

25 Ways to Improve your Health and Fitness

1. Limit sugary drinks

Sugary drinks like soft drinks, fruit juices, and sweetened teas are the primary source of added sugar!

Unfortunately, findings from several studies point to sugar-sweetened beverages increasing risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes, even in people who are not carrying excess body fat.

Sugar-sweetened beverages are also uniquely harmful for children, as they can contribute not only to obesity in children but also to conditions that usually do not develop until adulthood, like type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and non-alcoholic fatty liver disease

Healthier alternatives include water, unsweetened teas, mineral water with squeeze of lemon

2. Eat nuts and seeds

Some people avoid nuts because they are high in fat. However, nuts and seeds are incredibly nutritious. They are packed with protein, fibre, and a variety of vitamins and minerals

Additionally, one large observational study noted that a low intake of nuts and seeds was potentially linked to an increased risk of death from heart disease, stroke, or type 2 diabetes

3. Avoid ultra-processed foods

Ultra-processed foods are foods containing ingredients that are significantly modified from their original form. They often contain additives like added sugar, highly refined oil, salt, preservatives, artificial sweeteners, colours, and flavours as well.

Examples include cakes, fast food, frozen meals, canned foods, chips, desserts.

Ultra-processed foods are highly palatable, meaning they are easily overeaten, and activate reward-related regions in the brain, which can lead to excess calorie consumption and weight gain. Studies show that diets high in ultra-processed food can contribute to obesity, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and other chronic conditions

In addition to low quality ingredients like inflammatory fats, added sugar, and refined grains, they're usually low in fibre, protein, and micronutrients. Thus, they provide mostly empty calories.

4. Don't fear coffee

Despite some controversy over it, coffee is loaded with health benefits.

It's rich in antioxidants, and some studies have linked coffee intake to longevity and a reduced risk of type 2 diabetes, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases, and numerous other illnesses.

However, it's best to consume coffee and any caffeine-based items in moderation. Excessive caffeine intake may lead to health issues like insomnia and heart palpitations. To enjoy coffee in a safe and healthy way, keep your intake to less than 3 cups per day and avoid high-calorie, high-sugar additives like sweetened creamer, or sugar.

5. Eat fatty fish

Fish is a great source of high-quality protein and healthy fat. This is particularly true of fatty fish, such as salmon, which is loaded with anti-inflammatory omega-3 fatty acids and various other nutrients

Studies show that people who eat fish regularly have a lower risk for several conditions, including heart disease, dementia, and inflammatory bowel disease

6. Get enough sleep

The importance of getting enough quality sleep cannot be overstated.

Poor sleep can drive insulin resistance, can disrupt your appetite hormones, and reduce your physical and mental performance

What's more, poor sleep is one of the strongest individual risk factors for weight gain and obesity. People who do not get enough sleep tend to make food choices that are higher in fat, sugar, and calories, potentially leading to unwanted weight gain

7. Feed your gut bacteria

The bacteria in your gut, collectively called the gut microbiota, are incredibly important for overall health.

A disruption in gut bacteria is linked to some chronic diseases, including obesity and a myriad of digestive problems

Good ways to improve gut health include eating probiotic foods like yogurt and sauerkraut, taking probiotic supplements — when indicated — and eating plenty of fibre. Notably, fibre serves as a prebiotic, or a food source for your gut bacteria

8. Stay hydrated

Hydration is an important and often overlooked marker of health. Staying hydrated helps ensure that your body is functioning optimally and that your blood volume is sufficient

Drinking water is the best way to stay hydrated, as it's free of calories, sugar, and additives.

Although there's no set amount that everyone needs per day, aim to drink enough so that your thirst is adequately quenched

9. Don't eat heavily charred meats

Meat can be a nutritious and healthy part of your diet. It's very high in protein and a rich source of nutrients

However, problems occur when meat is charred or burnt. This charring can lead to the formation of harmful compounds that may increase your risk for certain cancers

When you cook meat, try not to char or burn it. Additionally limit your consumption of red and processed meats like lunch meats and bacon as these are linked to overall cancer risk and colon cancer risk

10. Avoid bright lights before sleep

When you're exposed to bright lights — which contain blue light wavelengths — in the evening, it may disrupt your production of the sleep hormone melatonin

Some ways to help reduce your blue light exposure is to wear blue light blocking glasses — especially if you use a computer or other digital screen for long periods of time — and to avoid digital screens for 30 minutes to an hour before going to bed

This can help your body better produce melatonin naturally as evening progresses, helping you sleep better.

11. Take vitamin D if you're deficient

Most people do not get enough vitamin D. While these widespread vitamin D inadequacies are not imminently harmful, maintaining adequate vitamin D levels can help to optimize your health by improving bone strength, reducing symptoms of depression, strengthening your immune system, and lowering your risk for cancer

If you do not spend a lot of time in the sunlight, your vitamin D levels may be low.

If you have access, it's a great idea to have your levels tested, so that you can correct your levels through vitamin D supplementation if necessary.

12. Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables

Vegetables and fruits are loaded with prebiotic fibre, vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants, many of which have potent health effects.

Studies show that people who eat more vegetables and fruits tend to live longer and have a lower risk for heart disease, obesity, and other illnesses

13. Eat adequate protein

Eating enough protein is vital for optimal health, as it provides the raw materials your body needs to create new cells and tissues

What's more, this nutrient is particularly important for maintenance of a moderate body weight.

