next, experimenting with every dietary trend, or trying every supplement in hopes that the next intervention will help you realize your goals.

It might also look like never taking any steps toward your goals at all, because you simply don't know where to start amid the informational flood.

It's time to get back to the basics. Enter the big rocks of fitness nutrition.

The big-rocks model, popularized by the late businessman Stephen R. Covey, goes like this: Say you're trying to fill a large jar with rocks of various sizes. The most efficient way to complete the task is to start with the biggest rocks. With a few of them, you'll quickly fill most of the jar. Then — and only then — do you fill in the gaps with smaller pebbles.

It's a striking metaphor for the power of prioritization: If you're tak-

ing on a complex project, "big rocks" suggests you should start with the actions that have the largest impact on your desired outcome. Pebbles, after all, form a shaky foundation.

When considering fitness nutrition — and all the advice out there — it's easy to get distracted by the pebbles while ignoring the big rocks.

"While creatine and electrolytes can support your performance, if you aren't doing the basics, like following a progressive strength-training program, eating enough calories overall to support your goals, and getting ample protein to help support recovery, supplements don't matter as much," says Lindsay Ogden, CPT, PN, Life Time nutrition coach and personal trainer.

Use the following five big rocks to lay a strong foundation for your fitness, longevity, and overall health.



BIG ROCK No. 1

EAT ENOUGH.

Consider everything you do in a day: walking, working out, socializing, breathing, thinking. Then add the processes that your body undergoes to support these activities: digesting, circulating and filtering blood, fighting infection, building or rebuilding muscle and other tissues.

“All those outputs require energy inputs to work,” says Ogden. “Energy input comes from the calories — energy — in food.”

Before you even think about the food sources of that energy, you need to be sure you’re getting enough energy in the first place.

“If you’re not getting enough calories, your vitality, energy, strength, and motivation can all decline,” says performance and transformation specialist Angelo Poli, ISSA.

So how much energy is enough? “That depends on what the demand is,” Ogden notes. The energy required to fuel a workout is only one small part of the equation. A larger contributor to daily energy expenditure, she explains, is non-exercise activity thermogenesis, or NEAT: the movements you do as part of everyday living. People with desk jobs and sedentary hobbies burn less energy via NEAT than those whose jobs and hobbies require walking or other physical exertion.

There are formulas for determining how many calories you need based on weight, gender, and activity level. For some people, tracking calories can be a useful tool to build awareness and ensure adequate

fueling. For others, calorie counting can feel time-consuming and joyless, or is linked to restriction and disordered eating.

Tuning in to your body’s hunger and satiety signals can be an easier and more self-compassionate approach for making sure you’re eating enough.

Simply put, the more you move, the more fuel you need. Try to eat an amount that keeps you energized throughout the day without leaving you overly full or tired.

This might be difficult if your fitness journey has included weight loss or food restriction. To start, give yourself permission to eat whenever you feel hungry. Learn to recognize

“If you’re not getting enough calories, **your vitality, energy, strength, and motivation can all decline.**”

mild sensations of hunger — and honor those cues before you become ravenous. (Find out more about the principles of intuitive eating at ELmag.com/intuitiveeating.)





BIG ROCK No. 2

EAT ENOUGH PROTEIN.

Protein is one of the three essential macronutrients that compose everything we eat. The other two are fats and carbohydrates, which function largely as fuel. Protein is unique in that its amino acids provide the raw materials for building all the tissues of the body, including muscle, organs, skin, and bones.

"If your body is a brick house, then protein is the bricks," says exercise physiologist and performance nutrition researcher Mike T. Nelson, PhD.

Protein supplies your body with the amino acids necessary for repairing essential tissues after any challenging activity. The combination of exercise and protein makes you stronger; it also protects your muscle tissue from breaking down over time.

Without protein, Nelson says, "your body will harvest those amino acids from your muscles to survive."

Muscle loss isn't just a concern for athletes, he explains. Leg strength, grip strength, and VO_2 max — a measure of cardiovascular health — are all commonly cited as being key predictors of mortality. And dietary protein supports all three.


That makes protein more than a strength nutrient; it's also a longev-

ity nutrient. "The data shows that as you age your protein needs go up, not down," Nelson notes. Researchers believe this is due to a decline in muscle mass. The body's response to protein also becomes less efficient as we age.


As with big rock No. 1, protein requirements vary. Active people should aim to eat about 1 gram of protein per pound of lean body mass per day, says Paul Kriegler, RD, Life Time's director of nutritional-product development. That amounts to a starting point of 140 grams of protein for a 175-pound person with 20-percent body fat. Intakes higher than this may not provide additional muscle-gain benefits but may help with appetite management.

An even simpler strategy is to eyeball it. "I recommend starting with at least a palm size of protein with breakfast, lunch, and dinner," says Ogden. From there, work to add more portions of protein at those meals, or consider adding high-protein snacks — protein powders, Greek yogurt, and eggs are great (and quick) options.

Aim to get most of your protein from whole-food sources, including lean meats, seafood, eggs, dairy products, beans, lentils, nuts, and seeds.



Protein supplies your body with the amino acids necessary for repairing essential tissues after any challenging activity.





BIG ROCK No. 3

EAT MORE PLANTS.

Vegetables and fruits are filled with nutrients that can support athletic endeavors and recovery. They're rich in essential vitamins, minerals, and phytochemicals that sustain overall health, immune function, and energy metabolism. Their antioxidants help manage the impact of exercise-induced oxidative stress, reduce inflammation, and assist with tissue recovery.

Some combine high water content with minerals, making them boons for hydration. This can bolster performance and recovery and regulate body temperature.

Plant fiber aids digestion and promotes a healthy gut microbiome. The carbohydrates in vegetables and fruits help athletes sustain their energy levels during physical activity.

How much produce do you need to reap these benefits?

"As with many other dietary guidelines, the goal isn't 'perfect' but 'better,'" says Nelson. Try to get at least two — and up to eight — servings of different vegetables and fruits each day. This can include mushrooms; sometimes-maligned starchier plants, like bananas and potatoes; and even tea.

Go for variety over quantity: A recent 15-year study published in the *Journal of Nutrition* found that eating an array of vegetables and fruits —

categorized by color — may be more important than how many you eat. Green and white fruits and vegetables, the study found, seem to protect against cardiovascular disease and all-cause mortality; red and purple ones are associated with a reduced risk of cancer and all-cause mortality.

Note that whole grains also fall under the "plants" umbrella, says Koff. Though they have been vilified by low-carb marketing campaigns, whole grains can be nutrient dense — full of antioxidants, phytoestrogens, phenolic and phytic acids, flavonoids, and fiber. (If you struggle with blood-sugar regulation, be attentive to portion size and preparation.)

Whole grains are also powerful sources of easily available fuel and energy. Oats, quinoa, barley, millet, and wild rice are just a few options to complement your training.

(Learn more about grains at ELmag.com/grains. For guidance on how to eat more veggies, check out ELmag.com/veggies. And to learn why fruit is great for you despite what you've heard about its sugar content, head to ELmag.com/fruit.)

Eating an array of vegetables and fruits — categorized by color — **may be more important than how many you eat.**





BIG ROCK No. 4

DRINK WATER CONSISTENTLY.

For digestion, circulation, regulation of body temperature, cushioning of organs, and the health of your skin, joints, and immune system, water is indispensable. Day after day, hydration fights fatigue and improves physical and mental performance.

Conversely, even mild dehydration can lead to impaired cognition and reduced energy. Dehydration can also lead to an increase in blood pressure, as your heart tries to pump blood that is thicker than normal; during exercise, you might experience a racing heart and decreased performance.

To offset these side effects, ingest half an ounce per pound of body

weight per day, adding another 16 to 24 ounces per hour of sweating, advises Kriegler. For a 150-pound person, that amounts to a baseline of about 75 ounces per day.

But, experts say, remain flexible about that amount. “That number should increase or decrease depending on your activity level, body size, and rate of sweating, as well as the temperature and humidity,” notes Poli.

Alcohol, caffeine, sugar, artificial sweeteners, medications, exposure to pollutants, and stress also affect hydration levels, he adds, so your hydration needs may change significantly from day to day.

Overhydration is possible, but it’s far less common than underhydration, says Poli. “Many people don’t feel the urge to drink until after they are mildly dehydrated. Their thirst threshold is set too high.”

This delay has a big impact on athletes. “If you’re waiting until your workout to start hydrating, you’re too late,” Ogden says.

With this fact in mind, shift your focus from drinking as much water as possible to drinking it consistently. “You don’t need to tote a gallon jug with you 24-7,” says Poli, “but you probably need to make an effort to take a drink more often.” (For a guide to getting the hydration you need, visit ELmag.com/hydrate.)



BIG ROCK No. 5

DRINK LESS ALCOHOL.

Alcohol can impede athletic performance and recovery in a variety of ways, says Nelson. It affects energy metabolism by hampering the liver’s ability to convert fat to energy, and it disrupts the body’s ability to regulate core temperature, making it harder to cool or warm itself.

Alcohol is also a diuretic, which decreases hydration levels. It can interrupt sleep, hindering recovery and athletic preparedness.

On a subtler level, alcohol reduces strength by blunting calcium function in muscle contractions, and at higher doses, it undermines protein synthesis,

necessary for building muscle. It can also impair muscle recovery and growth by tamping down growth hormone, which is crucial for muscle development.

In short, it can really set you back. “Alcohol won’t support performance or aesthetic goals,” Ogden says. “But it’s part of many people’s lives and experiences.”

As far as your fitness is concerned, the goal is to manage alcohol consumption so that its effects on your life and health are minimal. If alcohol dependence is not an issue for you and you’re able to drink moderately, you can probably do so with minimal risk.

