

On Health

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Consumer Reports On Health (ISSN 1058-0832) is published monthly by Consumer Reports, 101 Truman Ave., Yonkers, NY 10703. Periodicals postage paid at Yonkers, N.Y., and at other mailing offices. Canadian postage at Mississauga, Ontario (Cdn pub acct #2665247; agreement #40015148). Canada Post, please return all undeliverable copies to: Consumer Reports On Health, P.O. Box 481, STN MAIN, Markham, ON L3P 0C4. The title Consumer Reports On Health is a trademark belonging to Consumer Reports. Contents of this issue copyright © 2023 by Consumer Reports. All rights reserved under international and Pan-American copyright conventions. Printed in USA.

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CONSUMER REPORTS IN ACTION

Avoid These Five Food Additives

How they can harm you—and where they may lurk



FOOD SAFETY ADVOCATES are concerned about a broad range of food additives, hundreds of which have entered the food system in the past two decades without a rigorous safety review by the Food and Drug Administration. Currently, CR's food safety experts are focused on five of these additives: brominated vegetable oil, potassium bromate, propyl paraben, Red Dye No. 3, and titanium dioxide. They've been linked to serious health problems, such as a higher risk of cancer, nervous system damage, and behavioral issues.

All are prohibited for use in the European Union but allowed in many foods in the U.S., such as baked goods, beverages, and candies. "Despite the well-documented risks these five food chemicals pose to our health, the FDA has failed to take action to protect the public," says Brian Ronholm, director of food

policy at Consumer Reports.

CR and the Environmental Working Group have co-sponsored a bill to ban these additives from candy, cereals, and other processed foods sold in California. (The state Assembly passed the bill, which is now moving forward.) "By banning these dangerous chemicals from food, California can protect public health in the state and encourage manufacturers to make their products safer for the rest of the country," Ronholm says.

To avoid the substances, scan ingredient labels, especially of items most apt to contain them: candy, soda, sports drinks, packaged bread, tortillas, baked treats, and shredded cheese. (In general, the more processed the product, the more likely it is to have these ingredients.) For more on these additives, go to CR.org/ingredients.

THIS MONTH'S EXPERTS

We contact health authorities and medical researchers from around the world. Here are some of the experts we consulted this month:

Ruth Barclay, PhD, professor of physical therapy, University of Manitoba, Canada.

Mike Bentley PhD, entomologist, director of training and education, National Pest Management Association.

Sotiria Everett, RD, clinical assistant professor, Stony Brook Medicine, Stony Brook, N.Y.

Emily J. Fox, PhD, associate professor of

physical therapy, University of Florida, Gainesville.

Terry Fulmer, PhD, RN, president, John A. Hartford Foundation, New York City.

Peter Hollman, MD, chief medical officer, Brown Medicine, Providence, R.I.

Cary Kreutzer, RDN, professor of gerontology, USC Leonard Davis School of Gerontology and Keck School of Medicine of USC, Los Angeles.

Asher Rosinger, PhD, director, Water, Health, and Nutrition Lab, Penn State College of Health and Human Development, University Park, Pa.

R. Sean Morrison, MD, chair, Brookdale Department of Geriatrics and Palliative Medicine, Mount Sinai Hospital, New York City.

Maya Vadiveloo, PhD, RD, associate professor, nutrition and food sciences, University of Rhode Island, Kingston.



Activities That Ease Parkinson's Symptoms

In an analysis of 156 studies, a wide variety of exercises were found to reduce the symptoms of Parkinson's disease. Swimming and dance eased trembling, stiffness, and balance problems. Cycling, brisk walking, and water workouts improved quality of life.

Source: Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, January 2023.



DO YOU NEED SKIN CHECKS?

There's not enough evidence for or against skin cancer checks for people without signs of the disease or a personal or family history of it, according to the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force. But the group says more evidence is needed. If you have concerns or symptoms such as a suspicious mole, talk with your doctor about what's appropriate for you.

Source: JAMA, April 18, 2023.



REGULAR SLEEP LOWERS BLOOD PRESSURE

People whose total sleep amount fluctuated by more than 2 hours from night to night had an 85 percent higher hypertension risk than those with more consistent sleep, a study found. Bedtimes that varied by more than about 80 minutes were linked to a 9 to 32 percent higher risk.

Source: Hypertension, May 2023.

Are OTC Hearing Aids as Good as Rx Ones?

Over-the-counter "self-fitting" hearing aids—so named because users adjust them themselves—worked just as well as audiologist-fitted prescription hearing aids, according to a small study of older adults with mild to moderate hearing loss. OTC aids usually cost about \$200 to \$1,000 per set. Traditional aids can be about \$1,000 to \$6,000 per pair.

Source: JAMA Otolaryngology-Head & Neck Surgery, April 13, 2023.



Magnesium-Rich Food for Brainpower

Women who ate plenty of magnesium-rich food (like leafy greens, beans, nuts, seeds, and whole grains) had better brain health, according to a recent study. The recommended dietary intake is 320 daily milligrams for women ages 31 and up (and 420 mg for men). Researchers say 550 mg or more from food may offer extra brain benefits.

Source: European Journal of Nutrition, March 10, 2023.



