- Mind and body / Ageing



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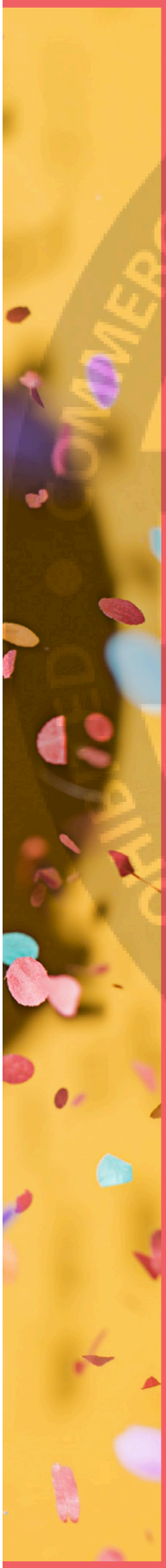

FEEL BETTER, LONGER

You are far more than the sum of your body parts, but keeping those parts working properly is key to **staying active and pain-free** well into older age. Give them a quick checkup and the TLC they need. **Here's how.**

BY MERYL DAVIDS LANDAU

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YOUR SPINE?

You service your car every 5,000 miles or so, but perhaps like many others you pay attention to the needs of your body only when bits and pieces start breaking down. As a reader of this magazine, you clearly know that's a mistake. Preventive measures now will pay off with better living down the road, says Matthew Motisi, D.O., an orthopedic surgeon at Baptist Health Orthopedic Care in Miami.

The thing is, even if most of your organs, bones, and systems are in top working order, if one or two have burgeoning issues, that can reverberate through the rest of your body and create additional problems. If you've got specific concerns about aches, pains, or other symptoms, consult with your primary care physician right away, and don't skip your annual physical even if you feel fine. Meanwhile, try these simple assessments you can do at home. After that, read on for expert advice—and speak to your doctor if you don't love your results.

Here's how to test yourself:

HOW HEALTHY IS YOUR...

SPINE?

▶ **THE TEST:** Sit up straight in a chair and place your hands on your shoulders. Twist your head, neck, and shoulders slowly toward the right, then to the left. Next, carefully roll your head, neck, and upper back forward, chin toward chest. Reverse and lean back, opening your neck and upper chest. Finally, stand up and, using your right hand, reach for a pretend plate on a shelf to the left above your head; switch hands and grab for a plate to your right.

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▶ HOW TO RATE YOURSELF:

The more you can move without feeling resistance or achiness, the better. "Twisting and bending with no pain is a pretty good indicator of the health of your spine," says Michael Gardner, M.D., an orthopedic surgeon at Stanford University and founder of the online National Scoliosis Clinic. You're checking not how far you can turn but whether you can do it pain-free. (Note: Don't do this when you first wake up or right after a gym workout, when tight muscles rather than your spine may be causing the ache.)

▶ WHY IT MATTERS:

The small stacked bones and discs running from the skull to the lower back are particularly susceptible to degeneration over the years, Dr. Gardner says, primarily because aging and arthritis distort their normal structure. This is especially true for people with large bodies and those who