The dose makes the poison. Exactly what that dosage is, however, has been hotly debated and varies by individual. Some studies conclude that no amount of drinking is safe; other research suggests that light drinking may even boost heart health. Generally speaking, less is more.

“Take inventory of where you are now,” Ogden suggests. “If you’re having 10 or more drinks per week, maybe the first focus is to get below 10 — and then chip away from there.” (Learn more about the health effects of alcohol consumption at ELmag.com/alcholeffects.)

YOU’LL COVER the lion’s share of your nutritional needs for health and performance with these five big rocks of fitness nutrition. Once you feel confident of your footing, begin adding the pebbles that make you feel good. And whenever you feel overwhelmed by all the nutritional advice out there, return to this steady foundation. 🍊



THE MIGHTY MICROBIOME

On the many ways the
gut influences health.

BY MO PERRY

IT WASN'T SO long ago that the medical world viewed bacteria as largely infectious and dangerous. But the truth, as is so often the case, is more complex.

Bacteria can be friendly. In fact, decades of research have steadily confirmed what observant practitioners, from Hippocrates on, seemed to understand: Most disease begins in the gut. And the gut, it turns out, is governed by bacteria of all kinds.

The trillions of microbes in the gut sit at the literal center of our bodies and health, and their well-being determines more than just the quality

of our digestion. The gut microbiome also influences respiratory health, mood, and hormonal balance.

“The more scientists dive into the topic, the more connections are made between gut health and pretty much every network in the body, including the neurological, cardiovascular, and immune systems,” writes integrative eco-dietitian Mary Purdy, MS, RDN, in *The Microbiome Diet Reset*.

Let’s examine some of the ways your gut’s microbial community contributes to your health — and how you can support your microbiome so it can keep supporting you.

GUT HEALTH

Most gut bacteria live in the lower part of the intestinal tract, where they help digest, absorb, and metabolize nutrients. They process fibers the body can't digest on its own, ferment carbohydrates into short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs) that nourish colon cells, and even help produce certain vitamins, like K and B12.

They also help break down polyphenols — plant compounds found in foods like berries, tea, and dark chocolate — unlocking their anti-inflammatory and antioxidant effects.

Friendly bugs are critical for maintaining the structural integrity of the gut lining and supporting the tight junctions and mucus that prevent gut dysbiosis, which can lead to leaky gut syndrome. These microbes feed on dietary fiber. If good bacteria go hungry due to a lack of fiber, they struggle to produce butyrate (an SCFA that reinforces the gut barrier) and may be crowded out by bugs that feed on the mucosal lining itself. This compromises the gut's defenses.

"When the gut microbiome is disrupted, that's when we see an increase in gut permeability, which drives systemic inflammation," explains Minneapolis-based naturopathic doctor Sara Jean Barrett, ND.

Meanwhile, an imbalance between beneficial microbes and bacterial strains that produce methane or hydrogen has been associated with several GI disorders, including irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), Crohn's disease, and ulcerative colitis.

Fortunately, modern interventions can often help restore the balance between helpful and harmful bugs. A 2024 review of 18 studies, published in *Endocrinología, Diabetes y Nutrición*, found that certain supplementary probiotics — particularly *Bifidobacterium bifidum* and specific multistrain combinations — may help relieve IBS symptoms such as abdominal pain and bloating in as little as four weeks.



MENTAL WELLNESS

Roughly 90 percent of the body's mood-soothing serotonin is made in the gut, notes Vivian Asamoah, MD, a Houston-based integrative gastroenterologist. Other neurotransmitters, such as GABA, dopamine, and glutamate, are also synthesized by gut bacteria. That synthesis helps regulate mood, stress response, sleep, and cognitive functions like motivation and focus. (For more on GABA and mood, see "Protein and Mental Health" on page 75.)

"When that process is altered by dysbiosis — whether from a postinfectious state, use of antibiotics, or diet — that will affect how those neurotransmitters are made, processed, metabolized, and passed along to the brain," Asamoah explains.

The gut-brain connection is bidirectional, so brain signals also modify the gut.

"Emotions such as anxiety, loneliness, and depression can affect the gut microbiota as well," she adds. An imbalanced gut microbiome may operate in a complex feedback loop with mental health challenges, each reinforcing the other.

Increasingly, functional practitioners are taking a multidisciplinary approach to untangling these loops. Asamoah often recommends that her patients work on diet and lifestyle changes to support the microbiome while partnering with a GI psychologist to help with stress reduction and

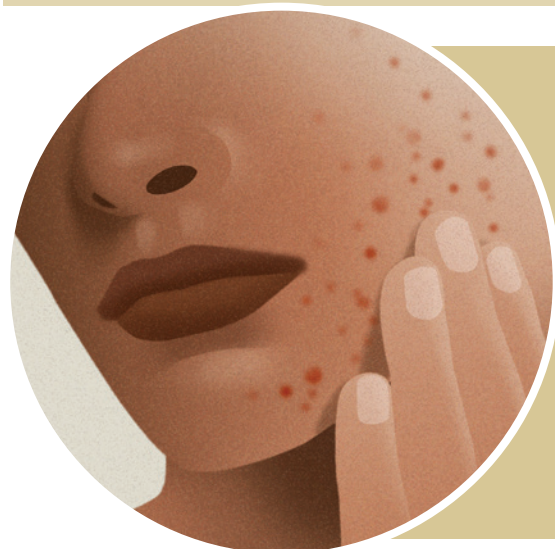
emotional regulation.

Research shows that a type of bacteria known as psychobiotics can also be particularly supportive.

"Certain strains of *Bifidobacterium*, *Lactobacillus*, and *Akkermansia* play key roles in gut-brain health," she says. "We often see low levels of *Akkermansia* in patients with gut-brain axis issues, so we focus on restoring it, often by increasing polyphenols in the diet that help support its growth."

Several studies indicate that *Akkermansia* supplementation can improve depression-like symptoms in mice. And a randomized controlled trial published in *Translational Psychiatry* in 2022 found that a short-term, high-dose, multistrain probiotic significantly reduced depression symptoms in people with major depressive disorder; the probiotic boosted levels of *Lactobacillus* in the gut and even changed patterns of brain activity.

An imbalanced gut microbiome may operate in a complex feedback loop with mental health challenges, **each reinforcing the other.**



SKIN HEALTH

It may not surprise you that inflammation in the gut can show up on the skin as acne, eczema, or rosacea, but new research suggests that skin health may also influence the gut.

"We've always thought in functional medicine that disruptions in the gut microbiome can lead to skin concerns," Barrett says. "But now we're learning that damage to the skin barrier can actually cause changes to the gut microbiome as well." A study of mice, published in *Nature Communications* in 2024, found that wounded skin can alter the microbiome and immune activity in the colon.

COGNITIVE FUNCTION

The gut-brain axis not only influences how we feel day to day: It may also affect how our brains age and function over time, even playing a role in our risk for neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's.

One of the most important ways the gut influences cognitive health is through its effect on the blood-brain barrier, which protects the brain and spinal cord from harmful substances. Recent research shows that gut microbes play a surprising role in keeping the barrier strong and selective.

When researchers compared germ-free mice and mice with healthy gut bacteria, the germ-free mice had increased blood-brain barrier permeability. But when they received either a fecal transplant from healthy mice or supplements of SCFA-producing bacteria, the integrity was restored.

When the blood-brain barrier is leaky, harmful molecules and immune cells can cross into the brain and trigger neuroinflammation. And a lack of gut microbes that produce key metabolites can affect the behavior of microglial cells — the immunity defense in the central nervous system — leading to excessive synaptic pruning and damage to healthy brain tissue.

Studies show that people with Alzheimer's disease tend to have gut bacterial compositions that differ from healthy individuals, often including a higher proportion of the proinflammatory *Collinsella* strain.

Researchers are increasingly looking at whether manipulating the microbiome with diet or probiotic supplements can reduce the risk or affect the progression of neurodegenerative diseases. A 2024 systematic review in the *International Journal of General Medicine* found that probiotics show promise in helping treat symptoms of Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and multiple sclerosis.

IMMUNE RESPONSE

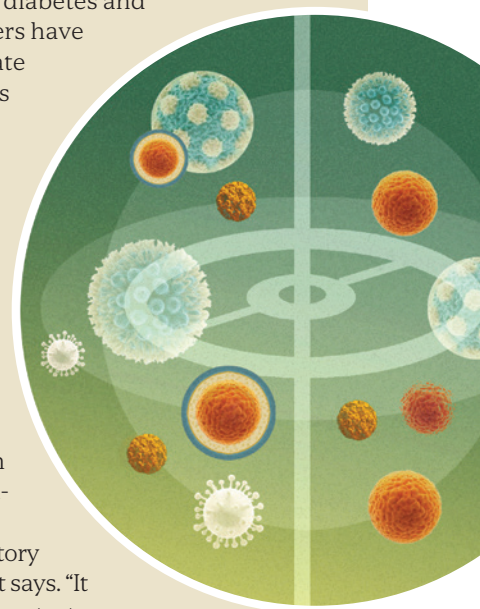
Gut microbes play a huge role in determining how well the immune system operates. "Seventy to 80 percent of our immune tissue is located in or around our GI tract, which means that our gut microbes are constantly communicating with our immune system," Barrett says.

Gut dysbiosis is recognized more as a driver of systemic autoimmune diseases, such as type 1 diabetes and rheumatoid arthritis (RA). Researchers have identified specific microbes that create SCFAs that educate regulatory T cells and promote the production of anti-inflammatory cytokines to help maintain immune balance.

