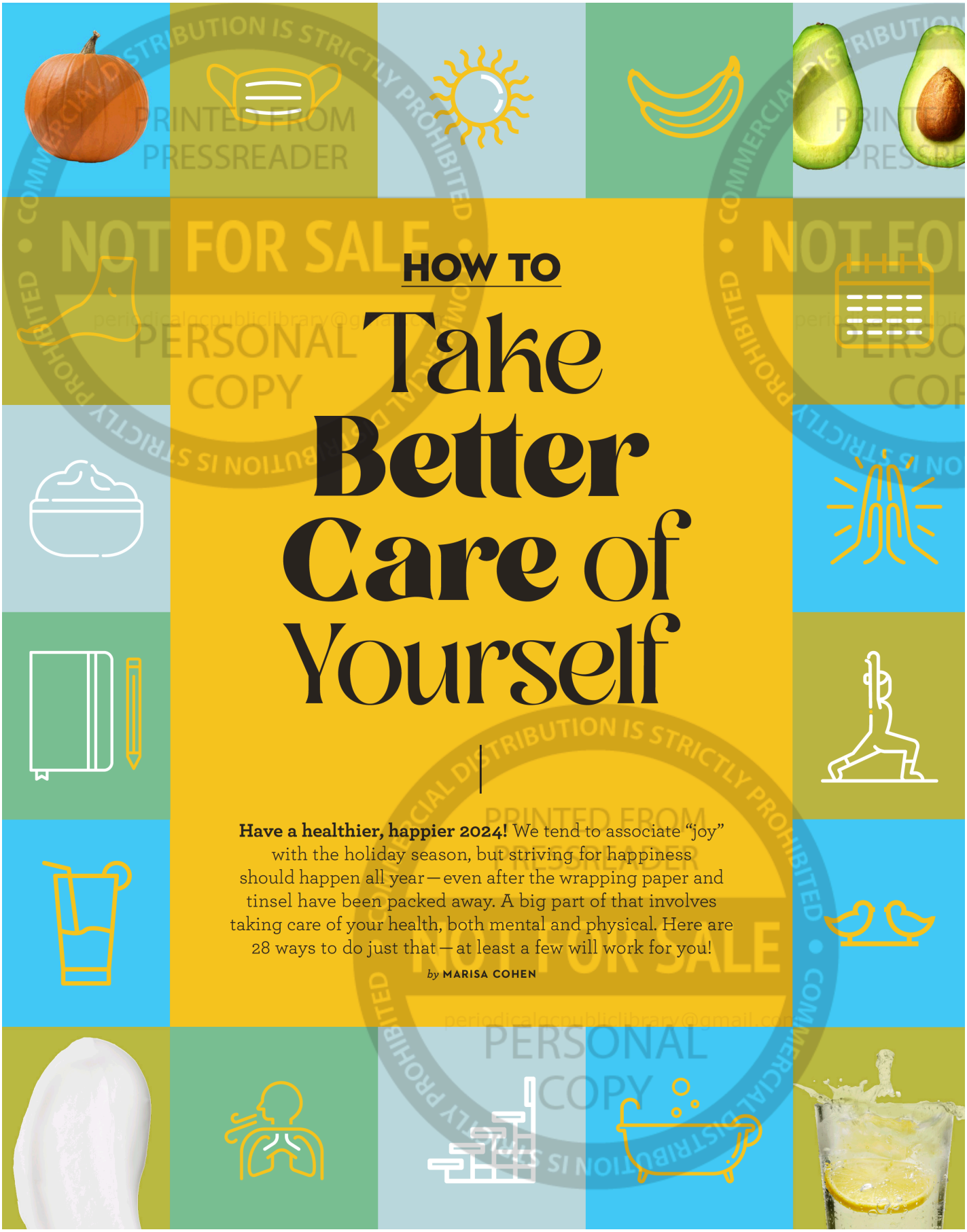
- Health self-care



HOW TO

Take Better Care of Yourself

Have a healthier, happier 2024! We tend to associate "joy" with the holiday season, but striving for happiness should happen all year—even after the wrapping paper and tinsel have been packed away. A big part of that involves taking care of your health, both mental and physical. Here are 28 ways to do just that—at least a few will work for you!

by MARISA COHEN

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1. Make time to smile. From laughing on the phone with an old friend to listening to Beyoncé to playing with your dog, **don't let joyful moments get elbowed out of your schedule**, says Tochi Iroku-Malize, M.D., M.P.H., board chair of the American Academy of Family Physicians. Embracing joy can help you build resilience and avoid burnout.