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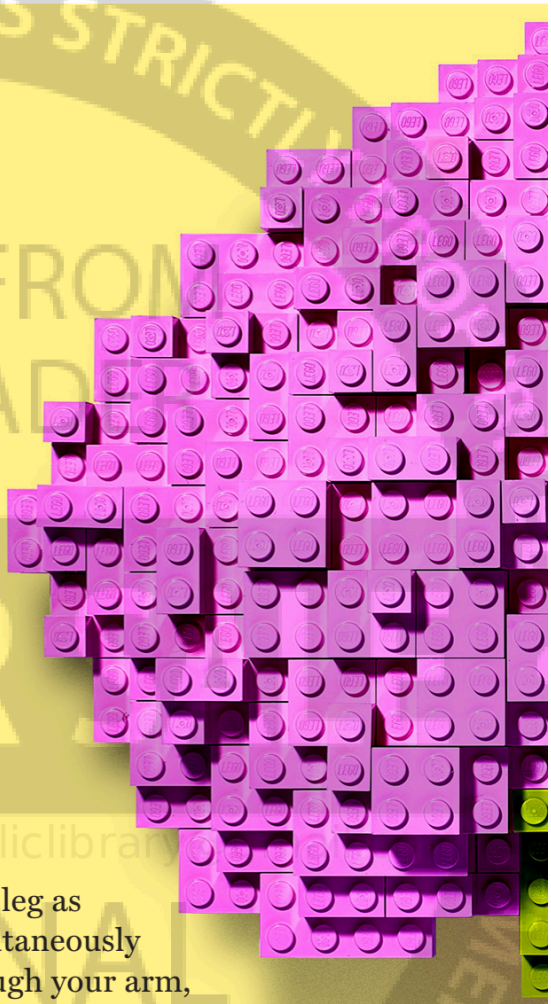
hunch over their phones or computers, as these factors add pressure. We need our spines to be supple enough to bend for activities like placing groceries in the car and breezing through a friendly game of pickleball. Also, the spinal column encases the spinal cord nerves, and if they're pinched off, problems such as a headache or leg pain can manifest as a result.

▶ THE TUNE-UP:

Many of us slouch forward when we sit, stand, and walk, but in the ideal stance the shoulder blades are slightly pinched back. Raise your phone and computer monitor to eye level rather than dropping your head. And be sure to exercise: One study following hundreds of people for more than a decade found that those who exercised for less than an hour a week ended up with more middle and lower spine degeneration. (For the maximum benefits, try to get at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise per week.)

Any movement is beneficial, but Dr. Gardner created a special stretch for the spine. This "push-me, pull-me" move stretches the back and strengthens the muscles: Get on all fours, arms beneath your shoulders and knees below your hips, and stretch your right leg back. Keep your toes on the floor as you lift your left arm straight out in front of you. Now stretch your spine toward your extended leg as you simultaneously pull through your arm, expanding the rib cage. Hold for 10 seconds, then switch to your left leg and right arm. Do several reps at least three times a week.



HOW HEALTHY IS YOUR...

BRAIN?

▶ THE TEST: Grab a pencil and paper and choose any large category containing many items (e.g., fruits, animals, or TV shows). Set your phone timer for one minute and press Start. Jot down as many things as you can think of that fit into the group. When the timer goes off, put down your pencil.

