

A HEALTHIER YOU, FROM

A TO Z

JUST IN TIME FOR THE NEW YEAR, HERE'S AN ALPHABET OF TIPS DESIGNED TO HELP YOU TAKE OPTIMAL CARE OF THAT BODY AND MIND OF YOURS AND STAY WELL.

Ready to become the best possible you in '24? For most of us, that needn't mean a complete lifestyle overhaul, with all the fun extracted. Making smart lifestyle choices can help you not only avoid disease, but also feel more energetic and get more joy out of life. On the following pages, we present, based on recent research, a health tidbit for each letter of the alphabet.

A IS FOR ALCOHOL

Beer, wine and liquor are ingrained in the culture as accompaniments to good food and good times. But the health benefits claimed for alcohol in some past studies have been questioned by experts, who wonder: Did they show a real cause-and-effect connection, or was it merely that healthy people did more socializing, and thus more imbibing? One thing doctors agree on is that you'll have a safer, healthier 2024 if you avoid heavy drinking. The Mayo Clinic suggests limits of one drink a day for women, two drinks a day for men, one drink being 12 ounces of beer, five ounces of wine or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits. (FYI: Mayo also says that even light drinking brings a "tiny" increased risk of some cancers.)





B IS FOR BEDSIDE MANNER

When you have a health issue—especially a serious illness like breast cancer—you want a health care professional you trust and feel comfortable with. According to a study from New Jersey’s own Rutgers University, an empathetic doctor makes a difference in reducing patient anxiety and uncertainty. “Knowing that one in eight women are diagnosed with breast cancer, it’s important to have empathy and compassion and put oneself in the patient’s place,” says Manpreet Kohli, M.D., director of breast surgery for Monmouth Medical Center. “Cancer care requires much more than just treating malignancy; we target the cancer’s specific biology while accounting for the human being that it developed in.” To see if a doctor you’re considering fits the bill—for breast cancer or any other medical issue—start by checking sites like healthgrades.com to read other patients’ honest assessments. “It’s important to select a physician you feel safe with,” Dr. Kohli adds. “If you feel your concerns are not validated or you are not being heard, you may want to consider a second opinion.”

C IS FOR CARDIAC CARE

Hitting 10,000 steps a day isn’t the only route to heart health. A new British study has found that climbing five or more flights of stairs daily, or about 50 steps, was linked with a lower risk of heart attacks and strokes. Researchers determined that really, any short burst of high-intensity activity is good for your heart, and it’s especially fitting if you can’t get a full workout in. So maybe 2024 is the time to take up jump rope?

D IS FOR DIETING

Europeans have been onto something for centuries with the Mediterranean diet, which emphasizes healthy fats and lots of meat and veggies. Turns out that older people who follow a lower-calorie Mediterranean diet and exercised—even minimally—up to six days a week gained muscle and lost weight by the end of year, and kept it off three years later, a new study reports. “High proteins allow for muscle to increase while decreasing the body’s overall body fat

percentage,” notes Ashley Kravitz, CEO, founder and registered dietitian at Nutrition Specialists of New Jersey in Freehold. The best news? This diet is easy to incorporate into our lifestyle. “Make sure each plate contains fresh fruits and vegetables, a whole grain (in place of a more processed carbohydrate), healthy fats (olive oil, avocado, nuts/seeds) and a lean protein,” Kravitz says. You can also add on even 20 minutes of exercise daily to start.

F IS FOR FERTILITY

The older we get, the harder it is to get pregnant, since women’s egg quality and quantity decline with age. But recent research has determined that an anti-aging supplement called spermidine made middle-aged mice more fertile. Experts think this shows promise for humans too, and just might be the “holy grail” of fertility over age 40. In the meantime, eat more cheddar cheese, mushrooms and soybeans, which naturally contain spermidine.

