

Tips on Leading a Longer and Healthier Life

Why do some people lead longer and healthier lives than others? Part of it has to do with genes. Research has shown that for most of us, longevity is determined by our family history (about 30 percent) and our lifestyle choices (about 70 percent). How long we will live—and how healthy we will be—is affected by the everyday choices we make about things like diet, exercise, sleep, and whether we smoke or abuse alcohol or drugs.

Whatever choices you've made until now, it's not too late to start leading a healthier life. Some of the most beneficial things you can do in midlife are listed below. But your needs may differ from those of other people your age, So talk with your doctor before you make major lifestyle changes—especially if you're over 40 or have a health condition. Your physician can help you decide which steps would be safe and beneficial for you.

Eat healthy foods

Eat a variety of healthy foods every day. Whenever possible, choose fresh fruits and vegetables and whole-grain breads, pastas, and cereals. Cut back on trans fat, saturated fat, and added sugar and salt. For guidelines and recommendations on eating a healthy diet for your age and activity level, look at [Canada's Food Guide](#) at the [Health Canada website](#), or visit [Half Your Plate](#), a website devoted to healthy eating. It's never too late to improve your diet.

If you need to lose weight, avoid fads and follow a sensible diet. Being overweight increases your risk of many illnesses—heart disease, type 2 diabetes, arthritis, and some cancers. If you need to lose weight, talk with your doctor about safe ways to achieve a healthy weight.

Get regular exercise

Most days of the week, get at least 30 to 60 minutes of exercise that makes you breathe harder. Find a way to walk, run, swim, garden, hike, bicycle, or participate in another type of aerobic activity at least four times a week for at least 30 minutes. Check with your health care provider before beginning any exercise program, and ask what exercise goals would be right for you.

Do strength training. We lose muscle as we age. We lose almost 30 percent of our total number of muscle cells between the ages of 20 and 70, according to the Tufts University Health and Nutrition Letter. Muscle burns calories much faster than body fat does. In middle age, that means you either need to consume fewer calories or strengthen and rebuild your muscles.

Strength training is the answer: It builds strong muscles, boosts metabolism, improves your balance and posture, and helps to prevent bone loss. Just two evenly distributed sessions a week of strength training can build and strengthen muscles. You can achieve your strength-training goal in sessions of 30 to 40 minutes by performing eight to 10 exercises (one exercise for each major muscle group). It's easy to begin a strength-training program at home. All you need are dumbbells (hand weights), ankle weights, an exercise mat, and a book or an app or DVD about strength

training. If you belong to a gym, a trainer can help. Be careful not to strain your muscles, and check with your doctor before beginning strength training.

Remember that regular exercise promotes both physical and mental health. Vigorous activity increases the flow of oxygen and nutrients to the brain, which helps you think better. Exercise also improves your ability to tolerate stress and may help you feel better if you're depressed.

Set an exercise goal. It's easy to find an excuse to skip your exercise time. The solution? Set a fitness goal that you'll enjoy meeting. Aim to run in a 5K race or take an exercise class at a YMCA or gym with your best friend. Create a playlist for your phone of upbeat music that makes you want to walk or run faster.

If you aren't already using the health app that came with your phone, start now. Record the number of steps you take each day and aim for 10,000 steps. Or invest in a wearable activity-tracker, like [Fitbit](#) to monitor your progress. If you'd like to set a longer-term goal, download an app like [Couch to 5K](#). And hold yourself accountable for the goal by checking in with a friend or with an app like [SparkPeople](#).

Quit smoking

If you are a smoker, do all you can to quit. Research has shown that it takes an average of seven tries to stop. Don't give up if you've failed to quit in the past. Women live an average of 14.5 years longer, and men 13.2 years longer, if they don't smoke.

Quitting also reduces the risk of heart disease, stroke, and some cancers. And you can benefit from quitting smoking at any age. Studies have shown that a year after quitting smoking, you will have cut your risk of heart disease in half. No form of tobacco is safe. People who dip or chew tobacco typically get as much nicotine as those who smoke. Chewing tobacco also increases your risk of head and neck cancers. Unfortunately, e-cigarettes also carry a risk of heart disease, so avoid all tobacco products.

If you need support, coaching, and resources, call the Canadian Cancer Society's Smokers Helpline QuitLine (toll-free at 1 877 513-5333 or [online](#)), or download [Health Canada's "On the Road to Quitting: Guides to Becoming a Non-Smoker"](#).

Avoid exposure to second-hand smoke. If you live in a household with a smoker, you are at risk for some of the same health problems as if you smoked yourself. Encourage family members to quit, or at least to smoke outside. And never allow smoking in a vehicle.

Avoid abusing alcohol or drugs

Look at your drinking habits. Light to moderate drinking causes few, if any, problems for most adults. According to the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse's report on [Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines](#), safe drinking means no more than two drinks a day, 10 per week for women, and three drinks a day, 15 per week for men, with an extra drink allowed on special occasions.

One drink equals one 341 ml (12-ounce) wine cooler or bottle of beer at 5 percent alcohol content, one 142 ml (5-ounce glass of wine) at 12 percent, or 43 ml (1.5 ounces) of distilled spirits at 40 percent. More alcohol than that can lead to problems. To access these guidelines as well as other helpful information about substance abuse, visit the [Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse's website](#).

Avoid abusing alcohol or drugs, including prescription medications. Both alcohol and drug abuse can cause or contribute to many health problems. Drinking too much increases your risk of stroke, cancer, liver disease, dementia, and sexual problems. If you take prescription medications, ask your doctor or pharmacist if it is even safe for you to drink alcohol. Some prescription medications interact with alcohol, increasing sedation or nausea. Keep in mind that herbal or over-the-counter medication may compound the effects of alcohol, so tell your doctor if you take these.