High protein intake may boost your metabolic rate — or calorie burn — while making you feel full. It may also reduce cravings and your desire to snack late at night

14. Get moving

Doing aerobic exercise, or cardio, is one of the best things you can do for your mental and physical health.

It's particularly effective at reducing belly fat, the harmful type of fat that builds up around your organs. Reduced belly fat may lead to major improvements in your metabolic health

According to Physical Activity Guidelines, we should strive for at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity each week

15. Don't smoke or use drugs, and only drink in moderation

Smoking, harmful use of drugs, and alcohol abuse can all seriously negatively affect your health.

If you do any of these actions, consider cutting back or quitting to help reduce your risk for chronic diseases.

There are resources available online — and likely in your local community, as well — to help with this. Talk with your doctor to learn more about accessing resources.

16. Use extra virgin olive oil

Extra virgin olive oil is one of the healthiest vegetable oils you can use. It's loaded with heart-healthy monounsaturated fats and powerful antioxidants that have anti-inflammatory properties

Extra virgin olive oil may benefit heart health, as people who consume it have a lower risk for dying from heart attacks and strokes according to some evidence

17. Limit refined carbs

Not all carbs are created equal.

Refined carbs have been highly processed to remove their fibre. They're relatively low in nutrients and may harm your health when eaten in excess. Most ultra-processed foods are made from refined carbs, like processed corn, white flour, and added sugars.

Studies show that a diet high in refined carbs may be linked to overeating, weight gain, and chronic diseases like type 2 diabetes and heart disease

18. Lift heavy weights

Strength and resistance training are some of the best forms of exercises you can do to strengthen your muscles and improve your body composition.

It may also lead to important improvements in metabolic health, including improved insulin sensitivity — meaning your blood sugar levels are easier to manage — and increases in your metabolic rate, or how many calories you burn at rest

If you do not have weights, you can use your own bodyweight or resistance bands to create resistance and get a comparable workout with many of the same benefits.

Physical Activity Guidelines recommend resistance training at least twice per week

19. Avoid artificial trans fats

Artificial trans fats are harmful, man-made fats that are strongly linked to inflammation and heart disease

Avoiding them should be much easier now that they have been completely banned in many countries. Note that you may still encounter some foods that contain small amounts of naturally occurring trans fats, but these are not associated with the same negative effects as artificial trans fats

20. Use plenty of herbs and spices

There is a variety of herbs and spices at our disposal these days, more so than ever. They not only provide flavour but also may offer several health benefits as well

For example, ginger and turmeric both have potent anti-inflammatory and antioxidant effects, which may help improve your overall health

Due to their powerful potential health benefits, you should aim to include a wide variety of herbs and spices in your diet.

21. Occasionally track your food intake

The only way to know exactly how many calories you eat is to weigh your food and use a nutrition tracker, as estimating your portion sizes and calorie intake is not unreliable

Tracking can also provide insights into your protein, fibre, and micronutrient intake.

Though some studies have found a link between tracking calories and disordered eating tendencies, there is some evidence that suggests that people who track their food intake tend to be more successful at losing weight and maintaining their weight loss

22. Get rid of excess belly fat

Excessive abdominal fat, or visceral fat, is a uniquely harmful type of fat distribution that is linked to an increased risk of cardiometabolic diseases like type 2 diabetes and heart disease

For this reason, your waist size and waist-to-hip ratio may be much stronger markers of health than your weight.

Cutting refined carbs, eating more protein and fibre, and reducing stress (which can reduce cortisol, a stress hormone that triggers abdominal fat deposition) are all strategies that may help you get rid of belly fat

23. Avoid restrictive diets

Diets are generally ineffective and rarely work well long term. In fact, past dieting is one of the strongest predictors for future weight gain

This is because overly restrictive diets actually lower your metabolic rate, or the number of calories you burn, making it more difficult to lose weight. At the same time, they also cause alterations to your hunger and satiety hormones, which make you hungrier and may cause strong food cravings for foods high in fat, calories, and sugar

All of this is a recipe for rebound weight gain, or “yo-yo” dieting.

Instead of dieting, try adopting a healthier lifestyle. Focus on nourishing your body instead of depriving it.

Weight loss should follow as you transition to whole, nutritious foods — which are naturally more filling while containing fewer calories than processed foods

24. Eat whole eggs

Despite the constant back and forth about eggs and health, it's a myth that eggs are bad for you because of their cholesterol content. Studies show that they have minimal effect on blood cholesterol in the majority of people, and they're a great source of protein and nutrients

Additionally, a review involving 263,938 people found that egg intake had no association with heart disease risk

25. Meditate

Stress has a negative effect on your health. It can affect your blood sugar levels, food choices, susceptibility to sickness, weight, fat distribution, and more. For this reason, it's important to find healthy ways to manage your stress.

Meditation is one such way, and it has some scientific evidence to support its use for stress management and improving health

In one study involving 48 people with high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, or both, researchers found that meditation helped lower LDL (bad) cholesterol and inflammation compared with the control group. Additionally, the participants in the meditation group reported improved mental and physical wellness

Final Words

A few simple steps can go a long way toward improving your eating patterns and wellness.

Still, if you're trying to live a healthier life, do not just focus on the foods you eat. Exercise, sleep, and social relationships are also important.

With the evidence-based tips above, it's easy to introduce small changes that can have a big impact on your overall health.