2. Help your mood soar.

Go for an a.m. walk to take in the chirping of the birds—research says that **listening to their songs can improve your mood** for up to eight hours.



3. Just breathe.

You may have heard about the calming benefits of mindful breathing, but it can be tough to remember the technique. Luckily, that doesn't matter, says Michelle Di Paolo, Ph.D., of Stress and Relaxation Services of America. "Many people worry about the 'right way' to breathe deliberately, but when you overthink it you're missing the benefits," she says. "Any **intentional, gently slowed breathing will lower stress.**"

4. Stretch it out. Every time you get up from sitting, **put your hands where your lower back meets your hips**, says Liza Egbogah, D.C., a chiropractor in Toronto. Take a deep breath in and, as you breathe out, slowly look up to the ceiling and then try to see the wall behind you. Take five deep breaths, then slowly come back up. This helps decompress your spine and improve your posture, which reduces stress and improves mood.

5. Swap your fats.

Eating heart-healthier can be deliciously joyful. Cooking veggies? Use olive oil in place of butter. Making a sandwich? Spread creamy avocado instead of mayo.





6. Team up to work out. Make a weekly exercise date: "Exercise can be a fantastic way to build relationships and even inspire those around you," says Stefani Sassos, R.D.N., nutrition director of the Good Housekeeping Institute and a NASM-certified personal trainer. **A workout buddy can keep you motivated**, which can help you stick with it. Plus, research shows that building close relationships is a key to happiness as we age.



7. Find your comfort level. When it comes to COVID-19, "**go out and enjoy your life** while being mindful of the fact that it hasn't gone away," says Dr. Iroku-Malize. "If your baseline health is good and you've had your vaccines, then just remember to always wash your hands, and if you get COVID-19, stay home and take care of yourself." For people at higher risk, it's OK to say no to big social gatherings and continue to mask in public places, she adds—no apologies or guilt required.

Pumpkin, moisturizer, lemon seltzer and avocado half: Getty Images. Avocado halves: Vadym/stock.adobe.com. Weights: photoguns/stock.adobe.com.

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8. Keep it real. When you're craving something sweet, **indulge in the foods you love, but do it in moderation,** says Sassos. "For a healthier treat, I like frozen fruit slices covered in dark chocolate," she adds. Her favorite brand: Diana's Bananas.

9. Get pickled.



About 90% of serotonin (the brain's feel-good neurotransmitter) comes from the gut, says Marissa Meshulam, R.D., of MPM Nutrition. **Fermented foods are full of probiotics, which can help maintain healthy gut microbiomes.** Add sauerkraut to a salad or a sandwich, use Greek yogurt instead of sour cream or top a rice dish with kimchi, she suggests.

10. Treat hot flashes.

If menopause symptoms such as hot flashes and night sweats are making you miserable, do something about it! "Waiting out hot flashes is not a strategy," says Lauren F. Streicher, M.D., author of *Hot Flash Hell*, who points out that they can last seven to 10 years. "There are safe, effective hormonal and nonhormonal solutions, so put down the fan and see a clinician with menopause expertise."

11. Eat greener. Dark leafy greens such as kale, spinach and Swiss chard are high in fiber, which can **help prevent moodiness** associated with blood sugar highs and lows, Meshulam says. Throw some chard into your soup, or mix a handful of spinach with your scrambled eggs.



12. De-stress your neck. Sore from looking down at your phone all day? Lock your fingers behind your back and **squeeze your shoulder blades together**, then try to bring your hands toward the ground and hold for five breaths, suggests Egbogah.

13. Balance your load.

One of the best ways to prevent mood-depleting chronic pain is by using a supportive backpack. Good Housekeeping testers love the Borealis Laptop Backpack from The North Face ($99).



14. Have a go-to second drink. Alcohol may perk up your mood at first, but since it's a depressant, the good vibes can quickly switch to depression and anxiety. To keep from overdoing it, **have a nonalcoholic beverage in mind** to order after your first glass of booze – say, pineapple juice and seltzer or even a classic Shirley Temple – you'll also wake up feeling good the next day.