The Simple Secret to a Happier Day

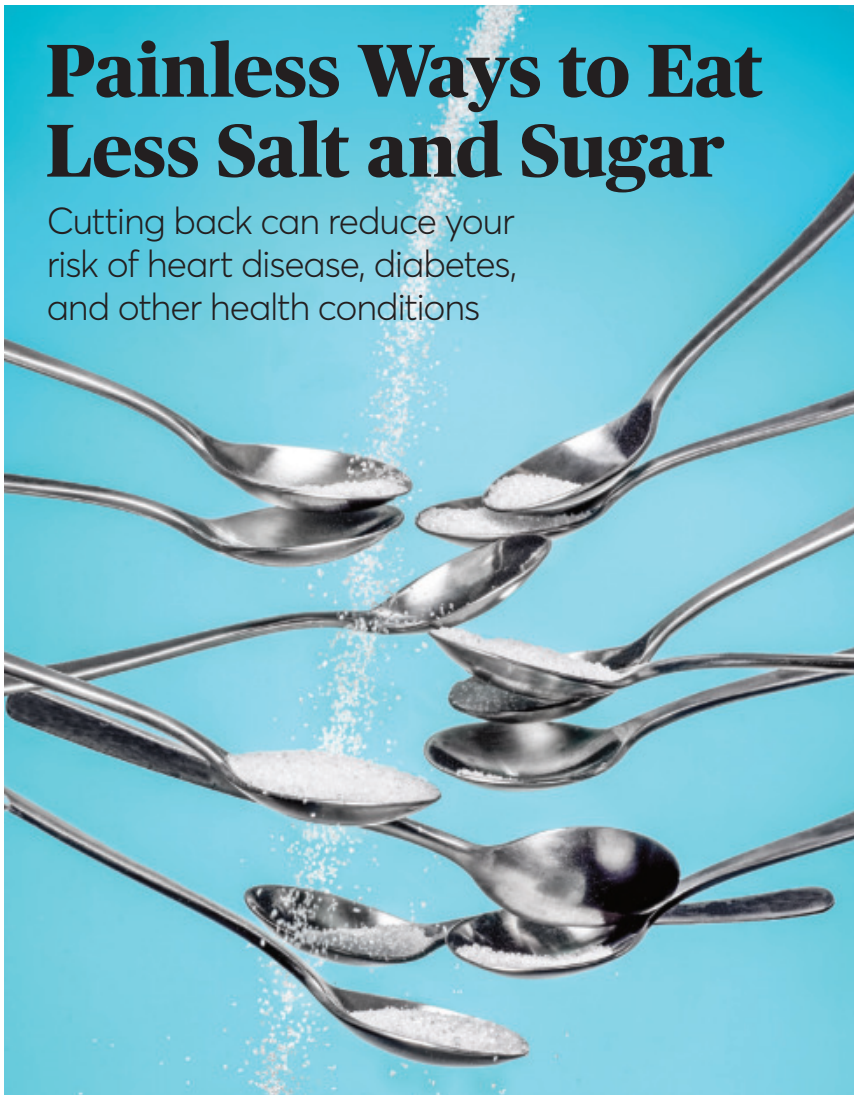
Talking with a friend daily—in person or by phone—can increase well-being and cut stress, a recent study found. Researchers asked 907 volunteers to have at least one "quality conversation" with a buddy, then report on their stress, anxiety, loneliness,

and the quality of their day. While volunteers were asked to use strategies known to build connections, such as listening or sharing something meaningful, what helped boost mood the most was simply reaching out to another person.

Source: Communication Research, Jan. 27, 2023.

Painless Ways to Eat Less Salt and Sugar

Cutting back can reduce your risk of heart disease, diabetes, and other health conditions



IT'S VERY LIKELY that at your last medical appointment, your doctor gave you a warning about your blood pressure or blood sugar levels creeping higher, if you're not already on medication to control one or both of them. Almost 75 percent of U.S. adults 60 and older have high blood pressure. About 29 percent 65 and older have type 2 diabetes; almost 50 percent have prediabetes.

What your doctor also may have shared with you is that reducing your intake of sodium and added sugars can help improve your blood pressure and blood sugar levels, respectively. These dietary changes also benefit your weight and reduce your risk of other health problems,

such as heart disease, dementia, stroke, kidney trouble, and erectile dysfunction.

"Americans are consuming far more processed foods than ever," says Cary Kreutzer, RDN, a professor of gerontology at USC Leonard Davis School of Gerontology and Keck School of Medicine in Los Angeles. "Ultraprocessed foods are being developed that have 'hedonic'—highly pleasurable—qualities, and salt and sugar play a significant role in promoting the hedonic properties in foods." This makes it easier to overconsume calories and promotes weight gain, which further exacerbates insulin resistance, inflammation, and the risk of type 2 diabetes.

The American Heart Association (AHA)

has sounded a warning on both ingredients, recommending significantly lower limits than the Dietary Guidelines for Americans calls for. The good news is that with a few tips, sodium and added sugars are easy to avoid in foods.

The Benefits of Less Salt

Reducing your intake of sodium is one of the most important dietary changes you can make for your health. In fact, the benefits are so huge that the World Health Organization (WHO) is redoubling its efforts to lower sodium consumption worldwide by 30 percent by the year 2030.

