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The first time I used a stability ball, it didn't go well. I slid off the ball several times, the ball rolled away from me (in protest probably), and the muscles I was working were practically squeaking from rustiness.

Since most people are more coordinated than me, your first experience probably will be—or was—better. But even if it isn't, stability balls are worth a second and a third try. They

provide a terrific workout because you're using your muscles to keep yourself stable as well as to work a specific muscle group.

On page 8, you'll find six stability ball exercises that focus on your core, and they're great for people of all fitness levels. You can do these exercises at the gym or at home—stability balls are an inexpensive way to get a challenging workout.

With or without a stability ball, exercising is one of the best ways to keep stress in check. Unfortunately, stress is something that more of us are dealing with these days. A 2008 survey by the American Psychological Association found that more people reported physical and emotional symptoms due to stress than in 2007.

If we don't take steps to manage our stress, it can take a serious toll on our health. On page 12, you'll learn about eight surprising ways that stress can affect the body. We also offer a number of tools and tips to help you relieve stress.

And since many of us are trying to change our unhealthy habits at this time of year, we also offer insight from experts on why we continue our bad habits, and creative ways we can try to change (page 20).

From all of us at BCBSRI, have a happy and healthy winter!

*Julie O'Connell*  
Julie O'Connell  
Editor

## Send any letters, comments, or general questions

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## Mark Zimmerman, M.D.

Director of Outpatient Psychiatry  
Rhode Island Hospital

As the Director of the Rhode Island Methods to Improve Diagnostic Assessment and Services (MIDAS) project, Dr. Mark Zimmerman is an expert in the area of psychiatric assessment and diagnosis. For more than two decades, he has worked to develop methodologies to help in the diagnosis of depression and other mental illnesses. With winter now upon us, we talked with him about **seasonal affective disorder (SAD)**.



**Q:** How is SAD different from other forms of depression?

**A:** SAD is a syndrome, which means it's a constellation of symptoms that may include depression, loss of interest in usual activities, feeling fatigued despite sleeping more hours, feeling worthless, feeling like a failure, dwelling on past regrets or past guilt. While these symptoms can occur in individuals with other forms of depression, individuals with SAD tend to have depression characterized by overeating and oversleeping during the months when there are fewer daylight hours—sort of like a hibernation pattern.

**Q:** How much does geography play a role in SAD?

**A:** It has a big role. The prevalence of SAD varies by latitude. The further north one is, the hours of daylight are reduced, and therefore the prevalence of SAD is higher. In contrast, in southern states such as Florida the prevalence is low. Relocating or taking a trip to a sunnier location is not an unreasonable idea for someone with SAD.

**Q:** How do you diagnose SAD?

**A:** You don't make the diagnosis simply on the basis of symptom cluster. It's also based on an individual's report of developing episodes of depression during the time of the year in which sunlight

becomes less plentiful. In individuals that I follow over time, I can keep track of the seasonal pattern and then intervene prior to the onset of another episode during the fall and wintertime. If someone comes to me for treatment during the fall and winter season, I inquire about when the symptoms began. If it's been a relatively acute onset, then that certainly raises the suspicion of SAD. I then ask if, in the past during this time of year, the individual has had symptoms that are characteristic of the syndrome.

**Q:** When it comes to treatment for SAD, what seems to be most effective?

**A:** There are two main options for treatment that have been found to be effective: light box therapy and medication. With the light box, the individual needs to turn on the light box first thing in the morning and just go about their normal activities—read the newspaper by the light box, pay their bills, etc. Occasionally they should look at the box, but it's not a matter of staring into the box, just like we don't stare into the sun during the course of the day.

The reason it needs to be a light box is that you need that high-intensity kind of light. Simply waking up and turning on all the lights in your house wouldn't be sufficient. We also use antidepressant medication, specifically bupropion

[Wellbutrin®], which has been found to prevent the onset of SAD, as well as the SSRIs [selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors] such as Prozac® and Zoloft®, to treat depression.

**Q:** What misconceptions, if any, do you think people have about SAD?

**A:** Probably the biggest misconception is that it's due to the temperature—that because it's cold out, people don't go outside, and they get depressed. In fact, it's the decreased duration of sunlight that's the important ingredient. That's why to treat SAD, you treat people with light. You need to expand the length of time they're exposed to daylight.

**Q:** What are the dangers associated with SAD?

**A:** Depression has a significant impact on one's functioning, a significant impact on one's quality of life, and is a life-threatening disorder. The overwhelming majority of people with depression don't attempt suicide or actually kill themselves, but it is a risk. So in the patients that I treat with depression, I ask about suicidal thoughts at every visit, even when they're doing well.

**Q:** Is there a link between depression and heredity?

**A:** There is no doubt that depression is, in part, genetically determined. So, if depression runs in one's family, it doesn't necessarily mean everyone will develop the illness; it just means that you're at increased risk and need to maintain vigilance.

### Help Is Available

If you've noticed a seasonal pattern to your feelings of depression, speak with your doctor.

#### Resources

Seasonal Affective Disorder Association  
[sada.org.uk/treat.htm](http://sada.org.uk/treat.htm)

Mental Health America  
[nmha.org/go/sad](http://nmha.org/go/sad)

# Slope Safety

Whether you're skiing down the black diamond or the bunny slope this winter, make sure you're sporting a helmet.

Traumatic brain injury is the leading cause of serious injury among skiers and snowboarders, and helmets have been proven to prevent, or reduce the severity of, 44 percent of head injuries to adults. For children under 15, that number is 53 percent.

These tips can help you find the best helmet for your head:

- » Don't use a helmet intended for another sport, such as biking.
- » Buy from a ski or sports store that has experienced salespeople. They can make sure you choose the right helmet.
- » Bring your goggles to the store, and try them on with the helmet, to make sure they feel comfortable.
- » Look for a helmet that meets industry standards and certification.



Reduces adults' head injuries by 44%



Reduces children's head injuries by 53%

## Try Before You Buy

Sometimes exercise equipment isn't used as intended. Treadmills double as clothes hangers, elliptical machines as drying racks, and stationary bikes...well, the seat is extra shelving. So before you buy, it's a good idea to ask yourself a few questions:

### Will I really use it?

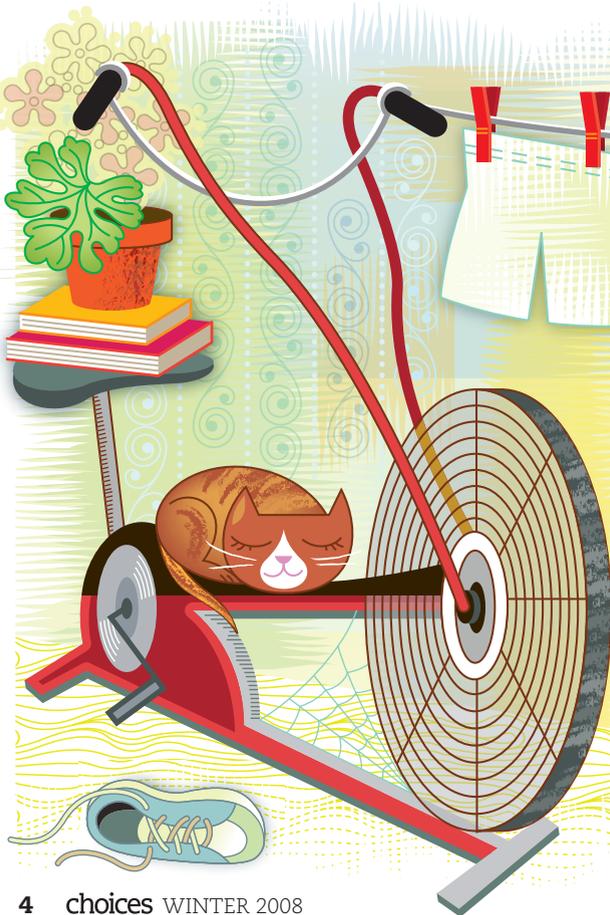
If you're buying an expensive piece of exercise equipment, try it out several times first (at a gym or someone else's home). Make sure it's something you like enough to do often. If you suspect you might get bored after a while, you may be better off with a gym membership.

### Do I have enough room?

You may not want to cram exercise equipment into your bedroom or living room. But if you decide to put it in your basement, consider whether it will be "out of sight and out of mind."

**What are my other options?** Buying inexpensive dumbbells, a stability ball,

and some fitness videos may work better for some people than a treadmill or elliptical machine. Also, keep in mind that some exercise machines designed for the home are not as well made as gym-quality equipment (which is available, but more expensive). So carefully research whatever you buy.



## MYTH? or FACT?

If you don't dress properly for winter weather, you'll catch a cold.



**Myth!** Colds and flu are caused by viruses that are more common in the winter. You might be cold if you don't dress warmly, but you're not more likely to catch a cold.

## Pomegranates: Unseeded

Many of us avoid the pomegranate because we're not sure what to do when we get it home. But this fruit is worth a little work—the seeds are packed with antioxidants, including vitamin C, and are a good source of potassium.

These instructions from [fruitsandveggiesmatter.gov](http://fruitsandveggiesmatter.gov) explain how to separate the delicious seeds from the rest of the fruit:

1. Cut the crown end (where the stem is) off the pomegranate.
2. Lightly score (cut) the rind in several places.
3. Immerse fruit in a bowl of water and soak for five minutes.
4. Hold fruit under water and break sections apart, separating seeds from membrane. Seeds will sink while rind and membrane float.
5. Skim off and discard membranes and rind.
6. Pour seeds into colander, drain, and pat dry.
7. Enjoy!