Other microbes, when they overgrow, have been linked to inflammation and immune dysregulation. Patients with RA, for instance, tend to harbor low levels of helpful *Faecalibacterium* and an overabundance of the inflammation-fueling *Prevotella* species.

The key to a strong immune system is sufficient bacterial diversity. "[A well-populated] microbiome promotes a healthy balance between the T-regulatory cells and inflammatory T cells," Barrett says. "It really plays a critical role in helping to protect you from autoimmune diseases."

This understanding of the gut-immune axis may lead to new strategies for cancer prevention and treatment. Already, scientists have found that certain gut bacteria, such as *Akkermansia muciniphila*, can boost the effects of cancer immunotherapy by helping immune cells target tumors more effectively.



CARDIOMETABOLIC HEALTH

Humans and our gut bugs are sometimes described by researchers as "metabolically active superorganism[s]." Studies have found that microbes play key roles in weight gain, metabolic obesity, and general metabolic health, including in blood-sugar and cholesterol management.

For example, a shortage of butyrate-producing bacteria, mainly from the Firmicutes group, has been linked to type 2 diabetes and obesity. Conversely, beneficial microbes help build butyrate, which can regulate appetite and enhance insulin sensitivity.

Dysbiosis has also been linked to cardiovascular risk factors, such as atherosclerosis, hypertension, heart failure, and chronic kidney disease.



ALLERGIC SENSITIVITIES

In recent years, researchers have connected rising allergy rates in children to declining microbial diversity. Babies born via C-section, fed formula, or exposed to antibiotics early in life tend to have different gut bugs than those delivered vaginally, breastfed, or raised with regular exposure to dirt, animals, and other kids.

“It’s really the early microbial exposures that set the immune tone for allergies,” Barrett says.

This idea is the central tenet of the hygiene hypothesis, which posits that modern life is a little too sterile: Without regular encounters with microbes, the immune system doesn’t get the stimulation it needs to mature properly.

A similar theory, the “old friends” hypothesis, suggests that humans evolved in regular contact with certain microbes from soil, animals, and other people. When we lose those “old friends,” the immune system can misfire.

Some encouraging studies suggest that restoring beneficial bugs through diet, outdoor exposure, or even specific probiotics may help reduce the risk of developing allergies, especially early in life.

A study published in *Science Advances* in 2020 compared the gut microbiomes of children who spent four weeks playing in standard urban daycare centers with those of children who played in daycares with more green space. The exposure to green space corresponded to greater microbial diversity and other improvements in immune health.

RESPIRATORY WELLNESS

As with allergies, your body’s ability to fend off mild or serious respiratory conditions, such as colds, flu, asthma, or pneumonia, is partly determined by your gut health.

“Microbial metabolites [like SCFAs] and immune signaling affect airway inflammation and your susceptibility to respiratory infection,” Barrett says, adding that these communications happen through the gut-lung axis.

Studies show that certain respiratory conditions — specifically chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), asthma, and lung cancer — often go hand in hand with gut dysbiosis. Children with asthma tend to host lower levels of beneficial *Bifidobacteria* and *Lactobacilli* bacteria and higher levels of Proteobacteria and Firmicutes than children without asthma. And people with lung cancer may have lower levels of some bacterial strains that counter inflammation.

Like the gut-brain axis, the gut-lung axis is bidirectional. Respiratory infections such as COVID-19 can lead to gut dysbiosis, and, according to animal studies, respiratory infections in general can cause a decrease in beneficial gut bacteria.

More positively, abundant SCFAs in the gut are linked to lower levels of lung inflammation, protection against COPD, and, in kids, a lower risk for asthma. A placebo-controlled study of 40 asthmatic adults published in *Allergy, Asthma & Clinical Immunology* in 2023 found that eight weeks of supplementation with a probiotic led to significant improvements in lung function.

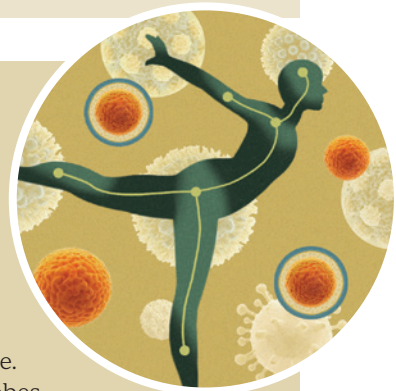
HORMONAL BALANCE

Hormones and the microbiome also have a bidirectional relationship. Gut bugs help metabolize and recycle hormones, such as estrogen and testosterone, and hormones can make direct changes to the microbiome.

Well-balanced hormones and gut microbes help regulate mood, metabolism, menstrual cycles, and immune function. But when either is disrupted by stress, illness, medication, or diet, both systems can be thrown off at the same time.

A disrupted microbiome can lead to constipation, for example, which can reduce the body’s ability to clear excess estrogen. This increases the risk of hormone-sensitive conditions like endometriosis and breast cancer.

And hormonal shifts during puberty, pregnancy, and menopause can reshape the gut microbiome, sometimes leading to changes in gut permeability, inflammation, or metabolism.



SUPPORT YOUR MICROBIOME

Each of us has a gut microbiome that's as unique as our fingerprints. "The bacteria hanging out in your gut might be quite unlike those spending time in your best friend's gut because of the differences in your backgrounds, lifestyle, genetics, and food consumption," Purdy writes.

There's no universal model for an ideal microbiome, but healthy gut communities typically have the following characteristics:

- **Diversity**, or a wide variety of microbial species
- **Richness**, or a high overall number of microbes
- **Stability**, or the ability to maintain balance over time, even after illness, stress, or antibiotics

Focus on fiber. Certain bacteria turn the indigestible fibers and starches in food into lactic acid, which supports digestion. These starches and fibers, called prebiotics, act as fuel for healthy gut bugs. Barrett notes that cooking rice or potatoes and refrigerating them for at least 24 hours increases their resistant starch content. Reheating doesn't destroy it, so enjoy them hot or cold.

Eat the rainbow. Colorful plant foods are rich in compounds called polyphenols, which act like fertilizer for beneficial gut microbes. Berries, leafy greens, purple cabbage, turmeric, and other vividly colored produce and spices offer antioxidants and microbiome-friendly fuel.

Variety is key: The more types of plants you eat, the more diverse your microbiome becomes, because different bugs thrive on different polyphenols. For instance, a beneficial strain of *Akkermansia*, which protects the gut lining, loves to feast on the polyphenols in pomegranates and red apple skins.

Enjoy fermented foods. You can feed good gut bugs only if they're there in the first place, so why not add some to the mix? This is where fermented foods and drinks like yogurt, kefir, sauerkraut, kimchi, miso, and kombucha come in. They're full of friendly microbes that help reinforce the gut barrier, counter inflammation, and bolster immunity. Daily intake of fermented foods has been shown to reduce inflammation and increase beneficial gut bacteria.

Exercise. Studies show that people who exercise consistently tend to have more beneficial bacteria, including those that produce anti-inflammatory compounds like SCFAs. Even moderate movement, like brisk walking, yoga, or cycling, can support the microbiome.

Get outside. Being in nature increases your contact with a range of environmental microbes, which may help diversify your microbiome. Gardening, hiking in nature, and interacting with animals can all support this microbial cross-training. Even rubbing soil and plant material on your hands may increase microbial diversity in the gut and skin, at least temporarily.

Manage stress. The gut and brain are in constant communication through the gut-brain axis. Chronic stress can affect this communication, altering microbial balance, increasing inflammation, and impairing digestion.

Practices like breathing deeply, meditating, and improving sleep hygiene may help reduce stress and support a healthier gut. In turn, a well-balanced gut can improve mood, lower anxiety, and help regulate the body's stress response.

Choose nontoxic cleaning products. Excessive use of antibacterial products can disrupt your body's friendly bacteria. "I personally don't like hand sanitizer, because [its] ingredients can disrupt the balance of the skin microbiome,"

• **Beneficial function**, including through strong production of SCFAs like butyrate, balanced immune signaling, and support for the gut lining

• **Low levels of inflammation**, signaled by fewer markers of gut irritation or immune overactivation

Daily habits go a long way in supporting these qualities. "We can see radical change in people's microbiomes and how they're feeling within a few weeks to months of focusing on the basics of optimizing gut health," says Asamoah.

Help optimize your own gut with these behaviors.

Barrett says. "They don't discriminate and can end up killing off the beneficial organisms along with the harmful ones."

Opt for simpler, nontoxic cleaning products for your home and body when possible. Save stronger disinfectants for when you really need them.

Use probiotics as needed. Probiotic supplements can be helpful in certain situations — particularly during or after a round of antibiotics or as part of a gut-healing program.

"Incorporating more fermented foods and prebiotics into your diet enriches the microbiome in a more natural way," Asamoah says. "But I also prescribe probiotic supplements in specific cases, like chronic constipation or antibiotic-associated diarrhea. In most cases, I don't recommend staying on a probiotic for longer than about three months without reevaluating your needs."

Purdy agrees. "Which diseases, which effects, which probiotic species, how much, and for whom are still very much being explored," she notes. "Probiotic supplements . . . can help digestive function but may offer very little benefit if diet and lifestyle habits aren't also shifting in a more supportive direction."

In short, aim for diversity in all things: A fiber-rich and colorful diet, time outdoors, stress management, and regular exercise all go a long way in creating a more resilient gut — and a healthier you. 🌱



Let's Eat Together

WHY DINING
WITH FRIENDS
AND LOVED
ONES IS GOOD
FOR YOUR
HEALTH.

BY SUSAN PAGANI



In 2007

Joanna Wing left her city life in St. Paul, Minn., for a home in the suburbs. “People said, ‘Oh, it’s not cool there, you’ll never have any fun,’” she recalls. “We said, ‘No, we’re going to start the North Suburban Supper Club.’”

