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## Managing your health

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### Summary

- A healthy lifestyle helps improve your physical, mental and emotional health.
  - Look after your health by watching what you eat, being physically active, having an active social life, getting plenty of rest, not drinking too much alcohol and not smoking.
  - You can take steps to help reduce your risk of disease, such as making sure your immunisations are up to date and handling your food safely.
  - Cover up from the sun in peak hours during summer to help protect against skin cancer.
  - Visit your doctor for regular health checks, and see healthcare professionals when you first notice symptoms.
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There are a range of things you can do to manage your health. You can help prevent some illnesses or reduce symptoms of some conditions by eating healthy, fresh food and being physically active. It's a good idea to see your doctor at least once a year, and you can stay up to date by reading current and accurate health information.

### Benefits of a healthy lifestyle

The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) promotes four main elements of a healthy lifestyle using the acronym SNAP, which stands for:

- **S** Smoking – affects every organ of your body. Call Quitline or visit the Quit website for online resources to help you stop smoking.
- **N** Nutrition – affects your overall physical and mental health.
- **A** Alcohol – can affect you physically and mentally in the short and long term.
- **P** Physical activity – can improve overall health and reduce your chronic disease risk. Aim for 30 minutes of moderate physical activity a day.

The benefits of living a healthy lifestyle include:

- reducing the risk of most diseases, including heart disease, stroke and diabetes
- improving your joint stability, flexibility, strength, stamina and range of movement
- helping to maintain flexibility, balance and coordination as you age
- maintaining bone density, preventing osteoporosis and bone fractures
- reducing the symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression, and improving your sense of wellness and mood
- improving self-esteem and self-confidence
- improving sharpness and clarity of mind, including memory
- improving your ability to recover from illness
- increasing the length of your life.

Being physically fit means you are less likely to get injured doing physical activity or in everyday life. If you do get injured, you are likely to recover quicker than if you were unfit.

Eating a well-balanced diet that is high in fruits and vegetables, and low in processed foods and fats, will help you to maintain a healthy weight.

For professional advice, including targeted nutrition and dietary recommendations to improve your overall health or to help you manage specific health needs, contact a nutritionist or dietitian.

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Your mental health is also important. Eating well and exercising can help guard against depression. Being healthy sharpens your memory and stabilises your mood. A low-stress life can help you sleep better, which leads to more energy. Good mental health can also be about maintaining healthy relationships, feeling positive about life and experiencing a sense of belonging.

For professional mental health advice, talk to your doctor, who may direct you to a psychologist, counsellor or psychiatrist.

### **Helping to prevent illness**

Taking steps to help prevent illness involves making sure your vaccinations are up to date, using appropriate sun protection, and maintaining good personal and food-handling hygiene. You can also avoid dangerous situations where your health is put at risk, such as avoiding communicable diseases by practicing safe sex.

Other steps may involve:

- taking action when you are sick by seeing a doctor and not waiting until symptoms get worse
- actively managing your health – for example, tracking and monitoring your own health, and asking healthcare professionals for advice
- being informed – for example, knowing the difference between healthy food choices and unhealthy ones. Visit a dietitian or nutritionist for help with planning a diet that meets your needs.

### **Vaccinations**

Immunisation is the simplest and most effective way of protecting children and adults against certain diseases. When someone is injected with, or swallows, a vaccine, they are taking in a dead or weakened version of the disease-causing germ (bacteria or virus) to the body's immune system. This tricks the body into thinking it has the disease, so it starts to build immunity to it without causing the actual disease.

If a vaccinated person then comes into contact with the disease, their immune system is better equipped to fight it, either preventing the disease from developing or at least reducing its severity.

Immunisation protects the community by helping to control serious infectious diseases.

You can protect yourself and your children by:

- making sure you and your children are up to date with immunisations (children in Australia are routinely immunised as babies, then as part of getting ready for school and while they are at certain stages at school)
- getting an annual flu shot if you are in a high-risk group, such as older people.

Your child needs to have had certain immunisations for your family to be eligible for the Australian Government Family Tax Benefit Part A supplement and the Child Care Benefit. More information is available from the **Australian Government Department of Human Services**.

The Australian Government recommends vaccinations for people at certain ages and life stages, and for those who may be at increased risk. These vaccinations are free for all eligible adults and children in Victoria. For more information, see the **National Immunisation Program Schedule**.

### **Sun protection**

Although a certain amount of sun is good for you as a source of vitamin D, which is essential for strong bones and overall health, time in the sun should be monitored so that you don't get sunburnt or damage your skin.

Australia has some of the highest ultraviolet (UV) levels in the world, and we have the highest rate of skin cancer in the world. UV is the radiation that causes skin cancer. This radiation is strong enough to cause sunburn in just 11 minutes on a fine January day.

During summer, protect yourself from sunburn and the possibility of skin cancer by:

- wearing a hat when you go outside between 10 am and 4 pm

- using sunscreen
- finding shady areas if you are going to spend time outside
- covering up with lightweight clothes, including long sleeves and pants.

UV radiation is lower in Victoria between May and August. Two to three hours of midday winter sun exposure spread over a week will help you get enough vitamin D. Sun protection is not needed during this period.