Too much sodium is harmful because it contributes to high blood pressure, which is a leading risk factor for stroke and heart disease, says Maya Vadiveloo, PhD, an associate professor of nutrition and food sciences at the University of Rhode Island in Kingston. A recent study of almost 11,000 people, published in the *European Heart Journal Open*, found that for every 1,000 mg of sodium in the diet, there was a 9 percent increased risk for narrowing of the carotid arteries and a 16 percent increased risk for narrowing of the coronary arteries. Even adults without high blood pressure saw their risk increase in step with their sodium intake. That means that some people who consume high amounts of sodium may already have hardening of the arteries even though their blood pressure hasn't reflected it yet.

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends getting no more than 2,300 mg of sodium per day (the amount found in 1 teaspoon of salt), but the AHA says 1,500 mg is an even healthier goal. Americans currently get about 3,400 mg a day, on average. That's because staples in the American diet—bacon, cold cuts, frozen dinners, pizza, and most restaurant meals—are loaded with sodium.

The Reason to Eat Less Sugar

Added sugars aren't naturally occurring, like the sugars found in fruit, vegetables, and dairy; they're put into foods during processing to sweeten them. In excess, added sugars can contribute to insulin

resistance, which in turn leads to higher blood sugar levels and increased risk of diabetes. They've also been linked to heart disease, obesity, and even depression.

Sugar-sweetened beverages (soda, iced tea, and sports drinks), cookies, pastries, baked goods, candy, ice cream, and other sweet treats are leading sources of added sugars. But those are also found in condiments, packaged bread, and other products that you wouldn't typically think of as sweet.

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends limiting added sugars to less than 10 percent of daily calories, or about 200 calories if you're eating 2,000 calories a day. But AHA guidelines drop them even lower—no more than 6 teaspoons (25 grams or 100 calories) per day for women, and no more than 9 teaspoons (36 grams or 144 calories) for men.

Small Moves, Big Benefits

Here's what you can do to reduce your intake of these two common ingredients.

➤ **Start reading labels.** "The Nutrition Facts label on food packaging makes it easy to see exactly how much sodium and added sugars are in each serving," Vadiveloo says. And you may be surprised: A cinnamon raisin bagel can contain 540 mg of sodium. A 6-ounce container of flavored yogurt can have 13 grams of added sugars—as much as some ice creams. The label also shows

Some people are able to cut down on salt and sugar quickly, but it may be more practical to give your taste buds time to adjust.

the percentage of the maximum recommended daily amount that number represents. A daily value of 20 percent or above for sodium or added sugars is high.

➤ **Cook more at home.** Most of the sodium in our diet comes from processed foods and restaurant meals. In addition, anything pre-prepared at the grocery store—such as roast chicken or deli salads—is likely to have added sodium as well. Cut out one restaurant meal a day or week in favor of home cooking and you can save yourself thousands of milligrams of sodium and many grams of added sugar.

➤ **Go slow.** While some people are able to cut down on salt and sugar quickly, others might need to take a more gradual approach. It may be more practical to give your taste buds time to adjust to the change. For instance, if you typically add 2 teaspoons of sugar to your coffee, reduce it to 1½ teaspoons, then 1, then ½ teaspoon over a week or two. The same subtle shifts work for sodium: Skip the

piece of cheese on your burger. Try low-sodium soup or pasta sauce. And if you're dining out, don't add salt to your meals.

➤ **Find sweet alternatives.** Opt for plain yogurt with fresh or frozen fruit over flavored yogurt. Eat a bowl of berries with a dollop of ice cream instead of cookies or cake. Nibble on a square of dense dark chocolate instead of a candy bar. Choose plain oatmeal (add fruit and cinnamon for sweetness) instead of sweet cereal.

➤ **Explore your spice cabinet.** Perk foods up with herbs and spices rather than adding salt to them. Basil, mint, parsley, chili flakes, ginger, garlic—they all add flavor as well as antioxidants and other healthy compounds. Spices can provide sweet satisfaction, too: Try cinnamon, nutmeg, or vanilla extract in yogurt, coffee, and other foods that you might normally add sugar to.

➤ **Don't aim for perfection.** "Making changes can be challenging," Vadiveloo says. "Every day and every meal are a new opportunity" to cut back. If you do have a salty or sugary meal, don't beat yourself up or assume you won't be able to stick with this new dietary approach long-term. "You'll get better over time," she says. "It's a lifelong process."



LEARN

For information on frozen meals with less sodium and sugar, go to CR.org/frozenmeals.

IS HONEY BETTER FOR YOU THAN TABLE SUGAR?

Not really. Honey and maple syrup have small amounts of healthy plant compounds called polyphenols, but they're still a type of sugar, and they may still prompt you to overeat otherwise empty calories. A tablespoon of honey, for example, has

17 grams of sugars, compared with 12 grams in regular sugar. Because it's very sweet, you can use less, but that means you're getting even less of those healthy plant compounds, too. Noncaloric sweeteners, such as stevia and monk fruit, aren't necessarily

healthier, either. Some may contain erythritol, which has been linked to an increased risk of cardiovascular issues.