The club consisted of five couples who met monthly. They rotated the hosting and shared the cooking.

They’re still meeting today.

A supper club, it turns out, can be about much more than supper. “We’ve all been through stuff, and after 20 years we’re close friends,” says Wing, a food-marketing writer. “Happy things, hard things, our kids, our husbands, our wives — we get into it all.”

Gatherings like Wing’s are becoming a rarity. A 2023 survey found that 26 percent of U.S. adults ate all their meals alone the previous day — a 53 percent jump since 2003. And results from a YouGov survey conducted in 2019

suggest that just 29 percent of Americans sit down with their families every night.

“We live in a culture of speed,” says longevity researcher Dan Buettner, author of *The Blue Zones: Lessons for Living Longer From the People Who’ve Lived the Longest*. “Families are busier, workplaces blur into home life, and convenience often trumps ritual.”

In the Blue Zone communities he’s studied around the world, shared dinners are a routine cultural practice — even when life is full.

“In Sardinia, for example, people stop what they’re doing to sit down together, even if it’s just bread, beans, and vegetables on the table,” says Buettner. “Eating together isn’t seen as optional — it’s part of culture, identity, and belonging.”

Fortunately, it’s not all that hard to get into the habit of eating with friends and family. The rewards are many, and they extend far beyond the table. These are a few of them.

When you attend to the sensation of pleasure, you’re more likely to hear your body when it tells you it’s had enough.

EATING IN COMPANY CAN SUPPORT DIGESTION.

WHEN YOU EAT ALONE

in a stressed state, hunched over your desk or ingesting the news cycle on your phone, you miss a natural opportunity to decompress.

Focusing on news or work during a meal can trigger stress hormones, says functional nutritionist Jesse Haas, MS, CNS, LN, even if you’re not in full fight-or-flight mode. These hormones shift energy away from the digestive organs to your muscles and brain, which can slow down gastric motility and decrease digestive juices. This may lead to indigestion, bloating, abdominal

pain, heartburn, and other issues.

Conversely, a friendly, food-focused dinner with others is likely to be relaxing. Not only does it help stimulate your nervous system’s rest-and-digest response, which supports a full range of your body’s digestive functions, but enjoying a meal at a slower pace also makes it more likely you’ll chew your food thoroughly.

“Chewing is an important part of digestion,” says Haas. “It breaks food down into smaller pieces, so our digestive juices can be more effective.”

This slower pace is important for satiety, too,

she adds. When you attend to the sensation of pleasure, you’re more likely to hear your body when it tells you it’s had enough.

Consider these digestive-supporting practices:

- **Step away from the screen.** Put your phone away during meals.
- **Chew each bite thoroughly.** Set your fork down between bites. Breathe.
- **Save heavy topics for later.** Unless a tough topic is time-sensitive and this is the only chance to bring it up, do your best to keep the dinner-table talk relaxed and peaceful so digestion-stalling stress hormones remain at bay.





EATING WITH OTHERS CAN DIVERSIFY YOUR DIET.

SOLITARY EATING can make it easy to fall into ruts and stick with what's familiar.

"Our food preferences are modeled for us when we're introduced to food as young people," says Haas. "So that influences what we're willing and interested in trying."

But when you eat with others, especially people beyond your family circle, you're more apt to branch out. Research suggests that eating with others promotes a more diverse, healthy, and balanced diet. Their food traditions and preferences offer opportunities to try new dishes — or test out a dietary flex, like going gluten-free.

Eating a more diverse diet supports the gut microbiome, which thrives on multiple types of fiber and phytonutrients. And that benefits your metabolic health, immune system, and mental well-being.

"Overall, if we just eat a variety of foods, we can relax about *Am I getting enough X, Y, Z vitamins?*" Haas says. "We can let go of the diet vibe and focus on our food culture as a way to care for ourselves."

Try these fun ways to expand your dietary horizons:

- **Host a potluck.** Offer to make the main dish and invite people to bring their favorite sides and desserts. And don't worry about

making sure the menu is harmonious.

As Buettner says, "The point isn't perfection; it's connection."

- **Split a CSA share.**

For adventurous eaters, a community-supported agriculture share is an excellent way to get a wider variety of produce — while supporting small local farms.

You pay a flat fee at the start of the growing season, and in exchange you receive a weekly share of fresh veggies all season long.

Splitting a share with a neighbor can be a great way to bond over food and find reasons to share recipes, dishes, and dinners.

When you eat with others, especially people beyond your family circle, you're more apt to branch out.

- **Don't fear dietary restrictions.** When one of your loved ones decides to be vegan or needs to go gluten-free, consider it an opportunity to experiment with new foods.

Likewise, if you have food restrictions and someone invites you over to dine, be honest about your needs.

Most hosts are happy to accommodate, and cooking without a familiar ingredient gives them an opportunity to try something new, too.

BREAKING BREAD TOGETHER CAN STRENGTHEN YOUR RELATIONSHIPS.

YOU DON'T NEED an elaborate menu to host a dinner, especially when you know the guests well. And that trust can be part of the pleasure.

"The thing I've learned from my friends is that they don't care what I make," says Wing. "The supper club is about coming together over food, which is such a lovely thing. When you're sitting down, eating something yummy, drinking something delicious — the music's on, there's great conversation — it's just the best."

Buettner says, "Simply sitting down with others, even over a humble meal, can make us feel more connected and less isolated."

Dinner conversation can help kids feel closer to their parents and siblings. Some research has shown that children who regularly eat with their families perform better in school, and they're less likely to experience symptoms of stress or depression. Another study suggests that routine family meals can boost kids' vocabularies.

For adults, sharing a meal with family or friends not only eases the sense of isolation but is an opportunity to practice basic social skills.

"That's what's great about it," says philosophy professor Emily Austin, PhD, author of *Living for Pleasure: An Epicurean Guide to Life*. "We have to practice self-regulation, put down our phones, share stories, and give others a chance to do the same."

The following tips can help make social eating a part of your routine — and

deepen your connections at the table:

- **Make a standing date.**

This could be a weekly family dinner, a monthly potluck with neighbors, or a regular working lunch. "Keep it simple, repeatable, and something you look forward to," says Buettner. "In Blue Zones, people don't overthink meals; they just show up and share what they have. We can do the same."

- **Be flexible about the venue.** Restaurant dining can be fun and celebratory. Home dining can be cozy and intimate — and there's no time limit on the table. Still, any venue will do. "It can be a park bench, the office cafeteria, or a café," says cookbook author Amy Riolo. The togetherness is the point.

- **Prepare some stories and questions.** This might sound corny, especially if you're dining with family or other people you know well, but why not make the effort to learn a little more about them? Austin suggests making a list of questions you'd like to ask your fellow diners and then inviting them to share their thoughts and stories.

- **Divide the labor.** At Wing's supper club, people bring dishes to pass around. Guests also take on jobs, like managing music playlists, prepping and serving the dish they brought, or clearing the table. People like to feel useful, and knowing the work will be shared can make it less daunting to propose a get-together.



COMMUNAL EATING CAN ENCOURAGE YOU TO COOK MORE.

IN ADDITION to creating a convivial space to unwind, enjoy food, and bond with friends, Wing says her supper club has improved her kitchen skills. "It teaches you how to time the food, which turns out to be important as we get older, our kids go every which way, and we have 20 minutes to make dinner."

Sharing a meal prepared in your own kitchen is often far less expensive than dining at a restaurant, and it's a healthy habit to cultivate. A growing body of evidence links more frequent restaurant dining to an increased risk for heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and depression.

"We're simply not going to stem the tide of increasing chronic disease ... until Americans start eating at home," says Buettner, whose latest book, *The Blue Zones Kitchen One Pot Meals*, aims to make it easier to do that.

Even if you aren't inclined to cook for yourself, cooking for the people you care about can inspire you to get into the kitchen and try stuff.

"Cooking for others is an act of generosity," Riolo explains. "It doesn't

even have to be elaborate, but when we do it, we enjoy cooking more and we tend to make more-nourishing food."

These tips can help you increase your confidence in the kitchen:

- **Have a realistic plan.**

If you lack experience, don't try to make a soufflé before you've learned to scramble an egg. Get a few simple recipes under your belt and initially aim to make dinner a couple nights a week.

- **Keep dinner simple.**

Don't wait to become a better cook before you start sharing food (though sharing food may eventually help make you a better cook). If what you know how to make now is lentil soup, then invite friends over for lentil soup. Ask someone else to bring the salad.

- **Take some risks.** If

you're already a comfortable cook, let gatherings be a springboard to expand your repertoire. "My absolute favorite way to host a dinner party is to make a menu of recipes I've never cooked before," says Haas. "Yes, it might be terrible, but we'll have fun."

ROUTINELY SHARING GOOD FOOD WITH GOOD PEOPLE WILL MAKE YOUR LIFE BETTER.

THE LEGENDARY pleasure hound Epicurus regularly hosted dinner parties, Austin notes. The philosopher understood the pleasures of eating with dear friends as foundational to a good life.

This is both philosophically and physiologically true. Eating a meal with people whose company you enjoy may trigger the release of oxytocin and endorphins; these feel-good hormones help lower stress and boost feelings of connection, well-being, and joy, which can make it easier to be present.

In that state, you're more likely to notice that the food is delicious, your friends are brilliant, and the playlist is spot-on — in other words, to savor the whole experience.

"These are times when you experience a pleasure that's out of the ordinary," Austin says. "It's in a catalog of joyful moments in your life."

Eating a meal with people whose company you enjoy may trigger the release of oxytocin and endorphins.