## Don't Talk and Drive



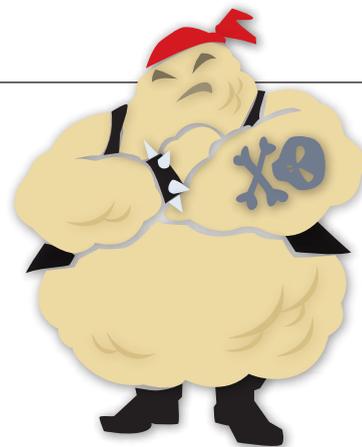
Cell phones are great in emergencies, but they can also cause emergencies—if you use them while driving.

A 2006 University of Utah study found that *people who use cell phones are as impaired as people who drive drunk*. This is true whether the cell phone is handheld or hands free.

Compared to undistracted drivers, drivers using cell phones:

- » Were 9 percent slower to hit the brakes
- » Displayed 24 percent more variation in following distance as their attention switched between driving and talking
- » Were 19 percent slower to resume normal speed after braking
- » Were more likely to crash

The study's authors conclude that people who drive and use cell phones put themselves and others at risk. So if you really need to make a call, it's best to wait or pull over.



# Trans Fat: The Baddest Fat

First New York City banned them. Then Philadelphia. Then California. But what are trans fats? And what's so bad about them? See how much you know about these artery cloggers.

## 1 What are trans fats?

- a) Fat formed when food manufacturers turn liquid oils into solid fats
- b) Fat found naturally in some animal-based foods
- c) Fat found in fish oils
- d) Both a and b
- e) All of the above

## 2 Why are trans fats considered harmful?

- a) They raise your "bad" cholesterol.
- b) They lower your "good" cholesterol.
- c) They raise your "bad" cholesterol and lower your "good" cholesterol.
- d) They contribute to osteoporosis.
- e) They can cause asthma.

## 3 Which of the following foods does NOT contain trans fats?

- a) Restaurant French fries
- b) Doughnuts
- c) Olive oil
- d) Frosting
- e) Stick margarine

## 4 What is the American Heart Association's recommendation for daily intake of artificial trans fats?

- a) 0 grams
- b) 1 gram
- c) 2 grams
- d) 5 grams
- e) 10 grams

## 5 True or false? If a food label says the product contains zero grams of trans fat, there is never any trans fat in the food.

- a) True
- b) False

## 6 A 2007 study found that women with the highest level of trans fat in their blood had \_\_\_\_\_ times the risk of heart disease than those with the lowest levels.

- a) Two
- b) Three
- c) Four
- d) Five
- e) No difference was found.

**1 (d) Both a and b.** Most trans fats are created when food manufacturers add hydrogen to vegetable oils, a process called hydrogenation. Because they help foods stay fresh and retain their flavor, trans fats have been a popular addition to packaged foods for decades. A small amount of trans fats is found naturally in animal-based foods, but these natural trans fats are not believed to be as harmful as artificial ones.

**2 (c) They raise your "bad" cholesterol and lower your "good" cholesterol.** Trans fats, when they first started to be used, were thought to be better

than saturated fats (found in beef, cheese, and butter). That's because trans fats are created from unsaturated, plant-based oils. But in recent years, scientists discovered that trans fats increase levels of LDL "bad" cholesterol and lower levels of HDL "good" cholesterol, which protects against heart disease. Both trans fats and saturated fats contribute to heart disease. While saturated fats increase "bad" cholesterol, they don't affect "good" cholesterol.

**3 (c) Olive oil.** Monounsaturated fats, such as olive oil, and polyunsaturated fats do not raise "bad" cholesterol and have health

benefits when eaten in moderation. These fats also include canola, peanut, sunflower, and corn oil. And while not all French fries, doughnuts, frostings, and stick margarines contain trans fats, many do. Check food labels for trans fats and, when at restaurants or bakeries, ask if foods are prepared with trans fats.

**4 (a) 0 grams.** The American Heart Association (AHA) recommends that no more than 1 percent of your total daily calories come from trans fats. (For a 2,000-calorie diet, that's 20 calories.) But since most of us eat about 20 calories in natural trans

fats from animal products, there are no calories left for food with artificial trans fats.

**5 (b) False.** If there are less than 0.5 grams of trans fat in a serving of a product, the nutrition label says that there is no trans fat in the product. But if you eat several servings, you could eat more trans fat than is recommended by the AHA. Check food labels for the following ingredients: partially hydrogenated soybean oil, partially hydrogenated oils, or shortening.

**6 (b) Three.** This Harvard school of Public Health study tested the blood of 32,826 participants.

# How to Shovel Snow Safely

A blanket of snow is lovely...until you have to clean it off your driveway. And shoveling snow is no easy task. Major snowstorms are associated with increased emergency room visits for everything from muscle aches to heart attacks, often caused by snow shoveling. Here's how to keep yourself in the clear:



**1. Talk to your doctor.** You need to get your doctor's OK if you have a history of heart attacks, heart disease, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, asthma, or if you smoke or are inactive. Please see page 16 for more information.



**2. Get prepped.** Before you head out, avoid eating a big meal, smoking, or drinking caffeine. (All can put stress on your body.) Warm up your muscles by walking around your house, then stretching. And, of course, layer up before heading out.



**3. Make it an S.** Use a lightweight shovel that has a curved, S-shaped handle and non-stick blades and is designed to push snow. Pushing snow away from you, rather than lifting it, reduces the strain on your heart and back.



**4. Do leg lifts.** If you can't avoid picking up snow, only fill your shovel partway. Keep your back straight, and bend and lift with your legs. Don't throw snow over your shoulder or to one side, as that can strain your back and shoulders.



**5. Keep it light.** Try to shovel soon after the snow falls, so it is lighter and less wet. If you are shoveling deep snow, push or lift only a few inches at a time.



**6. Pay attention to your body.** Drink water frequently. If you feel out of breath, stop and rest for as long as you need. Stop right away if you feel tightness in your chest.



## Can snow shoveling really be dangerous?

Unfortunately, yes. Consider the facts:

- For sedentary, out-of-shape Americans, shoveling heavy, wet snow for 10 minutes is equivalent to running on a treadmill to exhaustion.
- With the combination of shoveling and typical winter temperatures, heart attack deaths triple among men aged 35 to 49.
- Most people who have heart attacks while shoveling have no history of heart disease.
- The cold winter air raises blood pressure. This is true for people who don't normally have blood pressure problems and for people who already have high blood pressure.

# Get on the Ball

Strengthen your core and look slimmer with these six exercises.

by Patrick Carney

Stability balls are large, puncture-resistant balls, and look similar to a big beach ball. Originally, they were designed for physical therapy, but the bounce to exercise equipment was obvious. Just ask Robin Berghman, an occupational therapist. She uses the ball at work, with her patients, and at home, when she exercises.

“People who have never used one before think that it’s easy. But after a few minutes on a stability ball, they start feeling it. Stability balls, just by design, require you to use many muscles—not just for the exercise, but to maintain balance.”

Stability balls are a great way to work the body’s core, which includes the abdomen, the muscles along your spine, and your hips. In addition to strengthening your core, these stability ball exercises will help you prevent injury, improve your posture, and appear slimmer.

## 1

### Hip Bridge

*Muscles worked:* Gluteus maximus (your butt), which will strengthen your hips



1. Sit down on the ball and walk your feet out until your upper back is leaning against the ball.
2. Spread your feet slightly wider than hip width, and cross your arms over your chest.
3. Squeeze your glutes together, so that your hips rise to knee height. Pause for one second and then slowly release, letting your hips fall 10-12 inches.

2

## Crunch

*Muscles worked:* Abdominals



1. Sit on the ball and roll yourself forward, until the middle of your back is on the ball. Keep your feet hip width apart.
2. Cross your arms over your chest, and place your fists between your chin and your chest. This will keep your head and neck aligned.
3. Contract your stomach to lift your shoulders off the ball. Hold for a second, and then lower your shoulders back onto the ball.

3

## Plank

*Muscles worked:* Center and sides (obliques) of abdominals

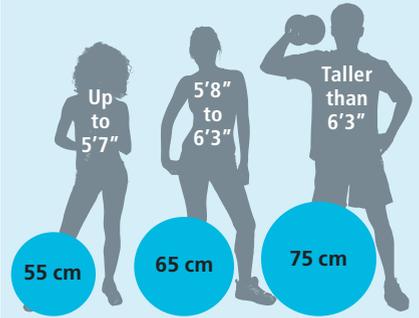


1. Lie facedown over the ball, with both your hands and feet on the floor.
2. Walk on your hands away from the ball, and let it roll under you.
3. Stop when your knees are on the stability ball. You'll now be in a push-up position.
4. Tighten your abdomen and hold for three deep breaths, or as long as you can keep your back straight.
5. Roll yourself back to the original position.

When you're ready for it, try rolling out further, so just your ankles are on the ball.

## The Right Size

The right ball size is determined by your height. Here are some recommendations:



4

## Alternate Superman

*Muscles worked:* Almost all core muscles, including the small muscles that hold your spine together



1. Lie facedown over the ball, balancing on your toes and fingertips.
2. Raise your right leg and left arm, so that they are parallel to the ground. Hold your arm straight out from your body.
3. Don't look up or let your chin drop to the ball. This will keep your neck in alignment with your spine.
4. Hold this position for 3 to 10 seconds.
5. Lower your arm and leg, and repeat with your left leg and right arm.

## Keep it Safe

Check with your doctor before beginning any exercise program.

If you experience any pain during or after your workout, stop exercising and consult your physician.

Always exercise in an uncluttered, clean place, with enough room for you and your ball.

Start off slow. Do just a few repetitions of each exercise at first, and then add on as you get stronger.

5

## Back Extension

*Muscles worked:* Lower back



1. Lie facedown on the ball, with your hips centered on the ball. Extend your legs and plant your feet about shoulder width apart. You can also put your feet against a wall for more stability.
2. Put your hands behind your head.
3. Bring your chest and head up from the ball. Bring your chest up as high as you feel comfortable and hold for a few seconds.
4. Slowly lower your chest and head back to the ball.