As for salt, "Himalayan and sea salts may have slightly different flavor and contain some trace minerals, but they aren't considered healthier than table salt," says

Amy Keating, RD, a CR nutritionist. But they generally come in larger crystals, so you get less sodium per teaspoon. If you add a pinch of these when you're ready to serve your food—sprinkle it over your salad, pasta, or soup—instead of while you're cooking, the salt will stand out.



Secrets to Finding Great Doctors

It seems like all of them are booked up or don't take your insurance. Here, getting in to see the ones you want ... and quickly.

NEEDED TO SEE A DOCTOR? It may be more challenging than usual right now. The average wait for an appointment with a physician for new patients is 26 days, according to a 2022 survey of 15 metropolitan areas by the physician recruiting firm Merritt Hawkins. That's the longest it's been since the company began doing the survey in 2004. In addition, 22 percent of adults age 65 or older waited six days or more for a doctor's appointment when they were sick, according to a 2021 survey of 11 high-income countries by the nonprofit Commonwealth Fund. Only Canada had a higher percentage of long waits.

One of several likely reasons is that the number of doctors leaving the workplace is increasing without enough new ones to replace them. A poll of more than 600 medical groups, released last year by the Medical Group Management Association, found that 40 percent reported they had a doctor leave or retire early—due to burnout.

And the shortfall of doctors is only projected to grow, especially for those in primary care. There, we may see a deficit of up to 48,000 doctors by 2034, the Association of American Medical Colleges says. "It's very concerning for older adults," says Terry Fulmer, RN, PhD, president of the John A. Hartford Foundation in New

York City, which works to improve care for older adults. Many "need primary care to stay on top of any kind of chronic disease."

But certain steps may help you get appointments when you need them or find a new doctor when the time comes.

Get Faster Primary Care

For a condition that's annoying but not critical, first call your doctor or use your PCP's online scheduling tool, if there is one, to see how quickly you can snag a spot. But that doesn't always work, so see "If You Need a Same-Day Appointment" on the facing page if you're too sick to wait even a couple of days, and also try the following:

➤ **Put your name on a list.** Doctors' offices often get last-minute cancellations. So book the appointment you're offered but ask to be put on a waitlist. If you can be flexible about dates and times, tell the office staff so that they contact you with anything that opens up.

➤ **Be ready to act fast.** Make sure you're clear on how the practice fills appointments that open up at the last minute. For instance, will they phone you, text you, or message you on the patient portal? "Usually, you don't have much time

before they move on to the next patient, especially if it's a same-day or next-day cancellation," Fulmer says.

➤ **See someone else in the practice.** You can inquire whether another physician there has a more open schedule. But if the office has a nurse practitioner or physician assistant, you may find that you can get an appointment with one of them pretty quickly. State laws vary, but generally, NPs and PAs can do many of the same things a doctor can, such as diagnosing and managing a variety of medical conditions and writing prescriptions. Plus, "their education often emphasizes patient-centered care, which means they may listen more," says Peter Hollman, MD, a geriatrician and chief medical officer for Brown Medicine in Providence, R.I. Case in point: A 2021 review of 13 studies, published in the *International Journal of Nursing Studies Advances*, found the care given by NPs in primary care was equal to—and sometimes superior to—that of doctors.

See a Specialist Sooner

Can't get an appointment with a new specialist as soon as you'd like? Book the first



available opening and ask to be put on a waiting list. Consider these strategies, too:

➤ **Lean on your primary.** Instead of struggling to book an appointment with a busy specialist on your own, ask your primary care provider for assistance, says R. Sean Morrison, MD, chair of the Brookdale Department of Geriatrics and Palliative Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City. He or she can talk to the specialist's office and explain why you should be seen in a timely way or determine whether another specialist who's more available may be just as appropriate.

➤ **Ask about an e-consult.** In some cases, your primary care doctor may be able to discuss your health problem with the specialist themselves. These doctor-to-doctor consultations are typically done online and may yield helpful information before your appointment or cancel the need for an in-person visit.

➤ **Check other locations.** If the specialist you want to see has multiple offices, ask if there's more availability in one of the other places.

➤ **Call your health plan.** If you're having a very hard time getting in to see a specialist (or any provider), contact your health plan's member services department, says Michael Hochman, MD, MPH, an internist in Los Angeles. "Health insurance companies have service-level standards, which includes the expectation that you can get in to see a specialist within 30 days if you need to," he says. They may be able to help you find a different specialist your PCP is comfortable with who can see you sooner.

➤ **Use waiting time well.** Ask your PCP if doing certain tests ahead of time might help the process move more quickly once you see a specialist. "If you do need to wait for a while, it's ideal to get at least some of the workup done before, so the specialist already has all that information in hand when they see you," Morrison says.

Find the Right New Doctor

If you're looking for a new PCP—because the strategies above haven't worked well enough, or your current doctor is leaving the profession or retiring—three steps can ease the way.

➤ **Cast a wide net.** Ask your friends, family members, and neighbors whom they go to and if they'd recommend them, Hochman says. Also, check with specialists you see and anyone you know who works in healthcare. Contact the practices that sound appealing.