Remembering your best meals in detail — reminiscent savoring — not only brings back all those pleasurable feelings but also helps train your brain to focus on the positives in your life and fully appreciate them. Which is to say, enjoying great meals with others helps you get better at loving your life.

And what could be more satisfying than that? 🍴

SUSAN PAGANI is a Minneapolis-based food writer and editor.



Make the Most of Eating Alone

Dining with others may be the ideal, but sometimes it's not possible — or even what you need. Done right, the solo meal can be one of life's underrated joys. This is especially true when you set your own pace and savor the food, just as you would in the company of good friends.

Plan your experience around your mood. What would feel best? A plate of crunchy cucumbers and hummus with a side of popcorn? A big bowl of comforting pasta? Some spicy Thai curry from the café down the block? Take advantage of the fact that you have only yourself to please.

Enjoy the ritual. When you're eating alone at home, don't skimp. Set the table, put on your favorite playlist, and light a candle — even if your meal isn't fancy, you can make it lovely.

Pay attention. Solo dining is ideal for savoring all the details — the meal, the ambience, the feelings. Use this as an opportunity to really taste your food and notice your experience.

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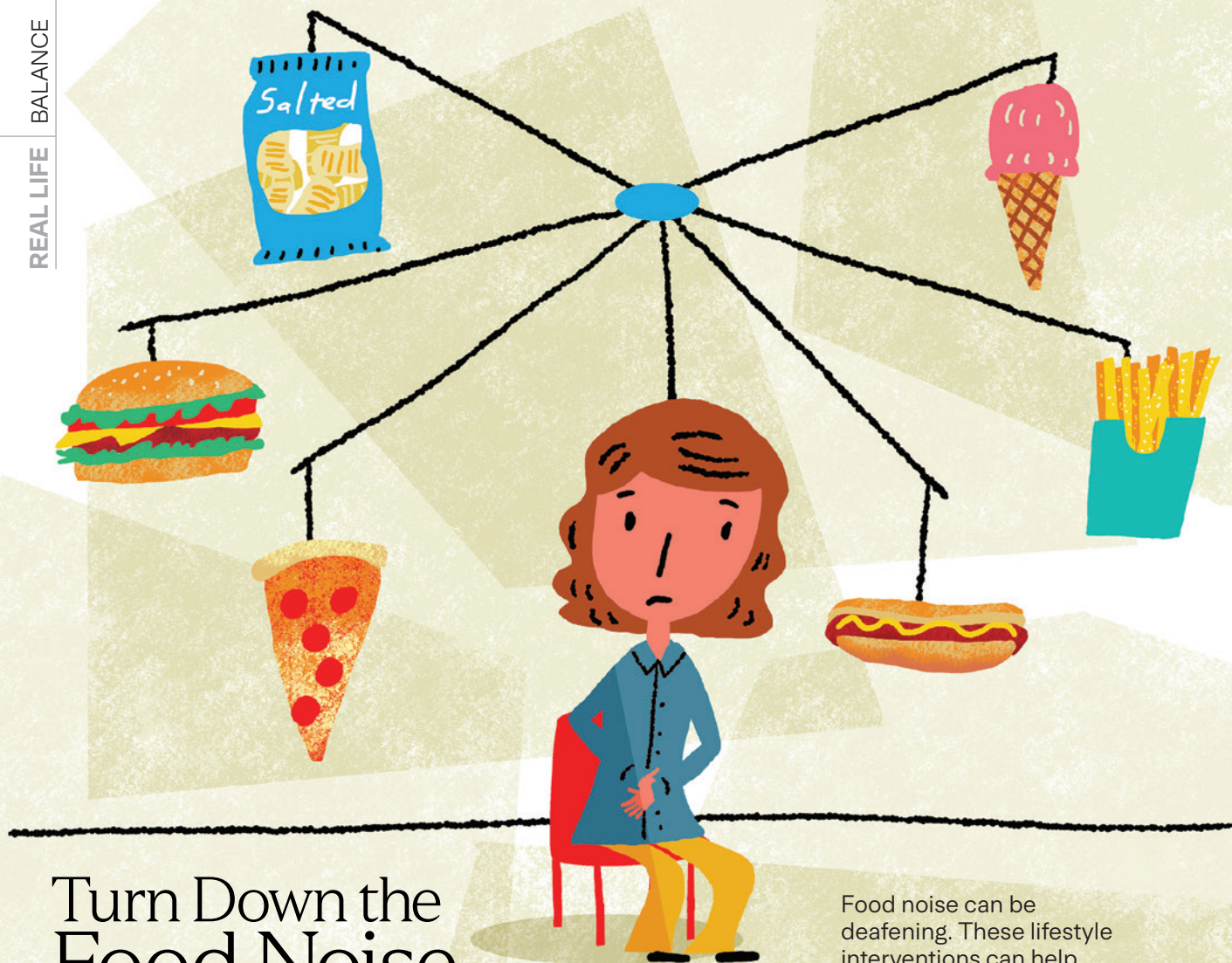
**LIFE TIME
KIDS**



A young girl with dark hair is sitting at a wooden table, holding a large head of fresh green broccoli with both hands. She is looking down at the broccoli with a focused expression. The background is a soft-focus green, suggesting an outdoor setting. The overall image has a light green gradient overlay on the left and bottom edges.

REAL LIFE

CHILDREN NOTICE how the adults in their lives interact with food. On **page 76**, a nutritionist explains how to be sure you're modeling healthy behaviors.



Turn Down the Food Noise

BY ELIZABETH MILLARD

Food noise can be deafening. These lifestyle interventions can help lower the volume.

STACEY STEINER remembers what it was like to hear shouting from the kitchen — even when she was home by herself. Certain items in her cupboards, fridge, and freezer would “call to her” until she got up and ate them, often when she wasn’t hungry.

“This was every single day, every moment,” she recalls. It didn’t matter if she had just eaten or was in the middle of eating. “The only way to deal with it was not having certain foods in the house. But even then, I would still think about them.”

Steiner, now 47, says she’d been experiencing a constant chatter nudging her toward eating — particularly sugary, ultraprocessed, and fried foods — since college.

This is an example of food noise, says Emily Dhurandhar, PhD, researcher and associate editor of the *International Journal of Obesity*. In a recent review published in *Nutrition & Diabetes*, her research team offered the following definition of the phenomenon: “Persistent thoughts about food that are perceived by the individual as being unwanted . . . and may cause harm to the individual, including social, mental, or physical problems.”

Food noise can feel incessant and inescapable. “Many people describe their experience like an itch that they can’t scratch, that drives them to distraction at the cost of other things in

their life,” Dhurandhar says. “Their entire lives have felt as if they are haunted by food.”

According to anecdotal evidence, one of the notable effects of taking GLP-1 medications is that they often quiet food noise, and that can bring profound relief, she says. (Learn more about GLP-1s at ELmag.com/GLP1.)

Yet these drugs aren’t the only way to turn down the volume, according to Eric Pothén, a men’s eating-disorder recovery coach. Developing greater awareness around your relationship with food can offer relief. It can also help you establish a more easeful approach to eating.



HEED HUNGER CUES

A crucial strategy for reducing food noise is to ensure you're eating enough at regular intervals.

Food noise can develop when natural appetite signals are ignored, says nutrition and somatic therapist Heidi Schauster, RD, CEDS-C, SEP, author of the books *Nourish* and *Nurture*. She argues that what some consider food noise is really just intense appetite.

She describes hunger cues as alarm bells that tell us it's time to nourish our bodies.

"Appetite can get noisy when people are restrictive around food," she says. "That's because the body and brain don't like to be underfed. When this happens, we can find ourselves thinking about food a lot."

If you're concerned about food noise, it's worth exploring whether you might actually be experiencing a high number of hunger signals. Consistently eating enough can help reduce hunger-related thoughts.

IDENTIFY POTENTIAL TRIGGERS

Emotional stress, anxiety, boredom, loneliness, and shame can all trigger food thoughts, especially if you've relied on food as a coping tool in the past, says Pothen. Social media, diet talk, and body comparison can also play a huge role.

"One of the most helpful things you can do is start paying attention to when and why the noise shows up," he says. "You don't have to over-analyze it, but gently noticing the patterns — like, *I always feel this way after scrolling*, or *I skip lunch and food noise ramps up by 3 p.m.* — can be really eye-opening."

Pothen suggests keeping a food-noise journal. Ask questions when the noise becomes deafening: *What happened just before this? What thoughts are looping? What emotions are underneath?*

Part of this exploration can involve delving into your food history, suggests Jessica Guerrero, NBC-HWC, wellness coach and Eating Freely practitioner. She says food noise might stem from growing up without enough food. Or from having parents who grew up hungry and then emphasized overeating so their children wouldn't feel deprived.

"Food noise is often linked to the relationship with food you had in your childhood, and whether restriction or lack of food was involved," she says. "Sometimes, simply acknowledging that can inform how you think about food now and why you may have that persistent food chatter that feels relentless."



CULTIVATE MINDFULNESS

Rushing through meals, grabbing a snack whenever you have downtime (whether you're hungry or not), and eating while distracted can all create a disconnect between the brain and the body, which might generate food noise later on, says Pothen.

He suggests practicing mindfulness while eating. Build an appreciation of flavors, textures, and aromas in a new way, he adds. This can enhance your enjoyment of food and eating — which some people coping with food noise might lack.

Mindfulness can also extend to what you're consuming in other ways.

"We live in a culture that creates food noise through constant messaging about what we should or shouldn't eat, body ideals, and the glorification of restriction," he says. "Diet culture makes it nearly impossible to have a quiet, trusting relationship with food."

Pothen also recommends avoiding social media feeds and influencers who use body-shaming language or post food "hacks" or extreme detoxes.