And never drink and drive. According to MADD Canada (Mothers Against Drunk Driving), crashes involving alcohol and/or drugs are the leading criminal cause of death in Canada. On average, four people are killed each day in crashes involving alcohol and/or drugs.

Get help if you have a drug or alcohol problem. Treatment for addiction is available on an inpatient or outpatient basis. The options include counselling, 12-step programs, and rehabilitation clinics. Ask your doctor to recommend one, or contact your assistance program.

Get enough sleep

Get enough sleep for good health. Too little sleep impairs your concentration, reaction time, and ability to absorb new information. Adults need an average of about eight hours of sleep a night. But you may need more or less, depending on your age, medical history, and exercise routines.

Talk with your health care provider if you often wake up feeling tired or become exhausted during the day. Difficulty sleeping can be a sign of underlying physical or mental health concerns. Sleeping too much or having difficulty falling asleep may be a sign of depression. If you are unsure, ask your physician.

Keep a regular schedule and avoid long naps. Have regular times for going to bed and getting up, even when you don't have to go somewhere. Most people function best when they get about the same amount of sleep each night. And getting enough rest allows your body and mind to recuperate from the stress of the previous day and gives you the energy to start a new day.

Strengthen your ties to family and friends

Get together often with the people you care about. People really do need other people. Research shows that strong relationships promote good health and become especially important in later life. Keep strengthening your ties to family and old friends, while also reaching out to new acquaintances all through life. Share meals, social activities, and celebrations.

If you don't see some people as often as you'd like, set up a way to stay in touch—a weekly check-in call or email message to a relative, monthly lunches or club meetings with friends, reunions with classmates or members of your military unit. Social media sites, like Facebook and LinkedIn, can also help. Try writing a letter to friends to brighten their day—it will brighten yours when they write back.

Let people know when you could use extra support. Speak up when you have a problem and could use support or a sympathetic ear. Be specific about what you need. Look for ways to help other people, too. Helping others can be especially beneficial as you age. A University of Michigan study found that older people who helped others had greater feelings of emotional wellbeing than those who didn't. An easy way to get started is to do volunteer work through a group you belong to, such as a house of worship or a veterans' organization.

Have the health screenings recommended for you

Find a doctor you trust. Have checkups on the schedule your doctor recommends for you. In midlife, you need different kinds of care, screening tests, and immunizations than when you were younger. To make sure you don't neglect something important, find and keep in touch with a doctor you trust.

Get the recommended preventive tests. Depending on your age, gender, and other factors, you may need mammograms, prostate cancer screenings, Pap smears, colonoscopies, eye exams, preventive dental care, and other important exams.

Get help if you feel depressed

Depression is highly treatable at any age. Seek support from a professional if you are experiencing symptoms of depression. These include persistent sad or "empty" moods; feelings of hopelessness or helplessness; difficulty concentrating; eating too much or too little; sleeping difficulties; loss of interest in once-enjoyable activities, including sex; persistent physical ailments that do not respond to treatment; and thoughts of death or suicide. Your doctor or the EAP can refer you to someone who can help.

Take time for yourself. Many people in middle age feel pulled in multiple directions. Make sure that your schedule allows for time to relax. Read a good novel, get a massage, or go for a walk outdoors.

Find ways to manage stress

Manage symptoms of stress. Stress is a normal part of life, and a little of it may motivate you to do your best. But too much stress can raise your risk of depression and other health conditions. The signs of stress include irritability; withdrawing from family and friends; frequent crying; trouble sleeping; drinking, eating, or smoking more than usual; and lower productivity at work. If you're showing any of these signs, make changes in your life.

Make time for relaxation every day. Become more mindful. Try deep breathing or using simple visualization techniques, such as picturing yourself in a calm place and saying, "I am at peace." Or learn to meditate through a class, a DVD, or the book *The Relaxation Response* by cardiologist Herbert Benson.

Have fun. A study presented to the American College of Cardiology found that healthy people who watched a 15-minute segment of a funny movie had better circulation (blood flow to the heart) afterward. Why is laughter good for you? One theory is that it stimulates the release of endorphins (also known as the "feel-good" hormones), the natural substances released by the brain that improve mood.

Keep your brain active—with crossword puzzles, Scrabble, Sudoku, or other puzzles or games you find online or in a newspaper.

Maintain good safety habits

Keep your home safe. Look around regularly and ask yourself if there are things you should do to make your home safer, such as installing handrails on steps, using bathmats, or putting night-lights in hallways to reduce the risk of falls.

Always wear a seat belt. Every year, roughly 30% of drivers and passengers killed in traffic accidents involving passenger vehicles were not buckled in. Buckle up every time you are in the car, even for a short trip.

Don't text while driving. Calls and texts can wait until you aren't behind the wheel. You're 23 times more likely to be involved in a crash if you're texting.

If you ride a bike or motorcycle, wear a helmet. And take the proper safety precautions for other sports, too.

Have a sense of purpose in life

Stay in touch with your values and sense of purpose in life. A strong sense of purpose helps to give your life meaning and direction. Yours may come from varied sources—your work, your family and friends, your faith, or your volunteer work—or anything that you find rewarding and enables you to make a contribution. Look for other ways to recapture a sense of direction and enthusiasm as your life changes—as retirement approaches, for example.

Keep learning all through life. It's never too late to go back to school or just take a class. If you aren't sure what you'd enjoy, visit the websites of adult education centres, local school division continuing education departments, or colleges and universities in your area.