## Hygiene

Good personal hygiene can stop the development and spread of disease. Every day, many of us interact with other people, and touch things such as door handles, pens and money that have been touched by many people before us. Touching these public items and then touching your nose and mouth is how many diseases such as the common cold are spread.

Good personal hygiene means:

- washing your hands before eating or preparing food, after the toilet and after sneezing or coughing
- having a daily shower or bath, and using soap to kill the bacteria that grows on your skin.

Good dental hygiene starts with brushing your teeth in the morning and before you go to bed. This, and regular check-ups with your dentist, will help prevent mouth and gum disease, which can lead to other illnesses in the body.

For hygiene concerns, speak to your doctor who may refer you to another healthcare professional or a dentist for dental hygiene concerns.

## Food safety

Help make sure that the food you buy, eat yourself or prepare for your family or friends, remains safe by following these simple guidelines:

- Take care when eating out – do not eat food if you think it may be unsafe. If you get sick, let the supplier know and report it to your local council if necessary. See a doctor if your symptoms are severe.
- Buy your food from reputable suppliers with clean premises – avoid spoiled foods, foods past their use-by dates or foods in damaged containers or packaging. Take chilled, frozen, or hot foods straight home in insulated containers.
- Store food well – keep raw foods and ready-to-eat foods separate. Keep chilled foods cold at 5 °C or colder, and hot food hot at 60 °C or hotter.
- Wash your hands when preparing food – thoroughly wash and dry your hands when preparing food. Rewash them after handling raw meats, chicken, seafood, eggs and unwashed vegetables. Do not prepare food for others if you are sick.
- Keep things clean and separate – prepare raw foods on separate chopping boards from ready-to-eat foods. Rinse raw fruits and vegetables with clean water before using them. Wipe down benches thoroughly and do not allow pets in the kitchen.
- Use the fridge (or microwave) to thaw frozen food – bacteria can grow in frozen food while it is thawing, so keep frozen food below 5 °C to thaw. Avoid re-freezing thawed food.
- Cook poultry and meat - cook poultry until the meat is white and red meat until any juices run clear. Thoroughly cook foods made from eggs, such as omelets and baked egg custards.
- Reheat foods thoroughly so they are steaming or boiling. If you need to store food for later use, once the steam stops rising, cover it and put it in the fridge.
- When in doubt, throw food out.

## Monitoring your health

The best way to stay on top of illness is to see your general practitioner for regular health checks, healthcare advice and when you get sick.

## Regular health checks

Regular health checks are an important part of your personal health management at all stages of life, and annual health checks are more important as you get older.

In your 20s and 30s, the checks that are recommended include:

- blood pressure (every two years)
- pap test and pelvic exam (women, every two years)
- regular dental checks
- regular skin cancer check for those at higher risk
- regular testes examination (men).

In your 40s, it also becomes important to have:

- eye checks (if high-risk)
- regular breast checks (women who are high-risk)
- health assessment if you are at risk of developing chronic disease (one in your late 40s)
- health assessment if you are at risk of heart disease
- cholesterol checks
- health assessment if you have a high risk of developing type 2 diabetes (every three years).

If you are over 50, it is important to have the tests above as well as to have:

- breast checks and mammograms (for women, check yourself regularly and have a mammogram every two years. For men, when you have symptoms)
- an assessment of your bone health
- faecal occult blood tests (FOBT) to detect bowel cancer (every two years using a self-test)
- a hearing assessment (when you have symptoms ).

### **Recording your progress**

Making any lifestyle change can be challenging. Many people find that having a goal in mind gives them something to work towards, motivates them to stay on track and provides a measure of how well they are doing.

Setting realistic, well-planned goals keeps you focused and motivated. Often small wins make the larger goals seem less daunting. Sometimes, your plans will not work out as well as you hoped. Learn something from your failures, adjust your goals and keep going.

Recording your progress is an effective way to stay on track and keep you motivated. If you are trying a few different things, it helps to compare which method works best for you. Keeping a record of what you are doing is also an easy way to keep your doctor informed. A simple notebook will do the job, but there are also plenty of free, easy-to-use online trackers and mobile phone apps that can help. These can make your recording more accurate and most of these tools will collate your results for you.

See your doctor for a medical check-up before starting any new fitness program, particularly if you are over 40 years old, overweight, haven't exercised for a long time or suffer from a chronic medical condition.

### **Living with illness**

A chronic or long-term illness means having to make changes in your life. You will have to adjust to the demands of the condition and the therapy used to treat it. Living with a chronic illness may change the way you live, see yourself and relate to others. This can create additional stress.

Often symptoms, like tiredness, aches and pains, are not visible, so others cannot always appreciate the debilitating effects. It is not just the physical symptoms that can affect a person. The limits on lifestyle and living with constant pain can take a toll mentally as well.

Getting the facts about your illness will help you feel more comfortable and in control. You may also like to share information about your illness with those around you who may benefit from a better understanding of it.

To get the facts about your illness or condition speak to:

- healthcare professionals, including doctors and counsellors – they can provide good advice about living with your illness
- other people living with the illness – many chronic illnesses have support groups available, where you can connect with others who are tackling the same issues as you.

### **Where to get help**

- Your general practitioner

**This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:**

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