6

## Ball Twists

*Muscles worked:* Obliques and chest



1. Standing straight, hold the ball by your palms, at arm's length from your body. Keep your knees slightly bent.
2. Squeeze the ball and keep squeezing throughout exercise.
3. Slowly twist your shoulders to the left, while keeping your hips straight.
4. Return to center, and then twist your shoulders right.



# GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Learn what you should do *now* to protect the health of your future children.

by Mary Barlow

**T**he everyday choices you make about your diet, activity, and lifestyle could affect the health of children you may have years from now. What you eat, how often you exercise, whether you smoke, or if you neglect medical care may also affect the health of your future grandchildren and their children's health.

As unbelievable as that may seem, researchers now understand more than ever before about the far-reaching effects a person's health has on his or her unborn children and on future generations. For example, if you have a baby at a low birth weight, that child is at significantly higher risk for heart disease as an adult. And since women born at a low birth weight are at higher risk for having children born at a low birth weight...who are then at higher risk for heart disease...you can see why it's so important to break the cycle.

## Off to a good start

Preconception (before pregnancy) healthcare is designed to help women and men of childbearing ages to understand their health and improve their chances of having healthy kids.

"Most of the things that need to be accomplished in terms of preconception care can be done in the three-month period before becoming pregnant," says John R. Sussman, M.D., who coauthored the book, *The Unofficial Guide to Having a Baby*. "With that said, not everything can be done in that window. For example, you can't solve obesity. If someone needs to lose 100 pounds, there's no way to do that safely in three months."

The people who seek out preconception care are those who are planning to get pregnant. However, 50 percent of pregnancies in the United States are unplanned. And some of the most serious complications arise within the first four to 10 weeks of pregnancy—before a woman may even know she's expecting.

That's why the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that all people of childbearing age pay attention to their reproductive health, even when they're not interested in, well, reproducing. The chart on the right explains what all this may mean to you, depending on whether you're planning on having children.

# Preconception Care Chart

## For people planning a pregnancy

### WOMEN SHOULD:

- Make an appointment with your Ob/Gyn for a preconception healthcare consultation at least three months or more before you plan to conceive. Women who are overweight, smoke, or have chronic conditions or complicated medical histories should see their doctors as soon as possible.
  - Avoid alcohol, herbal teas, and other herbal remedies.
  - Avoid coming into contact with cat and rodent feces.
  - Follow the recommendations at right under "For all people of childbearing age."
- List all of the medications, supplements, and any over-the-counter medicines you take.
  - Write down questions and concerns to discuss with your doctor.

During your appointment, you should discuss these points with your doctor and have an exam if you haven't had one recently. You also may receive vaccinations for rubella and hepatitis B if necessary, along with a host of screenings, depending on your age, health, and other risk factors.

"The consultation specifically for preconception care is a time to address anything that needs to be addressed—anything where your hands may be tied in treating it later on," says Dr. Sussman.

Prepare for your preconception healthcare consultation:

- Note your health history (surgeries, pregnancies, and your family's health history).
- Speak with your spouse or partner about his health and his family's health history. (Learn the ethnic background of his mother and father if you're not sure.)
- Consider your exposure to any environmental and occupational hazards.

### MEN SHOULD:

- Speak with your doctor about your general health and ask if there are any issues that could impact your future children.
- Follow all of the recommendations at right for men who are not planning on pregnancy.

## For all people of childbearing age

Since half of all pregnancies are unplanned, the following steps are important for preventing unintended pregnancies, as well as protecting the health of children who are not planned.

### ALL MEN AND WOMEN SHOULD:

- Use appropriate birth control if you're not planning to get pregnant.
- Avoid drug abuse, smoking, and other harmful substances.
- Get tested for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and if necessary, work with your doctor to address them.
- Learn to manage stress in a healthy way.

### WOMEN SHOULD ALSO:

- Track your menstrual cycles so you'll know if you miss a period. You also should share this information with your doctor.
- Take a daily multivitamin with 400 micrograms of folic acid to reduce the risk of brain and spinal defects in any children you may have later on.
- Maintain a healthy weight, eat healthy foods, and exercise regularly.
- Practice good oral hygiene and see your dentist regularly.
- Limit alcohol consumption.
- Avoid exposure to pesticides, hazardous waste, and other potential toxins.
- Carefully manage any chronic conditions.
- Speak with all of your doctors about any prescription drugs you take to ensure the drugs cannot harm a fetus.

### MEN SHOULD ALSO:

- Wash and change into fresh clothing before coming home from work if you handle pesticides, building materials, chemicals, potentially hazardous waste, etc. to avoid exposure to your partners.

## Better for baby

Here are just a few ways your future children can benefit from your good health and preconception planning:

- *Taking folic acid* helps prevent brain and spinal cord defects.
- *Avoiding alcohol* helps prevent learning disabilities, physical abnormalities, growth problems, and more.
- *Avoiding smoking* helps prevent preterm birth, low birth weight, congenital heart defects, and death.
- *Avoiding secondhand smoke* helps prevent low birth weight and growth problems.
- *Being vaccinated for rubella* helps prevent physical abnormalities.
- *Maintaining a healthy weight* can reduce the risk of brain and spinal cord defects, preterm birth, and diabetes.



**REAL  
HUMAN  
INSIDE!**

*Photos by David Perluck. Art by Rick Shiers.*

# OPERATION STRESS RELIEF

EIGHT SURPRISING WAYS THAT STRESS CAN AFFECT YOUR HEALTH, AND WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT.

by Leslie Lowenstein



**IN THE GAME OPERATION<sup>®</sup>**, you can fix a “wrenched ankle” by carefully lifting a wrench out of the ankle, or resolve “writer’s cramp” by taking a miniature pencil out of the wrist. To fix “brain freeze,” just remove the ice cream cone from the brain. But what if the Operation patient had “chronic stress”? Where would it show up in his body, and how would you fix it?

If you said it would show up in the brain, you’d be partially right. The stress response does start in a part of the brain called the hypothalamus. Sometimes called the “fight-or-flight” response, the stress response prepares your body to act quickly when you’re in danger. For example, if an angry dog suddenly ran toward you, your hypothalamus would send out a lightning-fast message (through nerves and hormones) to start the stress response. Your adrenal glands would release the hormones adrenaline and cortisol. Adrenaline would

get your heart rate up and increase your blood pressure, while cortisol would send a flood of glucose (sugar) into your blood for energy. Your body would also slow down major systems like your digestive and reproductive systems in order to save energy. In a split second, you’d be ready to run away from the dog as fast as possible.

If you ran, all that extra energy would be burned up, and once you were safely out of the dog’s reach, your systems would go back to normal. Your fight-or-flight response would have worked beautifully!

**THE PROBLEM IS** most of the time, the “danger” that sets off our stress response comes from day-to-day conditions such as long working hours, a difficult boss, or too much debt. We don’t need to run away or fight it off (although we may want to!).

Even when you have day-to-day stress, your body reacts the same way it would to the angry dog. Your brain still releases adrenaline and cortisol, except you don’t need all the extra energy it produces just to deal with a nasty e-mail from your boss. You end up with a constant stream of stress hormones—and that can take its toll all over your body.

Let’s go back to the game of Operation: Where would stress show up? If you were playing the game, you might have to remove a fire from the stomach (“digestive problems”), or a balloon from the arm (“high blood pressure”). In fact, chronic stress can cause problems all over the body, as shown in the illustration:

**1 Anxiety and depression**  
Stress hormones can act like sedatives, which can contribute to anxiety and depression.

**2 High blood pressure**  
The stress response raises blood pressure; constant stress can keep it high.

**3 Weakened immune system**  
Chronic stress can disrupt the balance of the immune system, which can make a person more vulnerable to infection.

**4 Skin problems**  
Some people may find that problems such as acne and eczema get worse with stress.

## Breathing 101

This breathing exercise helps you learn to use your diaphragm (the muscle that holds up your lungs). Breathing this way allows your body to take in more oxygen, which can help you relax and slow your heart rate.

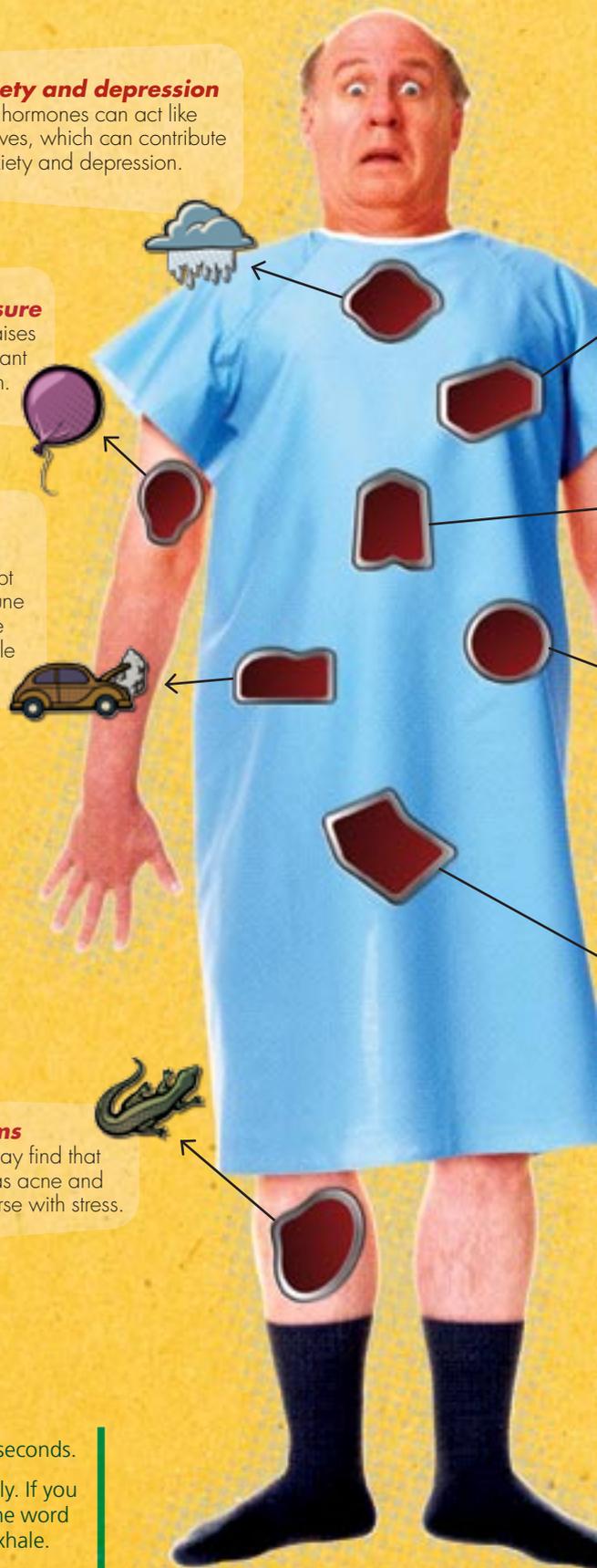
If you’ve never done this type of breathing before, it may take some practice. The more often you do this, the more it will help. Psychologist Bob Knauz, Ph.D., recommends starting with 10 breaths, once a day, and working up to more.

