

1 STOP OBSESSING ABOUT WEIGHT

YOU'LL... be healthier, happier (and slimmer)

SAYS Lucy Aphramor, NHS dietician and research fellow at Coventry University

WHY 'You might think dieting leads to weight loss and better health, but our analysis showed that although dieters lost weight initially, around 95% had put the pounds back on within two years. Yo-yo dieting is proven to have a harmful effect on blood fats, increasing your risk of heart disease. Interestingly, our research showed nutrition and exercise were more important health indicators than weight. For instance, a thin, inactive person who eats badly could have higher cholesterol than a slightly overweight person who eats well and exercises. Dieting may mean missing nutrients, too, putting you at risk of problems like osteoporosis. Instead, eat a wide range of foods, keep active and forget the scales. You'll be happier, healthier, and probably slimmer, too.'

2 KEEP YOUR TEETH CLEAN

YOU'LL... slash your risk of heart disease and stroke

SAYS Howard Jenkinson, professor of oral microbiology at Bristol University

WHY 'Studies have increasingly shown a connection between gum disease and heart attacks and strokes. Last year our team, along with researchers at the Royal College of Surgeons, in Ireland, discovered why. Poor dental hygiene can lead to gum disease, and this is how the bacteria that feed off plaque and food in the mouth get into the bloodstream. Once there, the bacteria use a protein to encourage blood clotting, which not only protects them from attack by the immune system and antibiotics, it also raises your heart attack and stroke risk. It's largely preventable by good cleaning, so floss gently every day - brushing only covers 60% of the surface area of teeth.'

3 LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE

YOU'LL... lower your risk of heart and kidney failure

SAYS Dr Mark Coulson, psychologist at Middlesex University

WHY 'A 2008 review of 70 studies by the Mayo Clinic, in the US, found that having a positive outlook increased life expectancy both for people in good health as well as those with chronic

illnesses. Positive wellbeing increases life expectancy by several years and provides a "buffer" against illness, reducing your chances of death from heart disease by 29% and kidney failure by 23%. We don't know why exactly, but studies show that happier people tend to have stronger immunity, plus they cope better with stress and may have lower blood pressure. Fortunately, making the best of things and having a positive outlook is something we can all learn.'

4 EAT EIGHT FRUIT AND VEGETABLES A DAY - NOT FIVE

YOU'LL... help your heart

SAYS Dr Francesca Crowe, nutritional epidemiologist at Oxford University

WHY 'Health guidelines say we should eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day, but results from EPIC, a European study on 300,000 people, suggest there may actually be greater benefits from eating eight. In the study, those who ate at least eight portions had a 22% lower risk of dying from heart disease than those who consumed fewer than three. Only a third of us eat our 5-a-day, according to the 2008/09 National Diet and Nutrition Survey, so if you can't manage eight, even adding just one extra portion will lower your risk of heart disease by 4%.'

5 STAND UP EVERY HALF HOUR

YOU'LL... reduce your waist and your risk of diabetes

SAYS Dr Genevieve Healy, postdoctoral research fellow at Queensland University

WHY 'Increasingly, research shows that people who spend long hours sitting are at greater risk of death from serious illnesses, even if they eat healthily or work out. Our study, published last year in the *European Heart Journal*, found the top 25% of people who got up from their chairs the most had waists on average 4.1cm smaller than the 25% who took the fewest breaks. A large waist is a significant risk factor for heart

disease, stroke and diabetes. Also, those who spent the longest time sitting had lower levels of HDL cholesterol - the 'good' type - and higher levels of harmful blood fats. So if you're desk-bound, make sure you get up every 30 minutes to an hour, even if it's just while you talk on the phone.'

6 TAKE A VITAMIN D TEST

YOU'LL... protect your bones and lower your risk of breast cancer and diabetes

SAYS Dr Marilyn Glenville, nutritionist (www.marilynglenville.com)

WHY 'Low levels of vitamin D are now common in the UK - our diets aren't high enough in vitamin D-rich foods, like oily fish. And because we spend a lot of time indoors, our skin doesn't get much sun exposure, when it's the action of sunlight on skin that used to be our main source of vitamin D. We've always known it's vital for strong bones, but increasingly studies are suggesting a connection between low levels of vitamin D and illnesses including heart disease, breast cancer and diabetes. In studies, vitamin D has been shown to promote apoptosis - the death of potentially cancerous cells, while the *American Journal Of Cardiology* reported a link between a deficiency and heart disease and Type 2 diabetes. However, more research is needed.'

Your GP can do a pin-prick test to see if you're vitamin D-deficient. In the meantime, follow Cancer Research UK's guide for sun exposure: 10-20 minutes a day during the UK summer without sunscreen, but never burn!

7 FOSTER GOOD FRIENDSHIPS

YOU'LL... add years to your life

SAYS Christina Dillman, clinical hypnotherapist and psychotherapist (www.mindquest.co.uk)

WHY 'An analysis of 148 studies in the US found that people with a good support network of close friends lived 50% longer than those without - the same benefit as ditching a 15-a-day cigarette habit. It's thought this is because these people tend to have lower blood pressure and stress levels, and higher immunity. Other research shows that the quality of the relationships is also important, as the benefits come from face-to-face interaction - Facebook pals don't count. And surround yourself only with friends who leave you feeling uplifted, not emotionally drained.' ■

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