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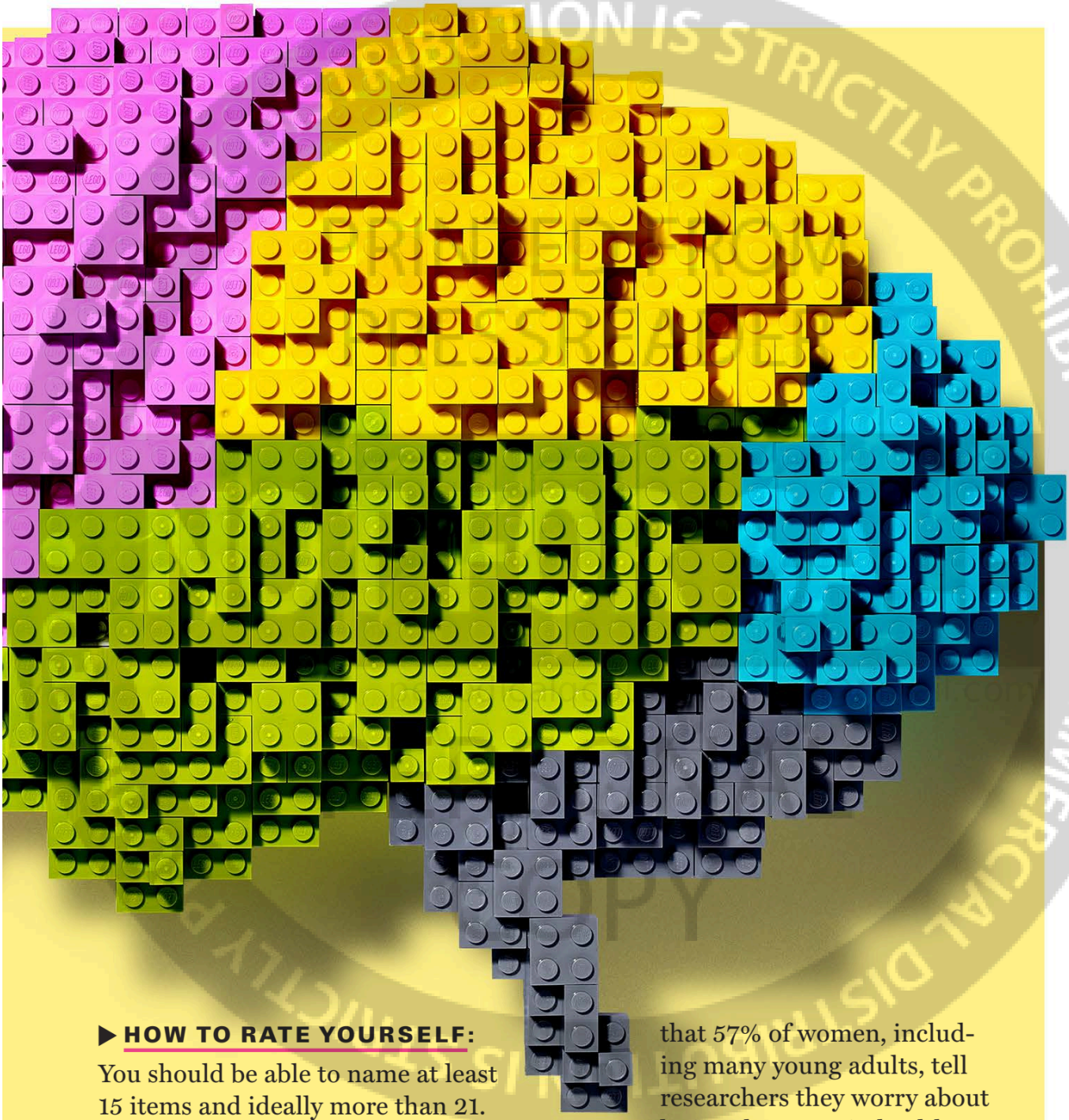

▶ HOW TO RATE YOURSELF:
You should be able to name at least 15 items and ideally more than 21.

▶ WHY IT MATTERS:
Difficulty with categorization is recognized by neurologists as an early symptom of cognitive impairment. It's not the only sign, of course, so talk to your doctor if you notice significant memory decline. Our memory and thinking skills are so important to us that 57% of women, including many young adults, tell researchers they worry about losing them. Brain health means more than just avoiding diseases like Alzheimer's, as of course we all hope to do—a sharp mind will enable you to work, travel, and socialize for decades to come. But don't panic if occasionally you can't remember an old friend's name or recall where you left your cell phone:

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Our brains do change slightly as we age, and these minor issues don't indicate disease.

▶ **THE TUNE-UP:** Seek treatment for things proven in research to damage the brain such as hypertension, diabetes, and depression; quit smoking; and avoid being too sedentary. Learning new skills and socializing with friends and family members can help keep you sharp, but don't bother with supplements, targeted computer programs, or other items hawked online as memory-enhancing—none are proven to work, and some might be harmful.

Thankfully, there are lifestyle changes that evidence shows us can help: In a groundbreaking study last year, people with mild cognitive impairment or early dementia who for five months ate a plant-based vegan diet (full of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, soy, and nuts); walked a half hour every day and did strength training three times weekly; managed stress with meditation, yoga, and breathwork; and attended group meetings for emotional support saw their cognitive skills improve or stabilize, while the skills of those who didn't make these lifestyle changes worsened. The authors speculate that these actions may prevent disease in people whose brains are currently healthy.

HOW HEALTHY IS YOUR...

HEART?