G IS FOR GUT HEALTH

You may want to invest in a good prebiotic vitamin. A new study found that this dietary supplement, which helps maintain good bacteria in the gut, not only helps with digestion but also with weight. Consuming significant amounts of prebiotics was found to decrease the brain’s desire for high-calorie foods, resulting in weight loss. Besides the packaged kind, prebiotics are found in onions, leeks, artichokes, wheat, bananas and chicory root.

H IS FOR HAPPINESS

Happiness is in our blood—literally. According to recent research, some people are more genetically inclined to be happy than others, and their happiness can vary slightly but mostly remains consistent from age 12 to age 73. This was true for people of all backgrounds. Still, even if you’re not more genetically joyful, it helps to do more of whatever it is that makes you happy—other research suggests that happy folks tend to have lower blood pressure and heart rates, reducing the danger of heart disease.

E IS FOR EYES

Carrots help your vision, sure, but apparently grapes do too! Eating this antioxidant-heavy fruit (on its own, not in wine) for 16 consecutive weeks was found in a recent study to help improve eye health and vision in older adults. It could be due to “polyphenols, which are phytochemicals found in grapes and other foods such as blueberries, cherries and leafy green vegetables that work as antioxidants that can help combat inflammation in the body” says Ralph G. Del Negro, D.O., of Del Negro & Senft Eye Associates in Red Bank and Neptune. Additionally, says the doc, “The Age Related Eye Disease Study (AREDS and AREDS2) showed that certain antioxidant vitamins can slow the progression of intermediate and advanced macular degeneration and are commonly recommended to patients, and this study suggests grapes have a similar benefit.” Good news is there are black, green and red grapes, which all taste slightly different, or you can opt for a sweeter variety such as cotton candy grapes or mini-champagne grapes.



I IS FOR INDIGESTION

The orange-hued spice turmeric has been shown in a new study to treat symptoms of indigestion such as bloating, nausea and stomach pain just as well as the over-the-counter omeprazole product Prilosec, both on its own and in combination with meds. People in Asia have been using this spice for this purpose for centuries, but the Western world is catching on. Sprinkle it on rice or cauliflower, in soups or stews, or even use it when baking cookies and cakes.



J IS FOR JOINTS

Seventy percent of older adults experience pain in their joints, which are intricate structures made up of bone, cartilage, ligaments, tendons and synovial fluid. But you don't need to live with achy joints. There are many remedies for joint pain, including over-the-counter hot and cold packs, NSAIDs and topical pain relievers containing ingredients like capsaicin or menthol, says Ahmed Siddiqi, D.O., an orthopedic surgeon at Orthopaedic Institute Brielle Orthopaedics. Gentle exercise, regular massages and weight management can also help, since being overweight puts added stress on joints. Still, says Dr. Siddiqi, "It's crucial to see a doctor if the joint pain is severe or sudden, or if the joint is red, hot or swollen or accompanied by a fever." Also talk to your doc before beginning any of these noninvasive regimens.

K IS FOR KINDNESS

Doing even a small generous deed for someone else has been found to ease symptoms of depression and anxiety. "The more acts of kindness one can engage in, the more it can contribute to an improved sense of well-being," says Dana Spada, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., founder and psychotherapist at LEAF by Dr. Dana Spada

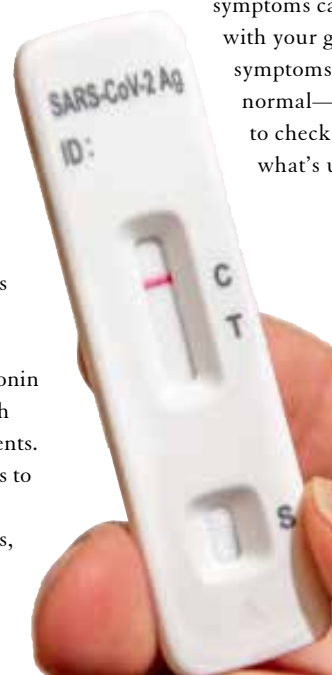
Psychotherapy with offices in Colts Neck, Little Silver, Hazlet and Sea Girt. Still, she notes, "it's essential to recognize that anxiety and depression are often manifestations of deeper underlying issues, and to address them effectively, the involvement of a psychotherapist is indispensable." So sure, donate some toys, give away proceeds from your bake sale or volunteer your time at a local women's shelter. None of that negates good ol' therapy, though being kind certainly won't hurt your mood!