PRACTICE SELF-COMPASSION

Food noise might get louder when you feel stressed or anxious, Pothen notes. So, it's important to build a toolkit of self-care strategies that feel nourishing on multiple levels.

Much like identifying your triggers, it's useful to explore what practices help turn down the volume. These might include journaling, taking a yoga class, going for a walk, texting with a friend, or simply resting.

A daily deep-breathing practice or body scan, in which you sit quietly and simply observe each part of your body in turn, can make a difference too, Guerrero adds.

"The aim for all of these is greater awareness," she says. "You're learning to pay attention to your body in different ways that don't involve food and the potential emotional connections you have there."

Steiner, for example, quieted her food noise through resistance training, which has made her feel stronger and more capable. She says that after decades of calorie counting, restriction, and labeling foods as "good" or "bad," building muscle has helped her relate to her body in new ways. Instead of trying to whittle it down or control it, Steiner now sees her body as a source of strength and even joy.

"Quieting food noise isn't about never thinking about food again," Pothen advises. "It's about giving yourself enough nourishment, compassion, and safety that food doesn't have to take up all the space in your mind. Over time, the noise gets quieter. You start trusting yourself more. And life starts to feel a little more spacious, a little more yours." 🌱

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Protein and Mental Health

This macronutrient is essential for building neurotransmitters.

BY HENRY EMMONS, MD

AS NUTRIENTS GO, protein gets a lot of press. Eating protein is touted for weight loss, glucose control, and building muscle.

Less focus has been granted to all the ways protein influences our mental health. That includes how well we're able to avoid depression, manage stress and anxiety, and maintain focus and energy.

As with all things nutritional, there's some nuance here. While we need adequate protein for mental health, more protein isn't always the right solution for disruptions in mood and energy.

Discover some of the ways protein can help — and sometimes harm — mental health, and how you can personalize your protein intake to meet your brain's unique needs.

PROTEIN AND THE BRAIN

The brain needs different things from each of the macronutrients. Carbs, in the form of glucose, provide fuel. Fats give brain cells their structure. And protein helps the body build neurotransmitters.

The gut breaks protein down into individual amino acids. In the brain, cells use amino acids to create molecules that enable neurons to communicate with one another. These networks allow us to recall childhood experiences, grieve losses, and celebrate victories. In this way, protein helps create our life experience.

Neurotransmitters need to be constantly replenished, and the brain can function well only briefly before needing to refuel. If you're depriving your body of certain amino acids by eating too little protein, that can translate to conditions like anxiety or depression.

HOW TO ADJUST PROTEIN INTAKE

Three neurotransmitters with a sizeable impact on mental health are serotonin, dopamine, and GABA (gamma-aminobutyric acid). Here's how you can tailor your protein intake to bring them into balance.

SEROTONIN: The Mood Soother

Perhaps the best-known neurotransmitter thanks to its powerful effect on mood, serotonin plays a role in digestion, bone health, libido, and pain regulation. It also soothes negative emotions, boosts stress resilience, and helps regulate circadian rhythms.

If you feel anxious or overwhelmed, or struggle to sleep, your serotonin levels may be running low. Serotonin is built from tryptophan, an amino acid you can get from foods like turkey, dairy, and nuts. Still, a focus on these foods in isolation doesn't ensure good absorption of tryptophan, because tryptophan has to compete with other amino acids to cross the blood-brain barrier.

During periods of high anxiety, try consuming slightly less protein — while still ensuring that it's high quality. Replace that protein with healthy fats and complex carbs, ideally from vegetables, beans, and whole grains. Eating carbs helps tryptophan find its way into the production line for your brain to make serotonin, while the fiber in complex carbs helps regulate your blood sugar.

DOPAMINE: The Reward Giver

Dopamine boosts energy, motivation, focus, and the ability to enjoy life. Alternatively, dopamine imbalance is associated with addiction, memory loss, movement disorders, and mental illnesses involving mania and psychosis.

If your mood is down, if you're unusually tired or unfocused, or if you're just lacking enjoyment in life, it may help to focus on increasing your dopamine supply. This one is easy: Just eat more high-quality protein.

Dopamine is built from tyrosine, an amino acid plentiful in high-protein foods like meats, eggs, and fish. Vegetarian sources include cheese, soy, and pea protein.

Any meal or snack in which protein is a primary component can result in a quick tyrosine boost, signaled by a bump in energy and focus. The effect increases if you also eat a moderate amount of healthy complex carbs.

GABA: The Calming Presence

The neurotransmitter GABA is a brake for the brain. It slows excess activity, calms anxiety, and helps reset an overworked nervous system. GABA operates in partnership with glutamate, a chemical that acts as the brain's accelerator. Both are necessary.

If you feel revved up, agitated, or ruminative, your brain may have too much glutamate and insufficient GABA. This is the most challenging of these patterns to adjust through diet. You're trying not to increase any amino acids but to decrease glutamate.

Try avoiding high-glutamate foods, such as aged cheeses, cured meats, and fermented or pickled foods. Then lower your protein consumption a little and consider focusing on vegetarian elements: fresh, brightly colored fruits and veggies; beans and legumes; whole grains; and nuts and seeds. This can help cool an overheated mental engine.

HENRY EMMONS, MD, is an integrative psychiatrist and the author of *The Chemistry of Joy*, *The Chemistry of Calm*, and *Staying Sharp*.



How to Talk to Kids About Food

Kids learn a lot from the way adults interact with food. A nutritionist explains how you can model healthy habits.

BY JON SPAYDE

PARENTS BEAR much of the hefty responsibility for teaching kids about healthy eating. Some of this education comes from direct instruction, but kids also learn by watching how their parents talk about and interact with food. (And they pay attention to other important adults in their lives, so don't assume that being an aunt or uncle means you lack influence.)

We can send positive messages by making healthy food choices, eating mindfully, and openly enjoying the food we eat. We may convey less helpful messages unintentionally. If we model overly restrictive eating patterns, refer to foods as "good" and "bad," or use food as punishment or reward, kids may learn lessons that could contribute to a disordered relationship with food.

It can be a lot of pressure. When we're caught between the desire to do right by our kids, uncertainty about how to process our own baggage, and confusion over what's actually healthy, we're bound to feel stressed. Maya Feller, MS, RD, CDN, founder of Maya Feller Nutrition, has a few suggestions for encouraging and modeling healthy food attitudes.

STRESS SOURCES

You haven't processed your own food baggage. You may have learned less-than-healthy lessons from your own parents and other adults in your life — and these biases may be unconscious and deeply ingrained. If you have yet to work through your own relationship with food, you're more likely to pass those lessons down.

The responsibility can feel like a heavy burden. "Parents have a lot on their shoulders these days," says Feller. When you're faced with struggle at the dinner table, it can be tempting to choose the path of least resistance.

You don't know what to teach kids about food. Feller notes that many parents are overwhelmed by health and nutrition advice, much of it contradictory. "There's an abundance of information," she says. "Some advice appears to be grounded in evidence but is actually anecdotal, and everyone seems to be an expert."

You don't know when to start having conversations about food. Kids start picking up on things at a young age, even before they're ready to have a nuanced conversation about it.

You don't know how to get kids involved. Including kids in grocery shopping and meal prep takes extra time and energy — both of which come at a premium.

You slip into disordered food habits or ways of speaking. It's impossible to set a positive example at all times, and you're unsure of how to correct your mistakes.

SUCCESS STRATEGIES

Look at your own relationship with food. “Each one of us has a learned relationship with food that’s significantly impacted by cultural and social norms,” Feller says. “We need to compassionately examine those ideas and relationships to minimize passing on harmful beliefs to kids.”

For those finding this difficult to do on their own, she recommends getting professional help from a physician, therapist, or dietitian.

Know that your words and actions can have a positive influence. Even if kids seem to live in their own worlds, they pay close attention to what you say and do, Feller emphasizes. Your opinion and example really matter.

Enjoy food together. Feller underlines the importance of family meals as a forum for talking about food in positive ways — that it can be delicious and fun to try. They’re also great opportunities to introduce kids to a wide variety of healthy foods.

Present food in neutral or positive ways. “We often paint things in very black-or-white terms when it comes to eating,” Feller says. “We say things like, ‘Donuts are bad’ and ‘Broccoli is good’ and attach moral judgments to the act of consuming one or the other.”

Assigning moral value to foods can lead kids to feel guilty about their choices, she adds. It can also lead them to rebel against hard-and-fast rules. Keep it simple and factual: “Broccoli is nutritious” rather than “Broccoli is good for you.”

Focus on the big picture — and don’t bargain. Feller encourages parents to focus on supporting a healthy, happy child rather than obsess over the specifics of their diet. “I recommend not shaming or guilt-tripping children into eating a particular food,” she says. “It’s best to skip saying things like ‘You can have ice cream if you eat your veggies.’”

Emphasize variety. Rather than continually urging kids to eat certain things, Feller recommends offering foods with different tastes and textures, and repeat



the offers with enough frequency that kids might build familiarity and interest.

This can be especially helpful with pickier kids. Regularly serving different foods can help kids find something they like, she notes. “I always remind parents that they themselves have strong preferences, and because your kid is their own person, they will have flavors that they like and flavors they don’t like.”

Help kids tune in to their bodies and appetites. “When my son was a toddler, I would say things like ‘Are you satisfied? How does your tummy feel?’ and I would let him answer,” Feller recalls. “Sometimes I would add, ‘Do you feel like you’ve had enough, or would you like to have some more?’ — not making either of those things good or bad. Just asking him to check in with himself.”

Start the conversation early. Feller recommends opening the door to food conversations when kids are toddlers. You can start by introducing kids to new foods and making neutral observations in grocery stores or at farmers’ markets. While browsing the produce aisle, for example, you can point out the vibrancy of berries or the cartoonish shapes of various types of squash.