**1.** Put both hands on your belly just below your navel. Inhale slowly through your nose. As you inhale, try to first expand your belly so your fingers separate, then expand your ribs, then your upper chest. Think of inflating a balloon from the bottom up.

**2.** Hold your breath for a few seconds.

**3.** Exhale slowly and completely. If you want, you can silently say the word “relax” to yourself as you exhale.

**4.** Pause for a couple of seconds, then start your next inhale and repeat.





5

### High cholesterol

Chronically high levels of stress hormones can raise blood cholesterol.



6

### Digestive problems

Stress hormones can cause stomachaches. They can also affect how quickly or slowly food goes through the colon, causing diarrhea or constipation.



7

### Weight gain

Stress can increase appetite, causing weight gain.



8

### Lower sex drive

Stress can cause or aggravate anxiety and depression, which can lead to a lower sex drive.



## 3 TOOLS TO TRY

Bob Knauz, Ph.D., a Staff Psychologist at Massachusetts General Hospital, Harvard Medical School Instructor, and Consultant for Beacon Health Strategies, says stress can come from major life events such as illness or divorce, or minor life hassles. "Minor stress adds up over time. Your body still reacts the same way it would to a major event, it just takes longer." If you're bothered by chronic stress, you might find that you worry more over little things, that you're moody or irritable, or that you have problems like headaches, muscle tension, stomachaches, or trouble sleeping.

Of course we can't avoid life's stressful hassles. But we can do something to keep the physical effects of stress from harming our bodies. Dr. Knauz recommends these three "tools" for managing stress:

**1. Short-circuit the stress system.** "If you short-circuit the symptoms of stress, you will calm the stress system, which will make you feel more in control," says Dr. Knauz. Try deep breathing or meditation, such as the exercises described in this article. These exercises will help slow your heart rate and ease muscle tension, which stops the stress system.

**2. Challenge your thoughts.** Your thoughts are what create your feelings, so if you have negative thoughts, you're likely to feel stressed. "Treat your thoughts as hypotheses, not fact," Dr. Knauz suggests. For example, when you get that critical e-mail from your boss, instead of thinking, "I'm going to get fired," think, "I know I did a good job on that project, so one small mistake isn't going to ruin it."

**3. Be in the moment.** "In Western culture, we're always way in the past or way in the future," explains Dr. Knauz. By focusing on what you're doing right now—and only that—you automatically eliminate stressful thoughts about what happened at the big meeting yesterday or what could happen when you visit your in-laws tomorrow night.

Exercise can also help to calm your mind and improve your overall health. All of these techniques can help stop your body from responding to the perceived "threats" of everyday life. Just think of them as the tweezers in the game Operation—use them to remove the pieces of stress from all over your body. ■

## MINDING THE MOMENT

Meditation may be unfamiliar to a lot of us, but it doesn't have to be difficult. It can help you be aware of your body and your thoughts—without judging them. Try one of these easy mindfulness exercises:

**Focus your attention on one object (it can be anything) and notice every last detail about it.** What color is it? How big is it?

Does it have a sound or a smell? Is it soft or hard? If your mind starts to wander away from the object and you notice that you're thinking about something else, just acknowledge your thoughts, but don't judge them or react to them. Gently bring your mind back to the object. Do this for several minutes, or as long as you want.

**Sit quietly and focus on your own breathing.** Notice how your breath feels going in and out of your body.

You don't need to change the way you breathe; just observe it. If your mind starts to wander away from your breath and you notice that you're thinking about something else, just acknowledge your thoughts, but don't judge them or react to them. Gently bring your mind back to your breath. Do this for several minutes, or as long as you want.



### By Peter Hollmann, M.D.

Associate Chief Medical Officer,  
Blue Cross & Blue Shield  
of Rhode Island

#### Dear Dr. Hollmann,

I am a fairly healthy man in my mid-60s. I do have high blood pressure, which I take medication for. My son doesn't think I should be shoveling my driveway. (He's in another state, so he can't do it for me.) How do I know if it's safe for me to shovel?

What you are basically asking is: How does someone know if he or she is at risk for a heart attack? And the answer isn't as clear as we'd like.

Screenings and tests for risk factors such as high cholesterol and high blood pressure are important, because those risks can be controlled through medication and changing your lifestyle (for example, exercising more, eating better, quitting smoking). Since you are already taking medication to control your blood pressure, you've probably had these important screenings and tests. And your age and history of high blood pressure would not make you at high risk for a heart attack. For individuals like yourself, who have no signs or symptoms of heart disease, further screenings (such as exercise stress testing or CAT scans of

the arteries) are not recommended.

So what does make sense? Start out by asking yourself what you do now that is like shoveling snow. If you jog several miles or can dig up the garden and have no problem, then there's no reason to believe you cannot shovel snow. If you get almost no physical activity, you should consider that now would be a great time to change that. Start slowly and build up. If there's not enough time to get in shape for this winter, you may want to get help with snow removal, depending on the amount and weight of the snow and how much time you have to shovel. It never makes a lot of sense to go from no activity to very strenuous activity overnight. If you take medication for high blood pressure, you are seeing your doctor. Ask what he or she thinks. After all, your doctor knows a lot more about you.

#### Dear Dr. Hollmann,

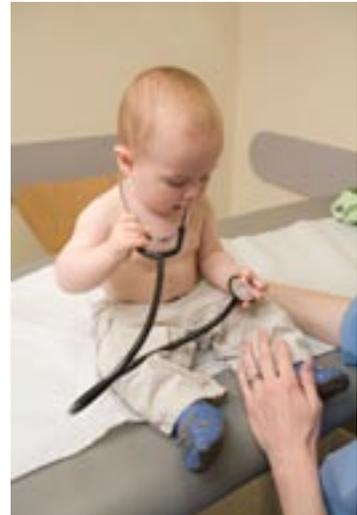
As a new mom, I'm never sure when to call the doctor. For instance, if my son has a fever in the middle of the night, how high does it have to go before I contact the pediatrician? I don't want to bother my doctor unnecessarily, but I also don't want to put my child at risk.

This is a great question. As a doctor, I'm always surprised by what people think are emergencies and sometimes what they don't think are emergencies when they are. But what I mind most is when my patients don't call when they could have.

Pediatricians who are on call do get a lot more calls than an internist like me, because parents want to be safe. At your child's next visit, I'd recommend asking your doctor for guidance on when to call. Pediatricians spend a lot of time at sick and well visits educating parents on just this subject, and some may even hand

out sheets describing common situations when you should call.

Also, you can find reliable information on this topic in books or online. On the Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island Web site, BCBSRI.com, there's an article that specifically addresses when to call your child's pediatrician. On the main page of the site, simply search for "when to call the doctor" to find it. The American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) Web site for patients, familydoctor.org, has a detailed answer to your question about fever. In addition, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) Web site, aap.org, has information by topic and recommends certain parenting books.



By the way, if your son is under 3 months and has a rectal temperature over 100.4, do call your doctor. Infants under 3 months can get sick very quickly. It's important to take a rectal temperature on infants and young children to get the most accurate reading. For instructions on how to do so, please visit the AAP Web site at aap.org. ■

### Got a question? E-mail your health question to [choices@bcbsri.org](mailto:choices@bcbsri.org), or mail it to:

While Dr. Hollmann cannot respond to letters personally, he'll answer as many as possible in the next issue.

*The information provided through this column is intended solely for general information and should not be relied upon for any particular diagnosis, treatment, or care. Always consult with your doctor for appropriate examinations, treatment, testing, and care recommendations.*

**The Doctor's In**  
c/o Choices

444 Westminster Street  
Providence, RI 02903



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# A Dose of Caution

Here's what parents need to know about kids' cold and cough medications.

By Tara Higgins, R.Ph.

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Marie isn't sure what to do anymore when her 3-year-old daughter comes down with a cold. "I'm afraid to give her any kind of cold medicine," she says, "but I hate not being able to do anything to help her."

Many parents have been feeling the same way since October 2007, when the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recommended that over-the-counter (OTC) cough and cold medicines not be used to treat infants and children under 2 years old (unless medications are specifically recommended by a pediatrician). That decision was made because of serious and potentially life-threatening side effects these medicines can have on young children. They can cause children to have seizures, stop breathing, or lose consciousness.

Then, in January 2008, FDA advisers said that cough and cold medicines also

shouldn't be used in children aged 2 to 6. However, neither the panelists nor the FDA have yet to officially recommend against the use of cough and cold medicine for children aged 2 to 6.