L IS FOR LONG COVID

What differentiates people who recover quickly from the coronavirus from long-COVID sufferers, whose symptoms last beyond three months? Reduced levels of the neurotransmitter serotonin, according to a recent study. Lower serotonin levels were found to cause problems with cognition seen in some long-Covid patients. The next step is most likely clinical trials to see how increasing serotonin improves symptoms. For now, certain supplements, exercise, more sunlight and foods containing tryptophan (like turkey) can increase serotonin levels.

M IS FOR MENOPAUSE

Feeling extra stressed lately? That could be why your menopause symptoms are more pronounced too. A recent study found that women who reported higher stress levels, anxiety or depression and/or constipation also had more severe menopausal symptoms. However, these symptoms can be managed. Book a visit with your gynecologist if your menopause symptoms seem more severe than normal—the doc can run some tests to check your hormone levels and see what's up.



N IS FOR NAIL BITING

Quitting a nail-biting or skin-picking habit won't happen overnight, but surely "habit replacement" can help. In a recent study, nail biters who were taught to replace their habit with another, such as rubbing the fingertips, palm or back of the arm at least twice a day, saw a reduction in their biting habits. Still, notes psychotherapist Dr. Spada, keep in mind that this fix addresses the surface issue, but not the deeper reason one bites one's nails. "The key to truly addressing this issue lies in understanding the anxiety, the triggers and what is underneath the nail-biting behavior, not the physical act of nail biting," she says. Next time you feel the urge to pick or bite, try doing something else with your hands, such as sitting on them or texting a friend. If you want to quit this habit for good, though, seek out a qualified therapist.





O IS FOR OBESITY

Here in New Jersey, the prevalence of obesity in adults is slightly lower than the national average (28.6 percent vs. 32.3 percent), but many of us are still clinically overweight. And a recent paper claims that the biggest culprit in obesity is fructose. This sugar is found naturally in fruit, but is also added to artificial sweeteners and many processed foods. To lower your fructose intake, start by not buying foods whose nutrition labels list fructose, crystalline fructose or honey among the ingredients.

P IS FOR PICKLEBALL

An Apple Health study found that tennis and pickleball have equivalent health benefits for players, boosting overall health as well as balance and coordination. Still, tennis elbow and rotator cuff injuries are common with both of these upper-extremity-heavy sports. To avoid injury, warm up for pickleball with dynamic movements such as a quad stretch, as well as shoulder and wrist stretches to loosen the upper extremities.

Q IS FOR QUALITY CARBS

It's quality, not quantity when it comes to the carbohydrates you consume. New research found that high-quality carbohydrates such as whole grains promoted less weight gain in middle-aged folks, while lower-quality carbohydrates (those with refined carbs or added sugars) resulted in more weight gain. "High quality carbohydrates go through less processing, contain more nutrients and are higher in fiber," says Michele Peters, a registered dietitian certified in Integrative and Functional Nutrition who practices in Middletown. She says to try to fill your plate with high-quality carbs such as non-starchy vegetables, "high fiber fruits like berries, apples, pears and kiwi and grains such as farro, quinoa, buckwheat, steel cut oats, barley, beans and lentils," she adds.

R IS FOR RUNNING

Running has a plethora of benefits for our physical health, but now it's been proven to have advantages for mental health too. Researchers found in a recent study that in some people, running regularly can be just as helpful as antidepressants for treating depression and anxiety symptoms. The reasoning? Running helps release "endorphins and endocannabinoids [naturally occurring neurotransmitters that help regulate bodily functions] from the brain, which contribute to the feelings of happiness," says Zachary Perlman, D.O., sports medicine physician at Kai Sports Medicine in Little Silver. Not sure how to begin a new running routine? Start with one-mile runs three times per week and go at your own pace rather than aiming for a particular speed, recommends Dr. Perlman. Plus, he says, do dynamic stretching before a run and static stretching afterwards to help balance your flexibility and mobility.