➤ **Check availability.** First, find out if the doctor you're interested in is taking new patients and accepts your insurance. (Using the name of a healthcare professional or current patient may help if the doctor you decide on has a waiting list for new patients.) Then, in addition to considering how convenient the location is, the Department of Health and Human Services recommends inquiring about office hours (including nights and weekends), how long it typically takes to get appointments, whether virtual appointments are available, and who can see you if your doctor isn't available. You'll also want to see if the practice has NPs and PAs, and which hospital system the doctor is affiliated with.

➤ **Look for an age-friendly philosophy.** That you want a doctor who is knowledgeable and respectful goes without saying, but as the years pass, it's also wise to seek age-friendly care. This doesn't always mean geriatricians; they are few and far between. The truth is, if you're in relatively good health, you may not need a geriatrician, Hochman says. Instead, ask if the practice focuses on the 4Ms: what matters (your goals and priorities); medication safety and appropriateness; mentation (cognition and mood); and mobility (ways to keep you moving). If you're finding it hard to get into a new practice, you might even consider looking for a geriatric nurse practitioner or advanced practice registered nurse to serve as your PCP, Fulmer says. The 2021 review in the *International Journal of Nursing Studies Advances*, mentioned earlier in this article, found there's good evidence that nurse-based care—including geriatric care—improved overall patient care and outcomes.



IF YOU NEED A SAME-DAY APPOINTMENT

Many primary care practices allot time each day for patients with more pressing needs, so ask. But if you want to be seen right away for, say, a bad bout of diarrhea and the doc can't squeeze you in, consider these tips. (If you suspect it's an emergency, call 911).

■ **Use your doctor's network.**

The hospital or medical system your provider is affiliated with may help you find a same-day appointment with a different doc (and practice). Check online, using the name of the facility and "same-day appointments."

■ **Get video care on demand.**

If you'd rather not leave home and can't get an ASAP telehealth visit with your doctor, ask university hospitals, medical centers, health insurers, or telehealth companies to help you "meet" with another medical provider online. These are often same-day appointments. When we checked the Yale New Haven Health website, it had available openings within the hour.

■ **Try a convenient care clinic.**

You can go to a nearby urgent care clinic, a walk-in facility staffed by doctors and nurse practitioners. Another option is a convenient care clinic, which are walk-ins staffed by nurse practitioners and physician assistants. They're often in chain pharmacies. CVS MinuteClinics, for examples, give staff special training in the needs of older adults, says Terry Fulmer, RN, PhD. Both types of facilities should send notes and recommendations to your primary care doctor after the visit, but it's wise to confirm that they do.



For expert advice on getting better care from your doctor, go to [CR.org/doccare](https://www.consumerreports.org/doccare).

LEARN

Tips for Stable Walking

The moves that keep you going, even on rocky ground

EACH YEAR, ABOUT 3 million older adults are treated in emergency departments for falls, so it's no wonder long walks and hikes can sound challenging sometimes. But you can take on difficult terrain and stay safe. In fact, doing so can ultimately make you more agile and steadier on your feet.

"On uneven surfaces, you use your sensory and motor systems, your cognition, and your vision all to a greater extent than walking on a flat surface," says Emily J. Fox, PhD, an associate professor of physical therapy at the University of Florida, in Gainesville, and a research scientist at Brooks Rehabilitation in Jacksonville. "The more you use those systems, the more you retain them as you get older." The key is staying alert, adjusting how you walk, and getting the right gear in advance. These simple steps can make you more stable and help make walks in the woods or on trails a relaxing experience rather than a nerve-racking one.

Preparation Is Key

- **Practice.** Walk around your yard, across grass, mulch, and rocky surfaces.
- **Strengthen your lower body.** Simple squats (as you would to sit in a chair) and heel raises (rising onto your toes) target your legs, glutes, and core.
- **Get your eyes and ears checked.** Your vision and inner ear systems are crucial for good balance. Correcting any problems will keep you more sure-footed.



Find the Right Shoes

- **Match the shoes to the terrain.** Bulky, high-top hiking boots can be heavy and may impede the sensory information your feet and ankles pick up from the ground. Unless you're hiking up mountains with a heavy pack (which might make you wobbly), you probably don't need them. Lighter, low-top day hikers or trail running shoes with stable footbeds and nonslip soles are good choices for gravel and dirt paths. For smooth trails, a regular walking shoe may be enough.
- **Get a proper fit.** If a shoe is too tight or too loose, you may be more prone to taking a spill. Before you hit the trail, walk around with your new shoes indoors to ensure they're comfortable and secure.

Consider Walking Poles

- **Try before you buy.** "Poles can help you balance and feel more stable by widening your base of support," says Fox. But shop around: They come in various styles, and some have hand straps

for convenience and security.

- **Take them for test runs.** "Practice on a smooth, even surface to get used to the poles before walking on uneven surfaces with them," says Ruth Barclay, PhD, professor of physical therapy at the University of Manitoba, in Canada.
- **Ease into it.** When using poles, "your arm muscles can fatigue a lot faster than your leg muscles," Fox says. Start with short outings on well-maintained trails and gradually increase the duration and difficulty of the terrain. If you use a walker or cane or have hand, elbow, or shoulder problems, talk to a physical therapist before using poles, to help you choose what might work best.

