



Food as Medicine

By Cara Rosenbloom, RD

Nutrition is often promoted as a way to prevent or treat different chronic diseases, and you may have heard the expression “food as medicine.” In the right context, this term refers to prioritizing a balanced diet in an individual’s health plan, with the goal of preventing disease, reducing symptoms or treating certain conditions. It’s important to understand food as medicine in context. It is used as part of one’s overall health plan, but not to the exclusion of other therapeutic treatments.

Research supports using food to help prevent or treat conditions, such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes and some cancers. But diet and lifestyle interventions can only account for 40% to 80% of reducing the risk of, or the harm caused by, these conditions. That means beyond food, there are still other evidence-based interventions to consider.

The trouble comes when food is promoted as a sole cure or treatment for conditions, and people forego medication, surgery, doctor visits, medical tests, chemotherapy, or radiation in favor of a food-only approach. The results can have negative consequences for overall health.



Your best approach is to follow a well-balanced diet that contains plenty of vegetables, fruit, whole grains and protein-rich foods. And it’s equally important to take medications or supplements as prescribed, get necessary screening tests and follow your treatment plan. Think of healthy eating as part of other avenues of health care.

From Lifespan to Healthspan

By Cara Rosenbloom, RD

Our lifespan is defined as the number of years we’re alive.

In the U.S., the average is about 77 years. But living for longer is not the only goal you should focus on. It’s also vital to think about your healthspan as *the period of life spent in good health. That means we don’t just live long; we live well.*



Of course, the term *health* is subjective, and many people live with chronic diseases but still feel well most days or ably manage their conditions. As science and medicine make it possible for people to live longer, interest has grown in how to age well. That means preserving your physical and mental health now to maximize your quality of life as you age.

Life expectancy has increased, but healthspan has not followed. It’s largely impeded by chronic diseases that affect older adults. The World Health Organization has developed an indicator called the Healthy Life Expectancy (HALE). It measures the average incidence and age when diagnosed with the most common serious diseases (diabetes, heart disease, etc.) and places it at 63 years old, which means we may live up to 20% of our lives unhealthy, since lifespan often outruns healthspan.

What can you do to improve your healthspan? Many lifestyle changes, such as eating better, more activity, less stress and more sleep, could delay the onset of chronic diseases and help expand lifespan. Social and intellectual activities are also important determinants of your healthspan.

Start by figuring out where you can make small improvements.

For example, do you get at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity each week, such as brisk walking? Do you eat vegetables daily? Do you choose water more often than sugary soda? Small changes can add up and help improve your healthspan.



Mind-Calming Exercises Defined

Even a few minutes of practice can lessen stress.



Perform tai chi or yoga. These old, popular routines combine rhythmic breathing with a series of postures and flowing movements. With practice, you may reach a mental focus that helps distract you from stressful thoughts and surroundings.

Try counting: a quick, easy way to ease anxiety. Find a quiet, comfortable place to sit, close your eyes and slowly count to 10. Repeat and count to 20 or an even higher number. Keep counting until you feel your anxiety subsiding. Stay calm and patient.

Combine repetitive prayer with exercise. For this technique, you silently repeat a short prayer while focusing on breathing, an appealing option if religion or spirituality is meaningful to you. Combining a physical exercise with prayer can be a powerful way to lower stress and feel more tranquil.

Anti-anxiety exercises may not work for everyone, particularly if you have been diagnosed with anxiety. Consider exploring more suitable options with your health care provider. Example: Mindfulness meditation involves sitting comfortably, focusing on your breathing, and keeping your mind on breathing, leaving concerns behind.

More stress relievers: Listen to music, read a funny book, help someone, hang out with a patient, friendly dog or cat, or simply take five minutes to recharge and reset.

Speaking of Pain



Whether for injury, muscle strain or headache, over-the-counter (OTC) and prescription pain relievers are widely used. OTC options are available in stores. Prescription pain medicines, only available by prescription, generally offer stronger relief for severe pain, such as from trauma or surgery.

The best pain reliever for you depends on the cause of your pain and its severity. Acute pain often occurs suddenly and lasts fewer than three months. Chronic pain lasts for more than three months.

Common OTC pain medications

Acetaminophen: These dull the pain receptors in your brain so you feel less pain. It is the first line of treatment most health care providers recommend.

Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs): They lower production of prostaglandins (chemicals that irritate nerve endings, causing inflammation and pain). NSAIDs include ibuprofen and naproxen sodium.

Combination: Some pain relievers contain acetaminophen and aspirin (an NSAID).

Topical: This pain reliever is applied to your skin as a cream, gel, spray or patch and blocks the brain's pain receptors.

Note: Always get your provider's okay first before using any OTC medication.

By prescription only

Muscle relaxers: These medications reduce pain by relaxing tight muscles and relieving muscle spasms.

Opioid pain relievers: These narcotic pain medicines require a prescription. Because they can be addictive, care providers rarely prescribe opioids for chronic pain. But you may use them for a short time after a surgery or traumatic injury. Codeine, fentanyl, hydrocodone and morphine are common opioids.

Choosing pain relief starts with your primary care provider, who can work with you to find the right treatment to help you enjoy better, pain-free days.



Q: What is sleep debt?

A: Sleep debt refers to the amount of sleep that is deficient over a period of time. For example, getting only six hours of sleep when you need eight hours will result in a sleep debt of two hours for that day. The same pattern continued for seven days builds a sleep debt of 14 hours for the week. Continued sleep debt can lead to adverse health effects.

With continued sleep deficiency your mental, emotional and physical functions usually begin to weaken. Energy flags and immunity decreases. Weight often increases and raises the risks for heart disease and diabetes.

To reverse these harmful trends, schedule extra time to sleep longer. Going to bed early is especially helpful. Be patient: It can take several nights of deep sleep to recover.

— Elizabeth Smoots, MD



Note: Due to production lead time, this issue may not reflect the current COVID-19 situation in some or all regions of the U.S. For the most up-to-date information visit [coronavirus.gov](https://www.coronavirus.gov).

The **Smart Moves Toolkit**, including this issue's printable download, **Outsmart Winter Weight Gain**, is at personalbest.com/extras/23V1tools.



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