

# Understanding and Practicing Preventive Health Care

Preventive medicine is based on a simple idea: It's wise to seek treatment when you're ill, but you're better off if you don't get sick in the first place. By following preventive care guidelines—heeding expert recommendations on diet and exercise, getting regular screenings for common diseases, and so on—you can enjoy a healthier and longer life. The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, an independent panel of experts overseen by the federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, issues guidelines on preventive care based on scientific evidence. The following information is based on recommendations of the task force and other preventive medicine experts.

## The Basics of Healthy Living

Some aspects of health are beyond your control because of genetics and environmental factors, but your diet and lifestyle have a big effect on your health. Experts agree that the following can help ward off disease:

**Eat a healthy diet.** Having a healthy diet is one of the most important things you can do for your health. Conditions such as heart disease, obesity, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, stroke, and gallbladder disease can be prevented or controlled by eating right. A healthy diet also provides essential vitamins and minerals. Eat a balanced diet overall. While you need foods from all food groups, the proportion of each food group matters. Your diet should include lots of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy products. It should be low in saturated fat, trans-fat, cholesterol, salt, and added sugars, with most fats coming from sources such as fish, nuts, and vegetable oils. Go to the USDA's interactive site [ChooseMyPlate.gov](http://ChooseMyPlate.gov) to learn more about eating a healthy diet.

**Stay physically active.** Regular exercise is key in achieving good health. Physical activity helps prevent heart disease, obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, arthritis, and osteoporosis. It reduces the chances of mental health problems such as anxiety and depression and improves psychological wellbeing. It also enables you to stay at a healthy weight, reduce stress, sleep better, and feel better overall. Strive to get 20 to 30 minutes of aerobic exercise on most days of the week, through activities such as brisk walking, jogging, swimming, bicycle riding, tennis, or any other physical activity you enjoy. Ideally, you should also incorporate strength training (to build muscle) twice a week and do stretching exercises to improve flexibility.

**Maintain a healthy weight.** Being overweight increases your risk for heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, osteoarthritis, and breathing problems. Your doctor can tell you the ideal weight range for your height. To stay at a healthy weight, you need to balance the number of calories you eat with the number you burn off by your activities. The key to maintaining a healthy weight is to engage in physical activity and keep an eye on the type of food you eat and your portion sizes, especially if you eat out a lot.

**Get enough sleep.** Lack of sleep increases the risk of diabetes, heart disease, and obesity. It also raises your chances of getting into a car accident. Most people need at least 7 to 9 hours of sleep to function at their best. Keep your bedroom quiet, dark, and comfortable, and set aside enough time to get the rest you need. Keep your television and computer out of your bedroom to avoid “gearing up” before you fall asleep. Turn off your cell phone at bedtime or use the “do not disturb” mode if you use your phone as an alarm clock.

**Don't smoke or use other tobacco products.** Smoking causes illnesses such as cancer, heart and lung disease, stroke, and problems with pregnancy. Chewing tobacco increases the risk of head and neck cancers. Quitting lowers your chances of getting sick. In addition, secondhand smoke is a health hazard to those around you, even if you smoke outside.

**Don't drink alcohol excessively.** Alcohol abuse can cause liver disease, heart problems, and several kinds of cancer, as well as lead to accidents, depression, and problems with friends, family, and work. Men who drink alcohol should have no more than two drinks a day. One drink a day is safe for women, unless you are pregnant or planning to become pregnant, in which case you should avoid alcohol. A standard drink is one 12-ounce bottle of beer or wine cooler, one 5-ounce glass of wine, or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits.

**Don't use illegal drugs.** Using illegal drugs, such as cocaine and heroin, or abusing prescription drugs such as pain killers and opioids can lead to mental and physical health problems, which could include hepatitis B, hepatitis C, and HIV. Seek treatment immediately if you have a drug problem.

**Follow safety procedures.** Basic safety rules can prevent many serious injuries. At home, use smoke detectors, lock up guns and ammunition, keep hallways and stairwells well lit, and remove or repair things someone could trip on. Outside the home, use seat belts on the road; never drive after drinking alcohol or using marijuana; wear a safety helmet while riding a motorcycle, ATV, skateboard, or bicycle; and follow workplace safety rules.

**Take proper doses of medications.** Taking too little of a medication can prolong illness, while taking too much unnecessarily exposes you to side effects. Follow the instructions of your pharmacist or physician. Never use a medication that has been prescribed for someone else, even if you have exactly the same symptoms. If you are taking an antibiotic, be sure to take all of the doses unless instructed otherwise by your health care provider.

**Limit sun exposure.** Overexposure to ultraviolet radiation can cause sunburn and skin cancers. You can lower your risk for skin cancer by limiting the time you spend in the sun, especially between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.; wearing sunglasses and clothing that protects against the sun, including a wide-brimmed hat; and using sunscreen. Sunglasses also protect against macular degeneration, age-related vision loss. Be sure to use a sunscreen that provides protection against both UVA and UVB rays and reapply frequently.

**Choose a doctor before you get sick.** This way you can find someone you're comfortable with, develop a relationship, and get care that takes into account your lifelong health history. Research shows adults who regularly visit the same doctor get better preventive medicine. Having a primary care health care provider will lessen your costs of health care by keeping you out of expensive urgent-care centers or emergency rooms. Be sure to schedule regular checkups with your provider and stay up to date on any recommended screening tests and immunizations.

**Dental care.** Visit your dentist once or twice a year for checkups and follow good oral hygiene. Brush after meals, use toothpaste with fluoride, floss, eat sweets in moderation, and avoid smoking or chewing tobacco.

**Vision and hearing care.** Have at least one screening with an eye doctor between the ages of 20 and 29 and two screenings between the ages of 30 and 39. Between 40 and 65, schedule an exam every two to four years. People at higher risk for eye diseases—African Americans over age 40, people with diabetes, and those with a family history of eye problems—should go more often. At age 65, have your hearing checked. Also starting at age 65, get tested every one to two years for cataracts, glaucoma, macular degeneration, and other eye conditions. More frequent screening may be needed if you have diabetes or high blood pressure.

Eating a healthy diet, getting regular exercise and enough sleep, avoiding smoking and excessive drinking, and following the care guidelines in this article are vital keys to staying healthy. Always check with your doctor if you have health concerns.

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