“You can give them choices of fruits and vegetables so they feel that they are involved. It’s best to use positive and exploratory language with toddlers,” she says.

Get kids involved in meal planning, grocery shopping, and food prep.

Kids can take part in these activities early on, says Feller. “Including kids in

shopping is an opportunity to introduce them to the whole grocery store through ingredients and flavors. This builds curiosity as well as a willingness to explore different foods.”

Kids can even participate in food prep. “Children from 3 to 5 can tear lettuce, snap peas, help shuck corn; then, as they get older, they can use spoons and forks to do things like scoop melons or kiwis,” she says. “When their motor skills are even better, you can begin to teach them how to use a knife safely and properly, how to turn on the stove safely, how to boil water, and [how to] use various kitchen utensils.”

Recognize and normalize slip-ups.

“If a parent does something that’s out of character or inconsistent, that’s an opportunity for them to actually acknowledge it and be open and honest,” Feller says.

For example, perhaps you binge on something in front of your child. Afterward, you can say, “Wow. I ate more of that than I usually do, and I’m feeling uncomfortably full. I will try to remember how this made me feel and slow down next time.”

Part of this involves giving yourself some grace. “One of the psychotherapists I work with suggests that parents don’t need to worry about always being right or doing the right things,” she says. “They only need to be right about 75 percent of the time to be a good influence. There’s 25 percent leeway!” 🍌

JON SPAYDE is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.

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Why Daily-ish Is Good Enough

It's OK to practice your healthy habits *almost* every day.

BY OLIVER BURKEMAN

I ONCE HAD THE CHANCE to ask comedian Jerry Seinfeld about the Seinfeld Technique, a productivity secret that supposedly explains his prolific joke writing and global success. It goes like this: Every day that you manage to spend at least some time on your most important creative work, you mark a big red X on your calendar. The goal is to not break the chain of X's.

It turns out that he had indeed suggested it once, to some guy in a comedy club. Then he largely forgot all about it. "It doesn't even seem to be worth talking about," he told me. "If you're a runner and you want to be a better runner, you say, 'Well, I'll run every day and mark an X on the calendar every day I run.'

"I can't believe this was useful information to anybody," he added. "Really? [Are there] people who think, *I'll just sit around and do absolutely nothing and somehow the work will get done?*"

I was struck by this exchange, because in productivity world the Seinfeld Technique has come to mean "work on what matters most to you, every single day, without fail." But to Seinfeld it just meant putting in the effort, repeatedly, over the long haul.

No wonder it didn't strike him as a particularly astounding system.

In fact, I've come to believe the do-something-every-single-day variation of this advice is actively terrible. An every-single-day rule is so rigid, so intolerant of the vagaries of life, that you'll inevitably fall off the wagon. And once that's happened, you may lose all motivation to continue. At that

point you probably end up doing less, in aggregate, than if you hadn't been quite so exacting in your demands.

I have instead become a proponent of author Dan Harris's excellent alternative: Aim to do it *daily-ish*. He offers this guidance in the context of developing a meditation practice, but it's relevant to almost any important goal in life.

WHY DAILY-ISH?

If, like me, you're prone to making yourself miserable by holding yourself to unachievable standards, *daily-ish* may sound a bit self-indulgent. Yet it's the opposite. This approach involves surrendering the thrilling fantasy of yet-to-be-achieved perfection in favor of making concrete progress in the here and now.

Furthermore, *daily-ish* isn't synonymous with "just do it as often as you can." Deep down, we all know that if we never spend more than a day or two per week on that novel/fitness plan/meditation practice/side business/whatever, it will be impossible to gain the necessary momentum to move forward.

Daily-ish involves applying more pressure to yourself than that. But — crucial distinction coming up! — applying pressure is not the same as forcing it.

Behind so much productivity advice is the bewitching notion that a technique might force accomplishment to occur. Yet there is no such technique. And the yearning for one often seems to arise from buried insecurity or another agenda.

Maybe you don't know how to do the work in question, and you're hoping relentless effort might serve as a substitute for that knowledge. Maybe you don't *really* want to do it but believe you *ought* to want to do it, so you use "productivity" to try to force the missing desire into being.

Or perhaps you think you need a flawless record of achievement to justify your existence on the planet. When the stakes are that high, clearly you can't afford to put a foot wrong.

The *daily-ish* approach is different. Something about it shifts the focus away from one's particular smorgasbord of anxieties and back to the thing itself. To the creation you're seeking to bring into existence — whether that's a work of art, a happy family, a healthier body, or a meditation habit.

Daily-ish reminds us that, in some fundamental way, real productivity isn't about you. In the end, it's about what gets created — not whether the person doing the creating has an impeccable record of red X's.

Does Seinfeld owe his success to a productivity technique? I think not. More likely, he owes it to talent, perhaps also to luck. And then, on top of that, to his showing up and doing the work, on more days than not.

Holding yourself to a more flexible standard, such as *daily-ish*, is more forgiving than the alternative, but it's not solely a matter of being kinder to yourself. It's simply about getting you — and all your hang-ups and neuroses and ulterior agendas — out of accomplishment's way.

Seasonal Allergies on the Rise



Pumped-up pollen counts. Longer and warmer seasons. The climate crisis is affecting allergies. Some common nutrients and supplements can help you cope.

BY JILL PATTON, NBC-HWC

AH, SPRING, glorious spring! Blue skies, warm days, budding trees, blooming flowers . . . and the unwelcome return of seasonal allergies.

If your seasonal sneezing and wheezing, runny nose, and itchy eyes seem worse than ever, you're not alone. In 2021, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than one in four adults and nearly one in five children in the United States reported seasonal allergies, also known as hay fever or allergic rhinitis. That's roughly 81 million people. And studies say that these numbers are on the rise.

“Seasonal allergic reactions occur when something in the environment triggers or hijacks our protective immune response.”

“Seasonal allergic reactions occur when something in the environment triggers or hijacks our protective immune response,” explains New

York City–based functional-medicine practitioner Leo Galland, MD, coauthor of *The Allergy Solution*.

And although the environmental triggers of seasonal allergies depend on several factors, research from around the globe points to the increasing role of climate change as a key driver.

“Rising overall temperatures, CO₂ levels, earlier springs, and summer temperatures that extend longer into the fall can increase pollen quantity

and duration,” explains Kara Fitzgerald, ND, IFMCP, whose Connecticut-based practice has seen an increase in allergy patients of all ages.

Avoiding environmental triggers is difficult, but there are measures you can take to regulate your immune response and decrease symptoms.

REMOVE VULNERABILITIES

Seasonal pollen may not be the sole culprit behind symptoms, experts note. Food allergies and sensitivities can make pollen-allergy symptoms worse, and identifying and removing certain foods, even temporarily, may be helpful.

“Allergic responses can be exacerbated when the body is overloaded with triggers, and diet is an obvious place to start reducing that burden,” says Fitzgerald. “Diet can have a profound effect on allergic responses.”

For instance, cross-reactivity between food and pollen allergens occurs when your immune system mistakenly recognizes structurally similar proteins in both substances as a threat, leading to reactions.

In one study, researchers in northern Europe found that 70 percent of patients who were allergic to the birch pollen abundant in that region were also allergic to apples, celery, carrots, nuts, soybeans, or stone fruits — all of which contain proteins similar to birch pollen.

Comparably, people with a ragweed allergy are often sensitive to melons, bananas, citrus fruits, or tomatoes, Galland says.

“If you have already become allergic to something in the air, there may be foods you are eating that are similar enough to that allergen that eating them will increase your symptoms during allergy season,” he says.

Galland advises his patients to consider avoiding vegetables and fruits that might aggravate symptoms during this time. “But through the rest of the year, you can build up your antioxidant status by eating unprocessed fruits and vegetables,” he says. “In fact, eating those allergens out of season may make you less sensitive over time.”

It’s also worthwhile to explore food sensitivities or intolerances, says Minneapolis-based integrative nutritionist Jesse Haas, CNS, LN.

“If you’re eating foods that trigger an inflammatory response, that can make it more challenging for your immune system to deal with seasonal allergies,” says Haas, who often recommends seasonal-allergy patients try an elimination diet to identify potential food triggers.

BUILD RESILIENCE

Beyond removing food triggers, experts recommend general eating patterns that ensure the body has the nutrients it needs for optimal function and resilience.

Haas advises eating a plant-based, anti-inflammatory, whole-foods diet. “This means our meals are balanced — so we’re getting protein, fat, and fiber at each meal,” she says. “And we’re eating lots of color, lots of fruits and vegetables.”

A whole-foods approach also supports your gastrointestinal tract, which houses 70 to 80 percent of your body’s immune cells. “The gut is designed to combat allergy,” Galland says. “If you treat your gut properly, you can diminish allergy.”

Reach for foods that boost your resilience against seasonal allergies:

- **Antioxidant plants:** Eat plenty of dark leafy greens, broccoli, cauliflower, beets, bell peppers, garlic, and red onions, says Fitzgerald. She adds that many herbs and spices — including cinnamon, rosemary, and black pepper — are also high in antioxidant and anti-inflammatory compounds.

- **Anti-inflammatory fats:** Inflammation-tamping omega-3 fatty acids are found in flaxseed, chia

“Rising overall temperatures, CO₂ levels, earlier springs, and summer temperatures that extend longer into the fall can increase pollen quantity and duration.”

seeds, and wild-caught salmon.

If you can, choose organic, wild, or grassfed animal proteins to reduce pesticide and synthetic-hormone exposure, advises Fitzgerald.