Minimize Distractions

- **Put away your phone.** "The physical and mental demands are higher when the environment is less predictable," says Fox. "Anything that takes your attention away makes it harder." If you need to use your phone or want to take a picture, do it standing still—preferably on level ground.
- **Use a back or hip pack.** Stow your keys, water, and anything else you bring along. Keeping your hands free makes it easier to balance, and you don't have to worry about dropping anything.
- **Wear well-fitting clothes.** Seams that rub, pants that slide down, or shoelaces that keep opening can all divert your attention from staying steady on a path.

Adjust Your Walk

With every step you take, sensory nerves throughout your body relay messages to your brain, prompting changes in posture and walking pattern to accommodate varying terrain. Many adjustments happen automatically, but you can be proactive too: Try slowing your pace, bending your knees slightly, engaging your core, taking shorter steps, and picking up (rather than dragging) your feet.



For more on exercises that can reduce your risk of falls, go to [CR.org/balancetrain](https://www.cancer.org/balancetrain).

How to Make Sure You're Hydrated

Woozy? Crampy? Fatigued? Headachey? You may need more water.

DRINKING EIGHT GLASSES of water a day seems like one of life's immutable laws. So it may sound surprising, but hydrating adequately doesn't mean measuring and downing water all day long.

While eight glasses a day can be a useful guide, it's not a mandate, because individual fluid needs vary. And what goes toward our bodies' hydration needs isn't just water. "Various foods and beverages help get your fluid intake," says Sotiria Everett, RD, clinical assistant professor at Stony Brook Medicine in Stony Brook, N.Y.

Still, older adults need to pay attention to proper hydration. The thirst mechanism that tells us to drink can diminish with age. In warmer weather, heat stroke and other heat-related conditions are a risk. But chronic dehydration can have consequences too, namely "speeding up the aging process via increased cellular stress," says Asher Rosinger, PhD, director of the Water, Health, and Nutrition Lab at Penn State College of Health and Human Development in University Park. Here's what to eat and drink to make staying hydrated less chore-like.

Beyond H₂O

Water is great because it's calorie- and sugar-free (add a squeeze of fruit or a splash of juice for flavor). But seltzer, milk,

and fruit juice are also healthy ways to get your fluids. Even coffee and tea count. Caffeine is a diuretic—meaning it increases urine production—but the water in these drinks more than compensates for its effects. Just watch how much sugar you add. Hydrating with sugary drinks isn't a good idea—not because they don't contribute fluids, but because they contain empty calories and they're unhealthy in other ways.

You also don't need to be sipping drinks and powders that claim to be "ultra-hydrating." Typically, these products have electrolytes, such as sodium and potassium, which the body loses through sweating. But they may also have other ingredients you don't want, such as sugar and artificial flavors, says Everett. Athletes may benefit from them, but "for individuals who are participating in moderate exercise, water is good," she says.

The Water in Your Food

Nearly everything we eat has some water in it, and that water does help us stay hydrated. For example, Greek yogurt is 84 percent water by weight, canned tuna is 79 percent, and cooked pasta is 62 percent. Soups and smoothies also supply fluids. But fruits and vegetables are the best water replacers. ("Water-Rich Foods," below, lists the amount of water contained in a serving of seven different kinds of seasonal produce.)

Are You Getting Enough?

Pay attention to your body. "Thirst, urine, and weight are some ways to assess hydration," Everett says. Dark urine, for instance, could indicate underhydration, she says. Weighing yourself before and after exercise can help you determine how much fluid is lost. Everett says to drink 16 to 24 ounces of fluid for every pound you've lost after exercise. Also, look for symptoms like those mentioned above (in the line below the headline).



Water-Rich Foods

- ▶ **Watermelon**
1 small wedge =
7 oz. water
- ▶ **Cantaloupe**
1 cup = 5 oz. water
- ▶ **Peach** 1 large =
5 oz. water
- ▶ **Cucumber**
1 cup = 4 oz. water
- ▶ **Tomato** 1 large =
4 oz. water
- ▶ **Zucchini** 1 cup =
4 oz. water
- ▶ **Corn** 1 ear =
3 oz. water

Keep Critters Out of Your Home

The best strategies for getting rid of birds, bats, squirrels, and more



DEALING WITH A MOUSE in the house is certainly no fun, but they're not the only wild creatures that can take up residence without an invitation. Here's a guide to a few others, and how to get rid of them.

Raccoons and Squirrels

Raccoons and squirrels can spread bacterial diseases like salmonella and parasites like roundworm through their droppings. They can also gnaw through wires and insulation, says Jamie Nichols, senior service center manager at Arrow Exterminators in Atlanta.

BANISH THEM Because these critters can bite, call a pest-control company. (Look for one with certified, licensed commercial pesticide applicators and technicians.) The best approach is a temporary door that allows the animals to go outside to feed but doesn't let them return, says Brandon Thorsell, a district manager at Critter Control in Ontario, Canada.