15. Max out on cuddling.

You may not always have time for sex, but you can hold hands with your partner as you shop for groceries, get some cuddles at the animal rescue or hug a friend. Research shows that **physical contact lowers levels of the stress hormone cortisol.**

Kale and tooth care: Getty Images.

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16. Do what you love.

The world's best workout will do nothing for your mind and body if you dread it. "Don't be afraid to **think outside the box and try something new**," suggests Sassos. "A dance-style workout like Zumba is a great way to begin—it is fun and upbeat and can even make you forget you're there to work out." If dance isn't your thing, try something else with an element of fun, such as playing in a recreational soccer league or doing soothing yoga.



17. Schedule your annual check-up.

There are so many health checks to take care of (mammogram, colonoscopy, vaccines) that it can be easy to get overwhelmed. **Your primary care doctor can help keep you on track**, Dr. Iroku-Malize says.



18. Cheer up your tootsies.

No one is happy when their feet hurt. **Loosen yours up by doing these two stretches as soon as you wake up**, suggests New York City podiatrist and foot surgeon Brad Schaeffer, D.P.M., star of *My Feet Are Killing Me* on TLC. "Lie in bed and spell out the ABC's with your feet to get the blood pumping," he says. Next, lean against a wall and do four reps of a calf stretch, holding for 10 seconds each time to stretch from your plantar fascia all the way up to your Achilles tendon and calf.

19. Shore up support.

Building a community—in person or online—is vital for your well-being, especially if you have a disability, says Rhoda Olkin, Ph.D., a professor at the California School of Professional Psychology at Alliant International University: "**Move away from people who make you feel bad about yourself** and surround yourself with disability-affirmative friends." It can help build resilience and boost mood.



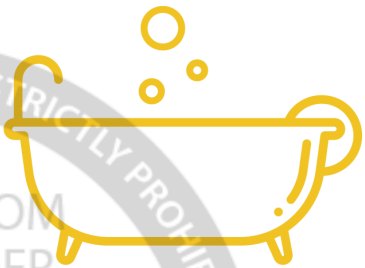
20. Visit a museum.

People who regularly go on artsy outings may have a **lower risk of developing depression.**



21. Spruce up your smile.

Brushing and flossing each day has multiple benefits for your body and your soul: Not only can taking care of your teeth **reduce your risk of heart disease**, but when you feel good about your chompers you may smile more, and according to research, just the act of smiling makes you feel happier.



22. Float into sleep.

A hot bath about an hour before bed does double duty—it **lowers stress as you soak and helps you snooze better** so you'll wake up in a better mood. Research has shown that taking a hot bath helps people fall asleep about 10 minutes earlier and have a better-quality rest.

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23. Take the stairs.

Adding bursts of exercise to your day gives you an energy boost. Plus, new research has found that climbing more than five flights of stairs daily may be as **beneficial to your health as walking 10,000 steps.**

24. Uplift your mind.

A good mood can turn sour when you're stuck in traffic or in an endless line at the post office. **Turn "stuck in space" moments positive with a podcast:** Try *Live Happy Now*, which digs into the science and practice of happiness, or *Smartless*, which will crack you up as the hosts rib each other and interview their funny friends.

25. Find cheer in the bleachers.

New research shows that **attending a live sporting event** improves feelings of well-being and decreases loneliness. Go, team!

26. Let in the light. As daylight decreases, your mood can plummet. But numerous studies have shown the benefits of using a **therapeutic light box**: GH's top pick is the Verilux HappyLight Full-Size—sit in front of it for around 20 minutes first thing in the morning and start your day in a lighter, happier mental state.



27. Eat pumpkin year-round.

The Halloween fave is full of **mood-boosting magnesium.** Mix seeds or the canned stuff into overnight oats, chili or soup, Sassos suggests.

28. Be thankful.

You don't have to be part of any organized religion to get the **benefits of gratitude**, which can reduce stress and boost your mental and physical health. Choose one meal a day and spend a few moments before you dig in thinking about what you're grateful for. It can be anything from the delicious food you're about to eat to your cozy sweater to the text you got from a friend that made you laugh out loud.

Pumpkin: Getty Images.