▶ **THE TEST:** If you have a cardio routine, do what you normally do; if you're not an avid exerciser, take a brisk stroll. Pay attention to how this feels: Do you have difficulty catching your breath? Are you moving more slowly than usual? Do you have to sit down before long? Another test to try: Check your heart rate while at rest. A wearable activity tracker makes this easy, but you can do it manually by pressing your first two fingers lightly on the artery inside your wrist on the thumb side to feel your pulse. Count for 30 seconds, then multiply by two.

▶ **HOW TO RATE YOURSELF:** Recall yourself working out or taking a similar walk a few months or a year ago. If you're tired or breathless earlier now—say, halfway through a fast two-mile walk rather than near the end—ask your doctor to assess you further. Many of us attribute fatigue or breathlessness to aging, but a heart that has to work harder than before "can be an early herald of cardiovascular disease," says Corey Bradley, M.D., a preventive cardiologist and an assistant professor of medicine at Columbia University's Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons.

As for the second test, most adults' resting heart rate should be 60 to 100 beats per minute (bpm), with most falling between 55 and 85 bpm. A high

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resting heart rate could indicate increased risk of cardiovascular disease, because the harder the heart has to work to pump blood, the harder it is for it to maintain proper function. If your heart rate is consistently above 90 bpm, touch base with your doctor.

▶ WHY IT MATTERS: Having a healthy cardiovascular system (which includes the heart and all the arteries in the brain, legs, arms, and organs) lowers the risk of life-limiting cardiac events like

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heart attack and stroke, and it also lets you do all the things you love, from dancing the night away to hiking up a mountain. Luckily, since heart disease develops slowly over time, actions taken now can have a big impact. "Women tend to have heart disease later in life than men, but it starts—and we have to start thinking about prevention—decades before that," Dr. Bradley says.

▶ THE TUNE-UP: Scientists are working to understand the numerous genes thought to play a role in heart disease, so one day we might crunch our personal risks on a "polygenic calculator" and learn about precise therapies just for us. Until then, do everything you know is good for your heart: exercise regularly, get enough sleep, don't overstress about the little things in life, and eat a healthy diet (like the Mediterranean diet) that contains a lot of protein. Dr. Bradley suggests Greek yogurt and cottage cheese as low-calorie protein powerhouses.

Also, stay inside when wildfire smoke or ground ozone pollution levels are high, a common problem thanks to climate change. A recent review found that breathing in these particles could dangerously strain the heart. (Track levels near you on the federal government website airnow.gov.)



HOW HEALTHY ARE YOUR...

JOINTS?

▶ THE TEST: Before getting out of bed one morning or after sitting in a car or a chair for several hours, notice if any of your joints feel stiff. Then, every morning for a month, closely examine the joints in your hands and knees for redness or swelling. (Some, like hip joints, are too deep to be seen.)

▶ HOW TO RATE YOURSELF: Stiffness in joints, especially if it lingers for more than an hour, may be a sign of arthritis. Ditto if you see redness or

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STUDIO 33.

swelling lasting three days or longer or occurring more than three times in a month.

▶ WHY IT MATTERS:

Given the strain life puts on the hinges, balls, and sockets connecting the body's 206 bones, joints are amazingly resilient. But they can wear down as their soft tissue contracts and cartilage thins. "When you use joints for many years, it can result in degenerative joint disease," says Dr. Motisi. Previously injured joints are especially prone to having issues.

▶ THE TUNE-UP:

Regular exercise is key for healthy joints, because "motion is lotion" (as physical therapists say) and because strong muscles absorb some of the impacts that would otherwise fall on the joints. Swimming and biking are gentle on joints, but unless you have pain, don't shun joint-jarring activities you enjoy. "If you like to play tennis or basketball or run marathons, keep doing those things," Dr. Motisi says.

Other joint-saving moves: Work on taking off excess weight to remove pressure on joints. Losing as little as 11 pounds can halve the risk of knee osteoarthritis, according to the Arthritis Foundation. And save stilettos for special occasions: Three-inch heels are especially tough on foot joints (as is sitting or standing too much, so alternate throughout the day). Last, chow down on green leafy veggies, which contain joint-boosting compounds as well as calcium.

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