### So what's a parent to do?

While the FDA is completing its review of this issue, it recommends that parents follow these tips if they use OTC cough and cold medicines for children over age 2:

- Check the "active ingredients" section of the DRUG FACTS label. This will help you understand what "active ingredients" are in the medicine and what symptoms each active ingredient is intended to treat. Cough and cold medicines often have more than one "active ingredient" (such as an antihistamine, a decongestant, a cough suppressant, an expectorant, or a pain reliever/fever reducer).
- Be very careful if you are giving more than one OTC cough and cold medicine to a child. Many OTC cough and cold medicines have more than one "active ingredient." If you use two medicines that have the same or similar "active ingredients," a child could get too much of an ingredient, which may hurt him or her. For example, do not give a child more than one medicine that has an antihistamine.
- Carefully follow the directions in the DRUG FACTS part of the label. These directions tell you how much medicine to give and how often you can give it.
- Only use the measuring spoons or cups that come with the medicine or those made specially for measuring drugs. Do not use common household spoons to measure medicines for children since household spoons come in

different sizes and are not meant for measuring medicines.

- Understand that OTC cough and cold medicines are intended only to treat your child's symptom(s). OTC cough and cold medicines do not treat the cause of the symptoms or shorten the length of time your child is sick. They only relieve symptoms and may make your child feel more comfortable.
- Don't use these products to sedate your child or make children sleepy.
- Call a physician, pharmacist, or other healthcare professional if you have any questions about using cough or cold medicines in children 2 years of age and older.

### Medicine isn't always the answer

In addition to questioning the safety of OTC cough and cold medicines for children, healthcare experts are also raising doubts about how well the medicines work. Many of these products have never been tested on children, and experts, including FDA advisers, believe that the medications may not even relieve children's symptoms.

However, there are safe and effective ways to help relieve your child's cold symptoms. The American Academy of Pediatrics offers these tips:

#### To relieve a stuffy nose

- Use saline (saltwater) nose drops to thin nasal discharge. Ask your child's doctor about which ones to use. Place a few drops of the saline into each nostril followed by gentle bulb suction. This works best for babies younger than 3 months.

- During the illness, use a cool-mist humidifier or vaporizer in your child's room. This helps moisten the air and may help clear your child's nasal passages. Be sure to clean the humidifier or vaporizer often, as recommended by the manufacturer.

#### To relieve chest congestion

- Chest physical therapy can loosen mucus and may help infants and young children cough it out. Lay your child across your knees, face down; cup your hand; and gently tap your child's back. Or sit your child on your lap, lean her body forward about 30 degrees, cup your hand, and gently tap her back.
- During the illness, use a cool-mist humidifier or vaporizer in your child's room. This helps moisten the air and may help clear your child's congestion. Be sure to clean the humidifier or vaporizer often, as recommended by the manufacturer.

#### To relieve a cough

- Try half a teaspoon of honey for children aged 2 to 5 years, 1 teaspoon for children aged 6 to 11 years, and 2 teaspoons for children 12 years and older. If honey is given at bedtime, make sure you brush your child's teeth afterward. Remember, it's not safe to give honey to babies younger than 1 year.
- For a child aged 4 years and older, cough drops or lozenges may help soothe the throat. Remember not to give cough drops or lozenges to a child younger than 4 years because he could choke on them. Also do not give your child more cough drops than directed on the package.

#### To relieve a fever

- Give acetaminophen to a baby 6 months or younger. Give either acetaminophen or ibuprofen to a child older than 6 months. Ask your child's doctor for the right dosage for your child's age and size. Do not give aspirin to your child because it has been associated with Reye syndrome, a rare but very serious illness that affects the liver and the brain. ■

### Why are doctors concerned?

- 7,000 children go to the emergency department each year because of problems with OTC cough and cold medi-

cines. The majority of problems involve children aged 2 to 3.

- Two-thirds of children's emergency department visits for these medications were due to medication error. One-fourth

of the visits were a result of side effects from proper use.

- Approximately one in 10 children use one or more cough and cold medication in a given week.

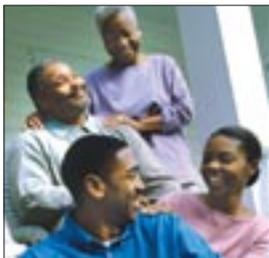
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H4152 2009\_57 8/2008

# Changing the Way **WE CHANGE**

Learn why we continue our bad habits, and four ways to motivate yourself to change.

(Hint: Money is one.) *by Peter Gallant*



Art by Alex Eben Meyer

**W**hat do smoking cigarettes, eating junk food, and drinking to excess have in common? If you said “They’re all bad habits,” you’d be right. If you said “We know they’re all bad habits and we still do them,” you’d also be right.

The cost and consequences of unhealthy habits are staggering and well documented. Less explored, however, is: Why do we continue our unhealthy habits when we know that they’re unhealthy?

First off, the list of excuses we use is long. James O. Prochaska, Ph.D., Director of the Cancer Prevention

Research Center and Professor of Clinical and Health Psychology at the University of Rhode Island, cites a few he’s heard: “Not enough motivation, not enough willpower, not enough time, the wrong genes, the wrong personality . . .”

Excuses aside, Dr. Prochaska, who is an internationally recognized expert in

## Tips to help you change

**Write it all down.** “People aren’t anywhere near aware of the amount of benefits they’ll get by giving up their unhealthy behavior,” Dr. Prochaska says. Making an exhaustive checklist of the pros and cons of behavior change allows you to see just how much you stand to gain by changing. If you realize that you’re going to get much more out of giving up your bad habit than maintaining it, you’ll be more likely to give it up.

the field of behavior change, believes that many people simply don't know how to change or are not prepared to do so—and there's a reason for that. "Most of the help that's been available is for people who are ready to take action," he points out. For example, if you're ready to quit smoking, it's relatively easy to find an effective smoking cessation program that will give you the tools, resources, and help you need to guide you to your goal.

However, studies have shown that roughly four out of five current smokers say they want to quit, but only about one

in five are prepared to quit. Transitioning from being someone who wants to change to someone who does change requires critical planning, but not a critical condition. "You don't have to have a crisis, like a heart attack, to be ready to change," Dr. Prochaska says. But you do have to "assess what stage of change you are in" before you can prepare for where you want to go.

### Getting started

Based on decades of research, Dr. Prochaska, in collaboration with several

health psychology experts, developed the Transtheoretical Model (TTM) for change. It says, in essence, that successful behavior change is accomplished over time and by transitioning through five distinct stages. Each stage is supported by a different type of intervention:

1. **Precontemplation** – You're not intending to quit in the foreseeable future. In fact, you might be unaware (or at least underaware) of the problem.
2. **Contemplation** – You're aware that a problem exists and you're seriously thinking about overcoming it, but you haven't taken any action.
3. **Preparation** – In this stage, you've committed to taking action in the next month. And, probably, you have unsuccessfully taken action in the past year.
4. **Action** – You modify your behavior or environment in order to overcome your problem. This stage takes a lot of time and energy.
5. **Maintenance** – In this stage, you're working to prevent relapse and you're building on the gains attained during the Action stage. (Note: For addictive behaviors, this stage can extend from six months to indefinitely.)

Once you determine which stage you're in, you can develop methods for navigating your way through the change process. For example, if you are in the "Contemplation" stage, you've probably said to yourself dozens of times: "I should lose 20 pounds," but you don't have a plan or a strong commitment to do so.

For suggestions on how to start and follow through on changing your behavior, please see, "Tips to help you change" to your left. ■



#### Change your routine.

Altering your routine, even a little, can jump-start your change process. If you want to get more physical activity, set the alarm clock a half hour earlier each morning so you can exercise. Moving your alarm clock across the room will help because you'll be forced to get out of bed to turn it off.

#### Go public with it.

"One of the best ways to strengthen commitment is to go public with it," Dr. Prochaska says. Telling your friends and family about your plan will help you gain their support, which is critical during the change process. It will also help keep you motivated and focused. (After all, how would you feel if friends saw you eating a burger and fries after you told them you were giving up junk food?)

#### Put your money where your mouth is.

Some people have achieved their health goals by putting money at stake. For example, you might give a certain amount of money (enough to be painful if you lose it) to a trusted friend or family member. If you don't lose 20 pounds or quit smoking within, say, nine months, your friend or family member gets to keep it. If you accomplish your goal, you get the money back. Money is a big motivator!



# One in Four

More than a quarter of Americans have diabetes or prediabetes, and many don't know it.

by Bill O'Connell

**T**he next time you're in a mall, or in a theater, or at a ball game, take a look around. Then consider this: More than one in four people you see there have diabetes or prediabetes. Just as startling, of those who have diabetes, nearly a quarter don't know it. And the diabetes explosion isn't expected to stop any time soon. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the odds that a person born in 2000 will develop diabetes are about one in three. That's a huge percentage of our population that faces the health risks of a disease that, if left untreated, can lead to serious complications.

## Diabetes 101

There are three basic types of diabetes: type 1, type 2, and gestational. In all three cases, the body's blood sugar level can climb too high because the body is not making enough insulin or it's using insulin improperly. Insulin is a hormone that helps the body remove sugar from the blood and burn it for energy.

**Type 1** diabetes is usually diagnosed in children and young adults. If you have it, you need a daily dose of insulin to live. The cause of type 1 diabetes is unknown, but research suggests genetic and environmental factors may be part of the equation. While a healthy lifestyle is important in managing type 1 diabetes, the disease is not caused by an unhealthy lifestyle.

**Type 2** diabetes typically strikes adults and often starts as insulin resistance. Doses of insulin are not always required, but can be. Obesity, inactivity, and age are primary risk factors for type 2 diabetes. Unfortunately, with childhood obesity on the rise, more and more children are being diagnosed with type 2 diabetes.

**Gestational** diabetes affects some women during pregnancy. It typically goes away following pregnancy, but can be a warning sign that a woman is at higher risk for developing type 2 diabetes.

Of the three forms, type 2 is by far the most widespread, affecting some 90 to 95 percent of people with diabetes.

