- Lifestyles

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Small but mighty

Forget the convoluted diets, plans and diagrams – it's the small changes that can transform your health.

BY BETH HOWARD



1 ADD A VEGIE

It's oh-so easy to rely on standbys such as broccoli and carrots (especially if you live with a "What is that?!" eater). But by expanding your roster, you have a better chance of eating a variety of nutrients. And you might excite your palate enough to eat even more vegies, which are linked to a lower risk of dying of heart disease.

2 PLAN TO WIN

Spend 15 minutes a day imagining what life will be like when you accomplish your goals, advises developmental clinical psychologist Dr Susan Krauss Whitbourne. Over time your outlook may become sunnier – a good thing, as optimists are more likely to live to age 90 or beyond, a recent US study shows.

3 TREAT YOUR FEET

It's time to bestow a little love on them. Data shows that reflexology, a special kind of foot massage, can help people sleep an hour longer and ease fatigue and anxiety levels. Before bed, use your thumbs to knead circles across your soles, or roll a tennis ball along the bottoms of your feet.

4 MEET FOR COFFEE

Drinking two to three cups a day of your favourite brew (decaf is fine) can lead to a lower risk of cardiovascular disease and early death. If you like the taste, go for espresso – it boasts more antioxidants (which may help stave off dementia) than any other beverage, says neuroscientist Dr Lisa Mosconi. Just make sure you sip the caffeinated stuff early enough in the day so that you can still fall asleep at night. And gabbing with a good friend is a mood lifter, with social connections tied to greater health and wellbeing as people age.

5 DITCH DIET DRINKS

Yes, it's time to swap them out for sparkling water. In a 14-year study of midlife women, those who drank more than 590ml of diet soft drink a week faced twice the risk of diabetes of those who didn't consume artificially sweetened or sugar-sweetened beverages. Chemicals in artificial sweeteners can trigger changes to the gut microbiome that harm metabolic health.

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6 GIVE YOUR TOES MORE SPACE

Women's feet tend to get bigger in midlife, especially after pregnancy, says podiatrist and foot surgeon Dr Brad Schaeffer. He adds that most women he sees are wearing the wrong shoe size. "This can have a ripple effect on your body and affect your knees, hips and lower back," he says. Seek out a shoe store or a podiatrist to get properly measured and fitted.

7 FIND YOUR FLOCK

According to British research, seeing or hearing birds was associated with a lasting boost in mental wellbeing. Go for a bird-watching walk or put out a bird feeder or bird bath, sit at the window next to your cat and watch your worries take flight.

8 MOISTURISE EVERYWHERE

Vaginal moisturisers can help you avoid painful sex resulting from dry, thinning tissues, says obstetrician/gynaecologist Dr Susan Loeb-Zeitlin. While lubricants are great for minimising friction during sex, vaginal moisturisers help produce and lock in moisture just as facial moisturisers do. Pick one with hyaluronic acid, as some studies have found that it's effective as vaginal oestrogen at improving skin health.

9 MARK YOUR CALENDAR

This is your reminder to add that colonoscopy, cervical screening test and any other important procedures, exams and screenings to your calendar. If a mammogram is on your to-do list, there's a way to make it a little less unpleasant: Look for an imaging centre that uses new technology called SmartCurve. Its compression surface is curved like a woman's breast, which may decrease discomfort.

10 GRAB A PAINTBRUSH

Or a camera, a lump of clay or some oil pastels. Getting into a focused creative zone is a boon for both body and mind. Research has found that mindfulness-based art therapy might ease menopausal stress and also improve nutritious eating and relationship health. Plus, when you try something you haven't done before, your brain creates new neurons and connections, and your memory is affected positively as well.

11 JACK UP YOUR CALCIUM

As you get older, your body gets worse at absorbing this mineral, but it's key for strong bones as well as your heart, muscles, nerves and hormones. Make a point of reaching for calcium-rich foods such as dairy products (yoghurt is an especially good source), leafy greens (such as spring greens and kale), tofu and sardines. And ask your doctor or dietitian if you should take a supplement, says nutritionist Dawn Jackson Blatner. Women need 1000mg of calcium daily until 50, then 1300mg per day after 51.



12 EXERCISE SMARTER, NOT LONGER

Many people think that the only way to get results is to do more and more physical activity, but there are other options. Yes, any workout you do is good exercise, but research shows that working out more intensely (rather than just spending more time exercising) can improve spatial memory, the kind that helps you recall where you left your keys or wallet. "If you have 20 minutes, go all out for one minute, rest for one minute and then repeat six to 10 more times," says exercise physiologist Dr Abbie Smith-Ryan. P

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