S IS FOR SKIN

Topical creams can help make your skin look and feel its best, but that's not the only way to get that natural glow. One study found that weightlifting can improve skin elasticity; another unrelated study concluded that listening to relaxing music can help skin look more rejuvenated too. (Taylor Swift was named the world's "most relaxing artist.")

T IS FOR TEA

A new way to help prevent diabetes may just be your cup of tea. Researchers found that drinking a cup of dark tea (such as black tea) once a day without added sweeteners may reduce your risk of prediabetes and type 2 diabetes. "Several 'shades' of tea come from the same plant—the difference lies in the processing after harvest," notes Kate Walters, owner of Sweet Tease Tea Room in Belmar. "Black tea leaves are the most concentrated, so it stands to reason they would have the highest antioxidant levels and potentially the most health benefits." Walters suggests trying a cup of orange pekoe, Darjeeling or oolong tea, or sub in Earl Grey for bourbon to concoct a tasty mocktail Old Fashioned. "The black tea base with the bergamot infusion is a wonderful substitute for bourbon and bitters," she notes.





U IS FOR ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS

Having trouble putting down that tub of ice cream or sealing up the bag of chips may not just be about self-control. Instead, a new study found that it could be because ultra-processed foods (UPFs) have an addictive quality to them. Researchers found that UPFs' ingredients make their way to the brain faster than minimally processed foods do, which is why we want to eat more and more of them. This isn't to say that everyone who craves salt is addicted to it, but it is worth keeping in mind next time you go for a (second or third) handful of Lay's.

V IS FOR VITAMIN B

Out of the 13 vitamins our bodies need, eight of them are part of the vitamin B subgroup, including B12, which helps make our DNA and our red blood cells. Vitamin B12 deficiency has recently been linked with chronic inflammation and a range of health problems. You may be vitamin B12-deficient if you feel unusually tired or weak or are experiencing gastrointestinal issues. Your primary care physician can run a blood test to see if your B12 levels are normal or on the lower end.

W IS FOR WALKING

No time for a full-on workout? Two minutes will do. Even just 60–120 seconds a day of vigorous activity—power walking, climbing stairs or even chasing after your kids—can

lower your risk of certain cancers, according to a new study. "A few daily activities can be made more vigorous, including cleaning your house, yard work, walking a pet or going for a walk," says Gina Gerard, owner and trainer at The PIT Gym in Eatontown. "Even the smallest additions of movement throughout your day can help to improve mental wellness, strengthen your body, loosen your muscles, get your blood flowing and hopefully create a more active lifestyle conducive to a healthier lifestyle." That's not to say that you should replace your one-hour gym sessions with these little exercise spurts, but it proves that moving your body even a little bit is better than not at all.

X IS FOR X-RAYS

Your dental office may inspire memories of wearing those heavy lead aprons or thyroid collars during X-rays, but you may not be doing so for much longer. A recent study found that the radiation from X-rays does not cause genetic mutations or diseases, and the risk of thyroid cancer is low, meaning that these aprons may not actually be necessary.



Y IS FOR YAWNING

Yawning has long baffled researchers—why do we do it, and what is the point? Experts have said a yawn releases hormones that jolt you awake—temporarily—by increasing your heart rate. But new studies suggest that yawning may be a way for us to avoid harm. The logic is that if you see someone around you yawning, you'll be more vigilant to threats in an attempt to protect that overly tired person.



Z IS FOR ZZZZS

(You knew this one was coming, didn't you?) Here's good news for folks who "snooze" the alarm every morning. In a new sleep study, people who snoozed for an extra 30 minutes performed just as well on cognitive tests as their friends and neighbors who jolted right out of bed. And grabbing that bonus Z-time apparently did not dampen the snoozers' mood. So don't feel too guilty about hitting that button—those extra few minutes may make you feel more awake once you're up and at 'em.