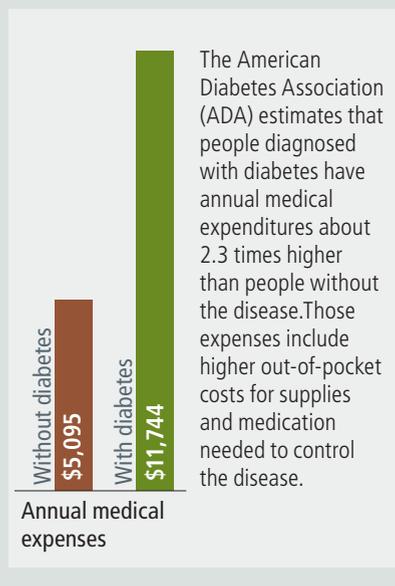
## Steps you can take

While diabetes is linked to a wide range of complications ranging from nerve damage and blindness to heart disease and stroke, there is good news: it can be controlled—or even prevented.

“Diabetes is one of the very few diseases for which we have very effective therapies that essentially work,” explains Dr. Ken Snow, Acting Chief of Adult Diabetes at Joslin Diabetes Center in Boston. “In many serious illnesses, you take the medication and hope it works. Whereas in diabetes, our therapies work. We can control blood sugars.”

## A Costly Disease

Diabetes not only takes a toll on your body, it also drains your wallet.



Two of the best therapies, Dr. Snow says, are maintaining a healthy weight and keeping active. Similarly, a healthy diet and exercise can help prevent you from getting diabetes in the first place. That's the case even if you have prediabetes, a dangerous condition characterized by above normal blood sugar levels that often leads to diabetes.

“The heavier we are and the more sedentary we are, the more resistant we are to insulin and the more likely we are

to get type 2 diabetes,” Dr. Snow says. “So, the way to prevent it is to try to keep your weight in a good range and to stay active.”

## Living proof

Patricia Audette found out she had diabetes in November of 2006, a few months before she turned 55. She was surprised and overwhelmed, but determined not to go on insulin. When her blood sugar level was rising and her doctor told her insulin therapy was the next step, she knew she had to lose weight. Thanks to an improved diet and increased activity, she lost 25 pounds. Her blood sugar level came down, and insulin therapy was delayed.

“That was a great day for me and my husband,” Patricia says. “I feel like I've had a second chance when it comes to diabetes.”

Patricia credits her health coach, Roslyn Grant, with providing the valuable information, education, and support she needed to make healthy changes. Roslyn is a dietitian and certified diabetes educator at Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island. Patricia says it's important to reach out for help from health professionals like Roslyn, and to take action on your own.

“You need to educate yourself because it's a part of you and it's real,” Patricia says. “You have to grab the bull by the horns and just say ‘This is what I have to do,’ because the longer you wait, the worse it's going to get.” ■

## How to take control

If you have diabetes, it's important for you to take an active role in managing the disease.

That includes taking insulin if it becomes necessary. Many experts feel that fear and avoidance of this treatment is a reason why blood sugar is not adequately controlled in many people with diabetes. Your doctor can help you understand what you need to do to

properly manage your diabetes, and ease any concerns you have.

You can also get valuable support and information by working with a certified diabetes outpatient educator (CDOE). Ask your doctor to recommend a CDOE or work

with a CDOE who is a Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island health coach. Health coaching is available through your plan at no extra cost—you can contact a health coach by calling (401) 459-2273 or 1-800-637-3718, ext. 2273.



# Thinking About Tomorrow

by Julie O'Connell

By following these five tips, baby boomers can change how they grow older.

If there's anything that baby boomers are known for, it's change. This is the generation that protested inequalities, went wild for the Beatles, brought attention to environmental issues, and, yes, started the fitness craze. And now that they're in their 40s, 50s, and 60s, baby boomers are reinventing what it means to grow older.

## Times are changing

Baby boomers are expected to live longer than their parents, now that deaths from heart disease, cancer, and stroke are on the decline. But to make sure that those years are enjoyable and productive, baby boomers need to pay attention to their health now. Consider these statistics:

- Baby boomers are more overweight, more stressed, and less physically active than their parents and grandparents.
- Six out of 10 baby boomers will be managing more than one chronic condition by 2030.
- Unexpected health problems cause nearly 25 percent of working Americans to retire earlier than expected with lower than expected incomes.

So what's the good news? *There's time to change.*

## Live well for the long-term

There's plenty you can do now to protect your health for the long-term. While the tips themselves may not be revolutionary, their results on your health can be.



**1 Fill up on fruits and vegetables.** "Far and away, the most common need among people I work with is better nutrition," says Philip Hagen, M.D. A baby boomer himself, Dr. Hagen is Medical Director of Mayo Clinic EmbodyHealth and Vice Chair of the Division of Preventive and Occupational Medicine at Mayo Clinic. "Eighty percent of people can make significant improvements in how they eat." Dr. Hagen recommends eating at least five servings of fruits and vegetables a day.

### Why it matters

According to Cornell University, regularly eating fruit and vegetables is associated with reduced risks of cancer, heart disease, stroke, Alzheimer's disease, cataracts, and some of the functional declines associated with aging.



## 2 Increase physical activity.

Dr. Hagen says we need to shift our thought process from 30 minutes, three days a week, to doing something active every day. “It’s important for aging baby boomers to walk or swim—something that we can do daily without getting an injury.” He recommends building up to 200 minutes or more a week (about 30 minutes a day).

“Many people avoid exercise because they think it causes arthritis,” says Dr. Hagen. “But done right, it actually helps slow the progress of arthritis. The best protection for our joints is strong muscles on either side of the joints.” What does worsen arthritis is obesity, which puts extra stress on the spine, hip joints, and ankles.

### Why it matters

Exercise can help prevent or delay heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and a host of other diseases, including Alzheimer’s. A recent University of Washington study found that people who exercised three or more times a week had a 30 percent to 40 percent lower risk of developing dementia compared with those who exercised fewer than three times per week.



**3 Get enough sleep.** As boomers age, they’re more likely to suffer from chronic insomnia (the rate is one in five for people aged 50 to 64). And even if you’re not suffering from insomnia, you’re probably not getting enough

sleep. Dr. Hagen estimates that about 50 percent of people don’t get the recommended seven to eight hours a night.

However, getting older isn’t the cause of sleeping problems—chronic health conditions and the medications used to treat them are often to blame. And for most people, insomnia can be treated with lifestyle changes. (Sleep medicines usually aren’t the answer.) If you often have trouble sleeping, talk with your doctor.

### Why it matters

Studies have linked lack of sleep to weight gain, increased risk of diabetes and heart disease, depression, poor memory, and traffic accidents.

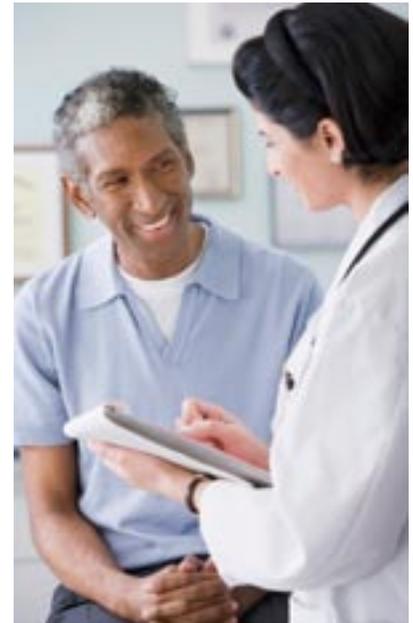


**4 Focus on your life’s purpose.** “It’s easy to just be on autopilot as we age,” says Dr. Hagen. But we all need meaning in our lives. He suggests that we ask ourselves: “What am I doing here and what am I doing that’s good for me and for others?” If you’re not happy with the answer, think about what you can do to feel more satisfied with your life.

For many of us, family and friends help give our life meaning. Dr. Hagen says, “I don’t think a lot of people think of strengthening relationships as a health issue, but it really is. If we look at people who successfully make healthy changes, one of the best predictors is the support they have for doing it.”

### Why it matters

A recent seven-year study found that older adults who frequently felt useful to others were more likely to be in better health and experience less disability than older adults who never or rarely felt useful to others.



## 5 Be your own health advocate.

Seeing your doctor regularly will help ensure you get all the important screenings and tests you need. Your doctor will also help you manage any health conditions you have. But we need to do more after we leave the doctor’s office.

“The risk for almost all diseases increases as we get older,” says Dr. Hagen. “If you have a medical condition, be sure to leave the doctor’s office knowing what your plan of treatment is, how to take your medication, if any, and when to follow up next with the doctor.” Also, know your general health information, such as blood pressure and cholesterol numbers.

“I encourage all my patients to keep a home medical file that includes information about any conditions they have, lab test results, and medication information,” says Dr. Hagen. He is excited about online personal health records, which allow patients to store their own medical records electronically.

### Why it matters

Chronic diseases—such as heart disease, cancer, and diabetes—account for seven of every 10 deaths and one-third of the years of potential life lost before age 65. However, they are often preventable. Your doctor can help you reduce your risk for these diseases, or detect them in early, more treatable stages. ■

by Joseph Rotella

# Glorious Ginger



Apple and pork stir-fry  
with ginger

Spice up your winter with these three recipes.

For centuries, ginger has been used by the Chinese as a medicinal remedy. It has been said to aid digestion, and relieve nausea and pain, among other uses. Ginger has also inspired various cuisines—with its unique aromatic and spicy flavor, it lends an Eastern influence to many popular dishes. Here are some terrific ways to enjoy it.