KEEP THEM OUT The pest-control pros should seal all possible entry points, including small cracks around doors and windows, screen vents, and chimney openings. It's also best to use trash cans with tight-fitting "animal-proof" lids. "Raccoons are very adept at learning how to open garbage cans," says Mike Bentley, an entomologist and director of training and education for the National Pest Management

Association in Fairfax, Va. If possible, store trash in a closed area like a locked shed. Consider removing bird feeders (which can attract a variety of outdoor animals), repair loose siding and shingles, and keep tree limbs cut back 6 to 8 feet from the roofline.

Bats

Outside, bats "provide an important service since they eat mosquitoes and other flying insects," according to Nichols. But they can carry rabies, and their droppings can be contaminated with fungal spores that cause histoplasmosis, a respiratory disease.

BANISH THEM Most often, a bat inside a home entered accidentally and is looking for a way out, Nichols says. Open all doors and windows and it should find an exit. If it doesn't or if you have or suspect multiple bats, call a pro. "Removal may require a special license or approval," Bentley says. **KEEP THEM OUT** Have a pro inspect and seal cracks and crevices where bats can enter, especially in attics and chimneys.

Birds

Small birds, like starlings or sparrows, sometimes build nests in dryer, stove, or bathroom exhaust vents, blocking them and creating a potential fire hazard. And wild birds may carry a variety of viruses and bacteria they can transmit to people.

BANISH THEM If you hear any tweeting in the areas noted above, call a professional. "We clean out the vents and apply

disinfectant spray to prevent diseases like salmonella from droppings," Thorsell says.

KEEP THEM OUT Have the pro seal any access points. The Humane Society of the United States recommends covering any vent openings outside the home with galvanized wire mesh or commercial vent covers. If you're doing this part yourself, both items are usually available at hardware stores.

Skunks

According to the Human Society, skunks are attracted to what's referred to as "low-hanging fruit," such as open garbage containers and pet food that's left out overnight—as well as to spots where they can create dens. These include elevated sheds and any openings below porches and decks, as well as wood or rock piles on your property. Skunks can carry rabies, and if they're disturbed they emit a foul, lingering odor.

BANISH THEM Ask a pest-control professional to install an "eviction" device like a one-way door, so skunks can leave but not return. You can also try putting mild repellents like kitty litter near or inside the den, placing them to the side so that the animals have an exit route.

KEEP THEM OUT Ask the pro to close off openings to shelters and remove wood piles. And feed your pets indoors or remove outdoor food as soon as they have dined.

BEAR TROUBLE?

In some areas, bears may come close to homes when their keen sense of smell unearths the scent of food. To keep them away, consider using bear-resistant trash cans and storing them in a locked area. Clean grills well to rid them of the scent of food drippings. If you compost, store the food scraps in a closed container. Placing a rag soaked in ammonia in a bucket next to your compost area can also help deter bears. And make sure that you ditch any bird feeders.

Your Guide to Safe Grilling

How to cook food right and reduce fire risks

WHETHER YOU'RE COOKING for a crowd or just for yourself, grilling can make for delicious summertime meals. You'll want to make sure your grill is in good shape before you start cooking, and there are a few risks you need to be aware of,

like the potential for flare-ups and food safety concerns. But simple strategies can help you avoid these problems. From Consumer Reports' experts, here's what you need to do to have a great grilling experience this summer.

1 CHECK YOUR GRILL

A few signs can mean your gas grill might need repair or replacement. These include a very rusty or cracked firebox, yellow or uneven flames that don't return to blue after you clean out the holes in the burner tubes, flaking or cracked grates, and a leaking or cracked propane hose. An igniter that's clicking slowly or not at all or failing to light the gas needs to be replaced right away. Many other parts can be replaced too, but if you think your grill is on its last legs, it might be time for a new one. CR members can find ratings at [CR.org/grills](https://www.consumerreports.org/grills).

2 CLEAN BEFORE YOU COOK

You probably remember to clean your grill grates. But you should also regularly dump the drippings that collect in your grill's grease tray. The fat can be a fire hazard, so clean it out when it's about half full.

3 USE A GOOD GRILL BRUSH

Grill brushes represent a surprising hazard. When stainless steel or wire types start to wear out, they can

shed bristles as you scrub. Those bristles can then adhere to the food you cook on the grill, and end up being ingested. A safer option is a brush made from woven steel. If you do use a bristle brush, replace the brush head frequently and wipe down grates with a damp rag after you scrub them.