- **Natural antihistamines:** Citrus, apples, broccoli, fennel, cherries, red cabbage, and wild rice contain quercetin, which has antihistamine properties. Fitzgerald also recommends herbs like parsley, thyme, turmeric, ginger, chamomile, and holy basil.

- **Microbiome boosters:** Onions, leeks, lentils, jicama, asparagus, and Jerusalem artichokes contain dietary fibers that stimulate the





growth of beneficial gut bacteria, as do fermented foods, including sauerkraut, yogurt, kefir, miso, and kimchi.

Eating locally grown honey is a popular home remedy for building allergy immunity, but research has been unable to prove its efficacy. The plants most responsible for seasonal allergies are pollinated by wind, not bees. Honey in tea does feel good on a sore throat, though.

MANAGE SYMPTOMS

If you use seasonal allergy medications, targeted nutritional supplements can offer additional support. They may even reduce or eliminate the need for medications.

- **Vitamin D** supports immune function, and many experts believe that most people have insufficient levels required for optimal health. “It’s not that loading up on extra vitamin D is going to reverse the allergy, but low levels can aggravate allergy,” says Galland, who recommends taking 1,000 to 2,000 IUs per day.

Although the environmental triggers of seasonal allergies depend on several factors, **research from around the globe points to the increasing role of climate change as a key driver.**

- **Vitamin E** has been shown to improve nasal symptoms in people with allergic rhinitis. Galland recommends 400 IUs of alpha-tocopherol for seasonal allergies, noting that another form of vitamin E, gamma-tocopherol, can aggravate asthma and decrease lung function.

- **N-acetylcysteine (NAC)** is an antioxidant that thins mucus and can reduce congestion in the lungs, says Haas. She prescribes 600 milligrams one to three times a day for patients new to NAC. For those prone to dry sinuses or a bloody nose, she suggests taking it every other day.

- **Quercetin and luteolin** are commonly used bioflavonoids that have anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, and antiallergic effects. They can be taken seasonally for antihistamine support, says Fitzgerald. Both have low bioavailability, however, so ask your practitioner for a recommended formula and optimal dosage. Consider starting them in advance of pollen season to prevent symptoms.

- **Probiotics** — in particular, strains of *Lactobacillus paracasei* — have been shown to alleviate symptoms of allergic rhinitis, says Galland, adding that any *Lactobacillus*-containing probiotic will likely be beneficial. He notes it may take a couple of months for probiotics to exert their antiallergic effects.

- **Black cumin-seed oil**, also known as *Nigella sativa*, has proved effective against allergic rhinitis in both human and animal studies. Participants in a recent study who took 250 mg with 2.5 mg piperine as a bioavailability enhancer twice a day for 15 days experienced significant reductions in nasal and eye symptoms compared with those who took a placebo. (Piperine is a bioactive compound found in black pepper.)

These interventions are generally safe to try alongside medications, experts say. “Symptom management is an important part of improving quality of life,” says Haas, who notes that anything bringing relief from symptoms gives you space to focus on a broader resilience-building diet.

“However you get there is good,” she says. “And doing so in a way that is reasonable and sustainable and works for you is important.”

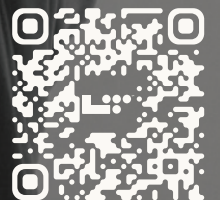
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The Power of Simplification

BY **BAHRAM AKRADI**

IN BUSINESS and in life, the path to success is often about “more” — more commitments, more activities, more possessions.

Professionally, we may assume that in order to grow we need to expand. Yet expansion is often slowed by more processes and strategies, more layers of approval, more meetings on topics that could be covered just as easily in emails.

In our personal lives, “more” has us drowning in obligations and commitments that no longer serve us. Our culture conveys that the busier we are, and the more we have, the more important we are. Doing less feels like giving up or not enough.

The opposite is true, actually. The Pareto Principle (a.k.a. the 80/20 rule) holds that about 20 percent of our actions produce 80 percent of our outcomes. Yet we keep putting effort behind the redundant steps and low-impact offerings that don’t amount to much (the *other* 80 percent) simply because we’re in the habit. Shifting effort away from those things feels risky because . . . what if we need them later?

So we keep doing what we’ve always done, following an often-subconscious drift toward complexity and inefficiency.

The good news, though, is there’s a quiet revolution happening, and it’s all about subtraction and simplification.

When we slow down and review our initiatives, eliminating what’s unnecessary, we create space. Not lost or empty space, but blue-sky-of-possibility space where there’s room to explore new opportunities.

Simplification isn’t a retreat from action; it’s a way to clear the path forward. This allows us to see where we’re going and arrive to new possibilities with renewed energy and focus.

When we eliminate noise and distraction, ideas and innovation have room to breathe. Our time, talent, and resources — freed from “extra” and complexity — are available to reinvest into what matters.

Metabolism is a good metaphor. When we chronically consume more than we need for energy, our bodies store the excess. Over time, this can lead to metabolic dysregulation, which can damage systems throughout the body.

Yet when we give our bodies enough of what they need and less of what they don’t, our metabolism improves and all our systems function better. We have better energy, clearer thinking, stronger performance.

So how do we simplify?

We can start by asking ourselves some questions in these key areas:

Our commitments: What is essential? What supports our goals? What are we maintaining out of habit rather than out of genuine connection? From there, it’s having the courage to say yes to only those activities that are aligned with our long-term goals. Every commitment consumes energy, and when we’re spread too thin, even meaningful activities distract and lose their impact.

Our priorities: What really matters? What is important to us? Focus on whittling this list down to a few meaningful personal and professional objectives. As writer and podcaster Merlin Mann says, “Priorities are like arms; if you think you have more than a couple, you’re either lying or crazy.” When we try to prioritize everything, we prioritize nothing.

Our routines: What have we been doing simply because we’ve always done it? What can be eliminated,



delegated, or automated? What processes have layers of approval and documentation that exist for reasons no one can remember? Question everything, then get into a rhythm with daily habits like sleep, exercise, and even what you wear. This can reduce decision load.

Professionally, simplifying our focus allows us to regain speed and stay nimble in uncertain, competitive environments. Personally, these questions reconnect our actions with our values, ultimately contributing to our purpose.

When we commit to doing this practice consistently — much like we commit to regular exercise or meditation — decisions may become easier and more intuitive. We may be calmer and less reactive; we may sleep better as we reclaim our energy for what deserves it.

We might experience a different sense of time, not because we have more of it but because we’re spending the time we have in more meaningful ways.

So, start your own quiet revolution, remembering that less is indeed more. Allow the power of simplification to shift your commitments, priorities, and routines — as well as your perspective on what matters. In doing so, you’ll ultimately create space for more of the health and happiness you’re here to experience.

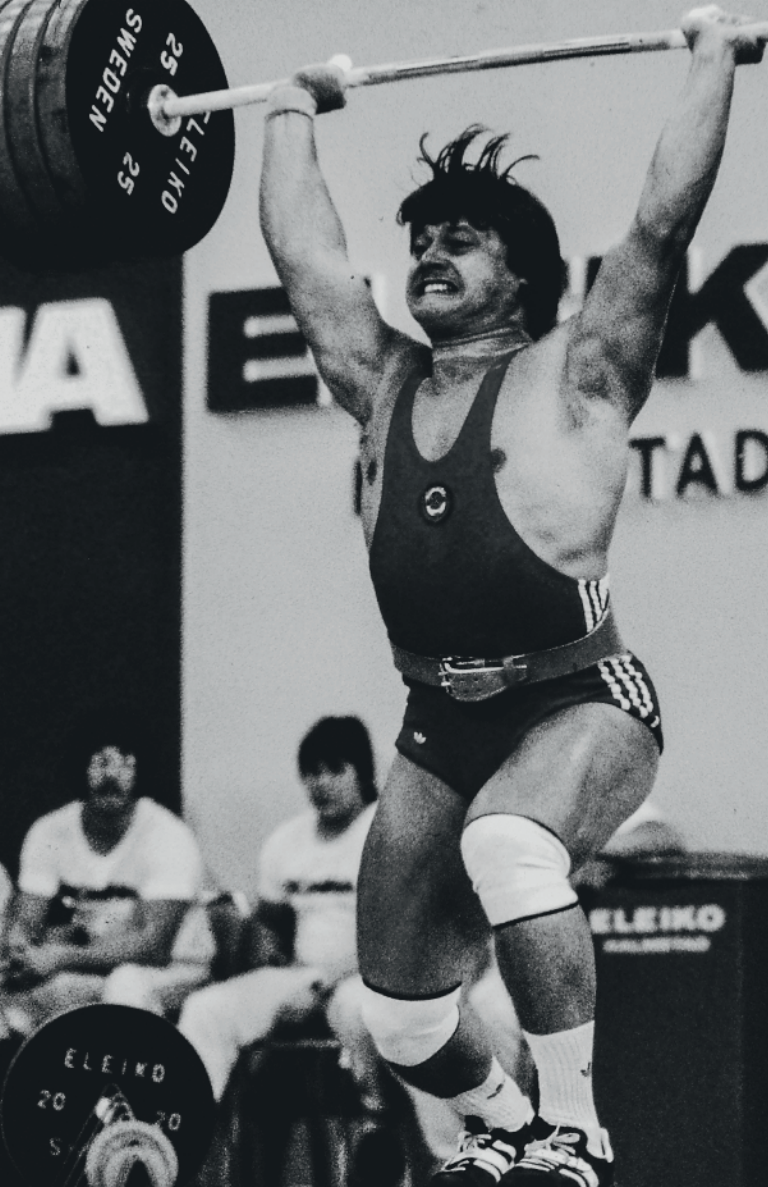


BAHRAM AKRADI is the founder, chairman, and CEO of Life Time — Healthy Way of Life.

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