## APPLE AND PORK STIR-FRY WITH GINGER

### 4 Servings

2 Tbsp. peach jam, preferably fruit sweetened  
2 Tbsp. reduced sodium soy sauce  
2 Tbsp. water  
½ tsp. cornstarch  
1½ tsp. dark toasted sesame oil  
½ pound (8 ounces) pork tenderloin, cut into thin strips

1 Tbsp. finely minced fresh ginger root  
1½ tsp. canola oil  
1 cup chopped red bell pepper  
1 cup chopped green bell pepper  
1 cup chopped yellow bell pepper  
1 can (8 ounces) sliced water chestnuts, drained

2 firm apples, such as Fuji or Gala, cut into one-inch pieces  
½ cup scallions, thinly sliced  
Freshly ground black pepper, to taste  
2 cups steamed brown rice or whole-wheat angel hair pasta

**Directions:** In small bowl, combine jam, soy sauce, water, and cornstarch. Set aside. In large non-stick skillet, heat sesame oil over medium-high heat. Add pork and ginger and stir-fry until pork is browned and just cooked through, about 3 to 5 minutes. Transfer pork and ginger to bowl with slotted spoon. Add canola oil to skillet. Stir-fry peppers, water chestnuts, and apples until peppers are crisp tender, about 3 minutes. Add pork back to skillet along with scallions. Stir-fry 30 seconds. Add jam mixture. Continue to stir-fry 30 seconds to one minute, or until sauce thickens. Season to taste with black pepper. Serve over brown rice or whole-wheat pasta.

Nutrition facts per serving: 355 calories, 8 g total fat (2 g saturated fat), 55 g carbohydrates, 17 g protein, 10 g dietary fiber, 345 mg sodium

## VEGETABLE MISO SOUP WITH GINGER

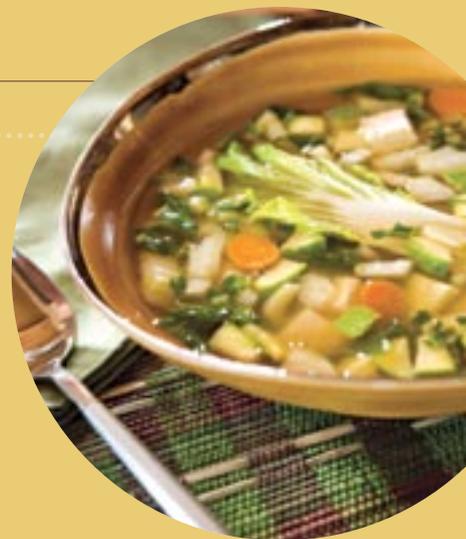
### 4 to 6 Servings

½ cup onion, chopped	1 Tbsp. low-sodium soy sauce	2 cups chopped cooked chicken or ½ block extra-firm tofu, diced into small cubes
2 or 3 carrots, chopped or diced	2 cups bok choy	2 to 3 Tbsp. miso*
1 Tbsp. olive oil	1½-inch cube fresh ginger, peeled and cut into large chunks	
6 cups low-sodium chicken broth	1 medium zucchini, diced	

\*Available at most grocery stores in the refrigerated Asian food section.

**Directions:** Saute onions and carrots in olive oil for about 4 to 5 minutes. Add broth, soy sauce, and ginger, and bring to a boil. Simmer until carrots are almost done. Add zucchini and bok choy. Simmer until vegetables are cooked, about 5 minutes. Do not overcook. Add chicken/tofu and miso and simmer for another minute. Remove chunks of ginger and serve.

*Nutrition facts per serving: 215 calories, 8 g total fat (2 g saturated fat), 11 g carbohydrates, 26 g protein, 2 g dietary fiber, 575 mg sodium. Note: The nutrition facts are for the chicken version of recipe. The tofu version has 164 calories and 9 g of total fat.*



## GINGER SPICE BISCOTTI

### Makes 40 biscotti

Canola oil spray	1 tsp. cinnamon	¼ cup unsweetened apple butter or applesauce
1¼ cups unbleached, all-purpose flour	1½ tsp. baking powder	½ cup packed dark brown sugar
1 cup whole-wheat flour or whole-wheat pastry flour	¼ tsp. allspice	½ cup dried cranberries, chopped dried pineapple, or other dried fruit
4 tsp. ground ginger	¼ tsp. salt	
	2 large eggs	
	⅓ cup canola oil	

**Directions:** Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Spray large cookie sheet with canola oil spray and set aside. In medium bowl, mix next seven ingredients and set aside. Using electric mixer or food processor, combine eggs with oil and apple butter for 10 seconds. Add sugar and blend for 30 more seconds. Add half of dry mixture and process until smooth. Add remaining dry mixture and process until a soft and sticky dough forms. Transfer dough to a large bowl; fold in dried fruit. Divide dough in half and place on either end of cookie sheet. With damp hands, form each piece of dough into a log 3 inches wide and about

¾-inch high. Bake 25 to 30 minutes, or until firm to the touch. Logs will spread during baking. Remove from oven and cool 10 minutes. With serrated knife, slice each log into ½-inch cookies, cutting on a diagonal. Bake 10 minutes. Turn each cookie over and bake 10 more minutes. Turn oven off and leave biscotti in oven for 10 minutes. Remove from oven and cool on wire rack. Store at room temperature.

*Nutrition facts per serving: 60 calories, 2 g total fat (<1 g saturated fat), 10 g carbohydrates, 1 g protein, <1 g dietary fiber, 36 mg sodium*



*Source: Apple and pork stir-fry and ginger spice biscotti recipes are reprinted with permission from the American Institute for Cancer Research. For more recipes, visit [aicr.org](http://aicr.org).*

To store ginger root, wrap it in a paper towel, place it in a plastic bag, and refrigerate for up to 3 weeks or, tightly wrap it in plastic and freeze it for up to 2 months. You can grate frozen ginger.

### How to choose, prepare, and store ginger



Fresh (raw) and ground ginger are available at most grocery stores. Look for a root with smooth, not wrinkled, skin.

The root's skin must be removed first by peeling it with a standard vegetable peeler. Only peel as much as you need.

Ginger can be grated using a cheese grater, or minced/chopped as you would a clove of garlic. If you prefer not to buy ground ginger, grind it yourself using a food processor.



# Your Choices

## MEN

### The Weight is Over

Winter is usually the time of year when many of us pack on some extra weight. Food is comforting when the weather is cold, and there's no other time when our diets suffer more. This year, put an end to winter weight gain with these simple tips:

**Get (or stay) moving.** In the winter, it's tougher to get motivated to exercise, and easier to find excuses (the weather is bad, it's too cold, etc.). Try exercising in the morning to get it done and out of the way.

**Join the protein team.** Comfort foods such as macaroni and cheese might keep you warm and satisfied, but they often have lots of fat, calories, and carbs. Try eating more protein instead, such as lean poultry, tuna, fish, beans, and lentils.

**Watch the alcohol.** Alcohol is a "sneaky" source of hundreds of extra calories. With all of the holiday parties and other celebrations you'll probably be going to, that can really add up.

**See the light.** The decrease in sunlight in the winter can make you want to eat more and exercise less, partially due to lower levels of serotonin (a mood-boosting chemical produced by our brains that is triggered by sunlight). Bundle up and get outside as much as possible.



### Five foods to lose

Many foods can wreak havoc with your diet, but these five types should be avoided or eaten infrequently:

- 1. High-fat dairy products:** Today, there are lower fat versions of milk, cheese, yogurt, ice cream, and whipped cream.
- 2. Sweets:** Don't deprive yourself of sweets entirely, just have them in moderation. A piece of dark chocolate may satisfy your craving.
- 3. Fried foods:** Try baking or oven-frying as alternative methods.
- 4. Soda:** Replace these "empty" calories with water, flavored water, or 100% fruit juice. If you drink diet soda, limit it to one per day.
- 5. White breads:** Steer clear of any items made from refined white flour. Instead, look for whole-wheat or whole-grain options.

## Keep Your Colon Healthy

Nearly 108,000 Americans are diagnosed with colon cancer each year, making it the third most common form of cancer in the United States for men and women. Colon and rectal cancers combined are also the second leading cause of cancer-related deaths. So, what can you do to lower your risk?

» The best advice is to have colorectal cancer screenings, which usually start at age 50. Testing can find polyps (growths) while they can still be removed and before they become cancerous. If you have a family history of colon cancer, check with your doctor about when you should begin to have screenings.



- » Your diet is one of the most important risk factors for colon cancer. Eat plenty of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, increase your calcium and fiber intake, and limit fatty foods. Have lots of healthy proteins, such as poultry, fish, eggs, and beans.
- » Regular exercise—at least 30 minutes, five times per week—can also help lower your risk for colon cancer.

Source: American Cancer Society

## The Face Facts

If you're like most men, you probably don't give too much thought to taking care of your skin. But you should, especially in the winter. Cold weather can do serious damage, causing your skin to dry, crack, and chap. Here are some easy ways to keep your skin looking great (and your buddies never have to know):

- » Lose the soap, and try a gentle facial wash or cleanser instead, for cleaning as well as before shaving. Most soaps dry out your skin, while products specifically for facial use contain beneficial moisturizers.
- » To add moisture in your home in the winter, consider using a humidifier.
- » When you go outside in the cold, keep your skin protected and use lip balm and facial moisturizer with sunscreen (even in winter).
- » Use a non-alcohol-based aftershave lotion or gel. (Alcohol also dries your skin.)

## Your Birth Day Bag



### Kudos for Calcium

Calcium helps keep your bones, heart, nerves, muscles, skin, and joints healthy. It's also known to relieve symptoms of premenstrual syndrome, lower cholesterol, and help prevent strokes. Now there's one more good reason to like calcium: It helps keep your weight in check.

Study after study has confirmed that people who eat the right amount of calcium lose more weight than those who eat too little. Also, people who regularly take in enough calcium are more likely to maintain a healthy weight later in life.