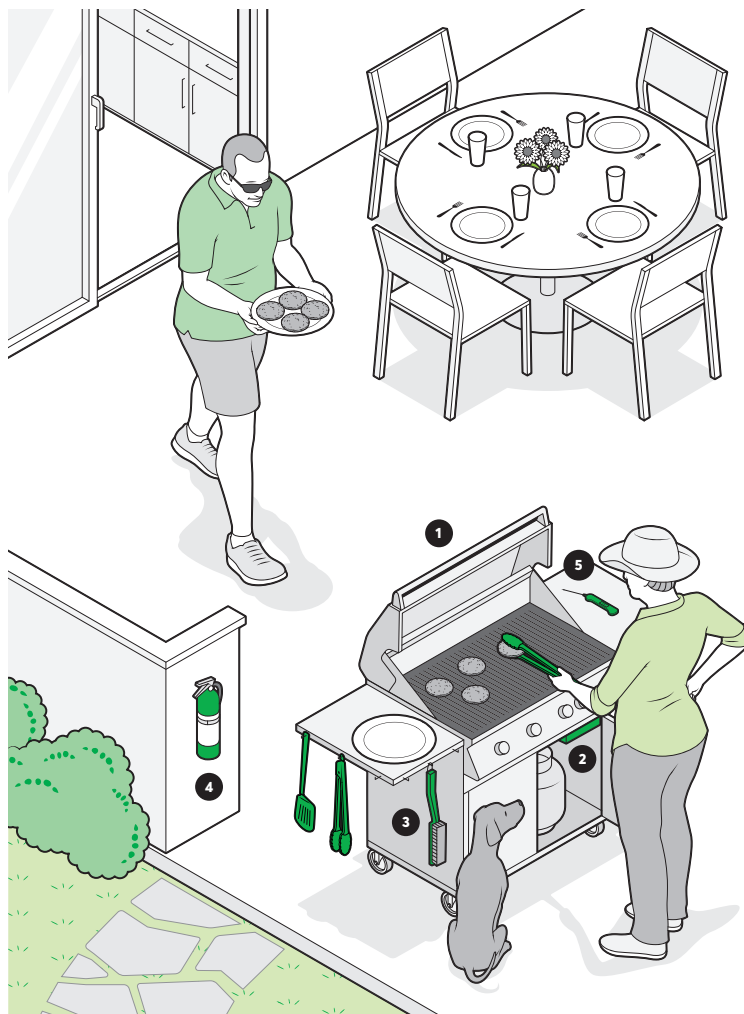
made from woven steel. If you do use a bristle brush, replace the brush head frequently and wipe down grates with a damp rag after you scrub them.

4 PREVENT FIRES

Place the grill 10 feet from any structures, and don't grill on a wooden deck unless you also use a fireproof mat. Use long-handled tools to keep your hands far from any flare-ups. If you have space, keep one burner off so that if something flares, you can move it to a cooler surface. Keep a fire extinguisher that works on grease and wood fires handy.

5 COOK FOOD PROPERLY

Use two sets of utensils and trays for your meat: one each for raw and cooked items. A grill cooks less evenly than an oven, so use a meat thermometer to ensure that each item reaches the right temperature. Don't let hot or cold foods sit out more than 2 hours (or more than 1 hour if it's above 90° F outside).



BEST MEAT THERMOMETERS

✓ **CDN ProAccurate TCT572-R** \$55

95
OVERALL SCORE



✓ **ThermoPro Digital (TP19H)** \$17

92
OVERALL SCORE



CR'S EXPERT

Paul Hope is a journalist and trained chef who reports on grills at CR.

On Your Mind

QUESTION OF THE MONTH

My berries always spoil so fast. How can I keep them fresh longer?

When you bring berries home, leave them unwashed and toss moldy or damaged fruit. Separate soft, overripe ones to eat right away. For blueberries and raspberries, put the rest in a shallow container in layers, with paper towels in between each layer. Place in fridge crisper drawer. (Cover raspberry container with plastic wrap.) Keep strawberries in a closed plastic clamshell container or partially opened plastic bag. If you have too many berries to eat within a few days, wash, drain, and freeze some in a single layer on a tray. Then store them in the freezer in a container or freezer bag.

My nails are brittle and break a lot. What can strengthen them?

Regularly moisturizing your hands, fingers, and cuticles with creams that contain white petrolatum, glycerin, ceramides, or lactic acid may help, says dermatologist Shari Lipner, MD, PhD, director of the nail division at Weill Cornell Medicine in New York City. Also, keep nails short and wear cotton gloves topped by latex or nitrile gloves when washing dishes or cleaning.

Skip nail polish, which may weaken nails (formaldehyde-free nail lacquer may be protective). Be aware that biotin, often used in “nail-strengthening” supplements, can interfere with tests used to diagnose a heart attack and thyroid function tests.

Can yoga give me a cardiovascular workout?

“The postures, breathing, and concentration that is part of yoga likely help improve

the functioning of the whole body,” says Julia V. Loewenthal, MD, a geriatrician at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston. But most yoga classes are not rigorous enough to be considered aerobic, so you’ll want to also do activities that raise your heart rate, such as brisk walking.

I’m having a little trouble swallowing food. What can I do?

Nerve damage from diabetes, missing teeth, ill-fitting dentures, a blockage or narrowing of the esophagus, or scar tissue from chronic acid reflux can all cause swallowing trouble. So can a stroke or neurological condition such as Parkinson’s disease. But swallowing can naturally become more difficult with age, as muscles lose strength or medications (like diuretics) reduce saliva production. Taking small bites of food and chewing thoroughly can help. You may also want to see your doctor—and absolutely do if you have pain when swallowing, or are losing weight as a result of these issues. They will try to pinpoint and treat the cause, and may refer you to a speech-language pathologist for strategies and dietary changes that can make swallowing easier.

TALK TO US HAVE QUESTIONS?

We’ll answer those of general interest. Write to CRH, 101 Truman Ave., Yonkers, NY 10703 or go to CRH.org/crh to contact us by email.

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