Women aged 19-50 need 1,000 mg of calcium daily, while women over 50 need 1,200 mg. The daily dose for pregnant women and nursing mothers is 1,300 mg. Calcium from dairy products—such as yogurt, cheese, and milk—is absorbed best by the body. To get 1,200 mg, you could consume the following foods in a day:

- » 8 ounces of milk (300 mg)
- » ½ cup of firm tofu – made with calcium sulfate (204 mg)
- » 1 cup of low-fat yogurt (245 – 384 mg)
- » 1 cup of spinach (240 mg)
- » 3 ounces of canned salmon (181 mg)

If you're not getting enough calcium in your diet, talk to your doctor about whether you should take supplements.

It may seem like a small thing, but your maternity bag can make a big difference when you go to the hospital or birth center to deliver your baby. Here are some things to keep in mind when you pack for the big day:

**The basics.** Little comforts go a long way when you're in unfamiliar surroundings. Be sure to pack toiletries such as your toothbrush, toothpaste, and deodorant. Your favorite pillow, hairbrush, shampoo, and skin cream can also help you feel more at home.

**What to wear.** You'll want a robe or nightgown, socks, slippers, pajamas,

extra underwear, nursing bras, and breast pads. When packing your pajamas, be sure to bring something you'll be comfortable wearing when visitors come.

**Special touches.** Think relaxation when you pack. Consider bringing your iPod or CD player, as well as massage oils or lotions. If you have other children, bring a picture of them. It'll put a smile on your face, and remind them how important they are to you when they visit.

**Going home.** Bring a comfortable outfit to wear home after your stay. Something that fit during the middle months of your pregnancy will usually work. Of course, you'll also need your baby's first outfit. Layers are a good idea in case it's unseasonably cool or warm. And, don't forget socks and a hat!

### Step Up to a New Treadmill Workout

Work out the boredom from your treadmill session with trekking. This is a good group exercise that can also be done at home. Trekking includes a warm-up period, followed by intervals of greater inclines and speeds.



Try this treadmill trek for beginners. You can walk or run, and for a greater challenge, repeat steps 2-6 before cooling down. Be sure to put on your favorite music for motivation!

Step	Incline	Speed	Action	Time
1	Flat	Comfortable walking	Walk (warm up)	5 mins.
2	Increase one level	Increase one level	Walk or run	5 mins.
3	Increase one level	Maintain same	Walk or run	5 mins.
4	Same	Increase one level	Walk or run	5 mins.
5	Increase one level	Maintain same	Walk or run	5 mins.
6	Increase one level	Increase one level	Walk or run	5 mins.
7	Flat	Comfortable walking	Walk (cool down)	5 mins.

Also, remember to stretch after working out, and always check with your doctor before starting a new program.

# CHILDREN



## No Turtles for Tots

If you're thinking about getting a pet turtle for your child, you may want to reconsider. In 1975, the Food & Drug Association (FDA) banned the sale of small turtles (under four inches long) in the United States because they can carry the salmonella bacteria, which is especially harmful to young children.

The best way to protect your child from a turtle-associated salmonella infection is to not have a pet turtle. However, despite the FDA's ban and the health risk, turtles remain a popular pet choice. Keep in mind that turtles, along with other reptiles and amphibians, carry salmonella naturally, so follow these safety rules:

- » Wash hands with soap and water immediately after handling turtles or their cages.
- » Clean and disinfect all surfaces that the turtle has come in contact with; wash any clothing.
- » Keep turtles away from high-risk individuals: children under age 5, the elderly, pregnant women, or other persons with weakened immune systems.
- » Don't allow turtles near food or in kitchen areas.
- » Never let your turtle roam freely in the house.

## Baby On Board



Traveling by air is stressful enough, but traveling with a baby makes it all the more challenging.

To make the trip as easy as possible for everyone, use this checklist to plan ahead and be prepared:

- ☑ Find out your airline's safety regulations for child safety seats, strollers, luggage, and carry-ons.
- ☑ Check with the doctor before you fly if your baby has had a recent ear infection or illness.
- ☑ Pack the bare necessities to take on board: diapers, wipes, a change of clothes, toys, books, and bottle/baby food/snacks. (You can take more than three ounces in your carry-on luggage as long as you let airport security know.)

## Not Ready to Wake Up

According to a recent Brown University study, teenagers do not naturally wake up as early in the morning as younger kids or adults. The study found that teens' levels of melatonin—the hormone that promotes sleep—rise later at night and remain elevated later into the morning. This means that at 7:30 a.m., when many American high schools start class, most teenagers' brains are technically still asleep.

On average, teens need at least 9 hours of sleep each night to be awake and ready to learn. With such early high school start times, most teens don't—or can't—get enough sleep. To help your child get more Zzzzzs:

- » Make it a rule: No caffeine after school.
- » Avoid over-stimulation from TVs, computers, iPods, and cell phones too close to bedtime.
- » Keep the bedroom dark at night and bright in the morning.
- » Consider limiting after-school activities to allow for more downtime.
- » Suggest your teen take a one-hour nap after school.
- » Don't let your teen sleep in too late on weekends to avoid throwing him or her off schedule.



- ☑ Dress yourself and baby in comfortable layers in case it's too hot or cold.
- ☑ Allow plenty of time for airport check-in, security, and boarding.
- ☑ Request a seat next to an empty seat for more room to spread out.
- ☑ Take advantage of preboarding to get extra help from flight crew.
- ☑ Give your baby a bottle or pacifier during takeoff and landing to ease pressure on the ears.

Remember, babies quickly sense your mood, so no matter how stressed out you get, keep smiling—and keep your sanity.

## Your Choices

# OLDER ADULTS

## Stay Close from Afar

Distance cannot diminish your love for your grandchildren. Still, it can be difficult to develop a strong bond with them if you live too far away for regular visits. These tips can help you nurture your relationship across the miles:

**Embrace technology.** If your grandkids are old enough, communicate with them the way they communicate with their friends. Use e-mail, text messaging, and instant messaging to stay in touch. You can also interact with them via the Web by playing games online or using a Web cam.

**Make a regular phone date.** Kids like routine. Pick a specific day and time to call your grandchildren every week or two. This will add importance to the calls and give the kids something to look forward to.



**Don't forget snail mail.** Provide your grandchildren with the pleasure of receiving handwritten letters. Include a homemade crossword or word search puzzle to add some excitement. Encourage your grandchildren to write back by starting a fictional story and asking them to add on to it.

**Write it down.** Keep track of what's happening in your grandchildren's lives with a notebook and calendar. Jot down their activities, classes at school, and friends' names. This will help you ask specific questions that will make each grandchild feel special.

**Share your story.** Make a scrapbook that tells your family history and gives your grandchildren a glimpse of what's important in your life.

## How Sweet It Is

They're brimming with nutrients and they treat your taste buds to a touch of sweetness. So why aren't you eating more sweet potatoes? They're rich in vitamin C, beta-carotene, and potassium. They're also a good source of fiber, they're fat free, and they're extremely versatile. Whether you bake, mash, grill, or stuff them, sweet potatoes really hit the spot as an ultra-healthy alternative to white potatoes. Consider these options to get this vegetable powerhouse into your diet:

- » Sweet potato ravioli
- » Sweet potato soup
- » Sweet potato pancakes
- » Sweet potato pie
- » Sweetpotato bread and muffins



## Ride the Wave

Are you a Web surfer? If not, don't be afraid to dive in and give it a try. The Web can be a wonderful source of information that can help keep you healthy and active.

If you're unsure about how to get started, talk to a friend or relative who is comfortable with a computer.



Local schools and community centers also offer assistance and training. Once you get on the Web, here are some sites to visit for valuable health information:

**National Institutes of Health – Senior Health Information**  
[nihseniorhealth.gov](http://nihseniorhealth.gov)

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**  
[cdc.gov](http://cdc.gov)

**Mayo Clinic Health Information**  
[mayoclinic.com](http://mayoclinic.com)

**MedlinePlus**  
[nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus](http://nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus)

**American Diabetes Association**  
[diabetes.org](http://diabetes.org)

**American Heart Association**  
[americanheart.org](http://americanheart.org)

**Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island**  
[BCBSRI.com](http://BCBSRI.com)



# Kathy Szyszkowski

Rochester, New York

When Kathy Szyszkowski found out that her employer, CVS, would pay for part of a Weight Watchers® program, it was just the push she needed to lose weight. "I knew I was at higher risk for diabetes," Kathy says, "because I had gestational diabetes when I was pregnant with my son, who's now 10." So Kathy did Weight Watchers, got serious about exercise, and lost 60 pounds. She says, "It wasn't always easy to take the time to exercise and eat right, but I had to get healthy. I'm active with my kids now, which I wasn't before. It's good for me and good for them."

### **What is your favorite exercise?**

"I enjoy step aerobics."

### **What is your favorite place to exercise?**

"I go to a place called Rochester Athletic Club for women."

### **What are your favorite healthy foods?**

"I love a good tossed salad. I usually have one for lunch with turkey or egg for protein."

### **What are your words to live by?**

"Take care of yourself so you can take care of others."

Photo by John Myers

*We're looking for people of all ages, conditions, and abilities to be featured in "Picture of Health." If you know someone who has chosen to take charge of his or her health by exercising, eating right, and getting regular checkups, we'd like to know! Send us a letter describing why the person you're nominating should be featured, along with a recent photo.*

**E-mail your submission to [choices@bcbsri.org](mailto:choices@bcbsri.org) or mail it to:**

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Think of her as an exercise machine with hair.



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You don't have to join a gym to get a workout. Recent studies show that every hour of moderate physical activity can add two hours to your life. So there's no need to radically alter your exercise habits to improve your health, and live longer! Just enjoy everyday activities like walking the dog. Washing the car. Cutting the grass. Playing golf. Or just taking the stairs instead of the elevator.

Don't sweat it if spinning classes aren't your style. Just get out and do something physical each day. You'll feel better, and live longer. Besides, the stair climber at the gym won't fetch your newspaper.

*A Public Service Message brought to you by the American Council on Exercise,  
a not-for-profit organization committed to the promotion of safe and effective exercise*

**American Council on Exercise®**

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