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## SPECIAL ISSUE: COVID-19 MENTAL HEALTH PULSE CHECK

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HOW TO OPTIMIZE YOUR MENTAL  
HEALTH THROUGH FOOD

RECIPE: BLOOD-SUGAR BALANCING  
CHOCOLATE BARK

7 STRATEGIES FOR TREATING INSOMNIA

Q&A WITH DR. LYNDALL SCHUMANN,  
CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST, UNION HEALTH

THE BENEFITS OF YOGA

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# HOW TO OPTIMIZE YOUR MENTAL HEALTH THROUGH FOOD

By Meghan Wilton, Registered Dietitian, Medisys Health Group

By the age of 40, half of us will experience a mental illness like depression or anxiety. We know that mental illnesses are caused by a combination of genetic, biological, personality, and environmental factors – and a worldwide pandemic certainly qualifies as one of the latter.

While there is no specific food to treat mental health concerns, research shows that a well-chosen diet can help relieve

symptoms, improve overall well-being and help us cope during challenging times like the current Covid-19 pandemic.

It's no argument that the mind and body are connected: those with a mental illness are often at a higher risk of developing chronic conditions, and vice versa. Ultimately, how we nourish our bodies can have a significant impact on our mental health.

Here are four strategies for optimizing yours through food:

## 1) Start small

Even with all of the extra time spent at home, prioritizing nutrition can be challenging. If you're struggling with mental health concerns, barriers like decreased energy levels, altered social and cognitive function, and decreased motivation can make it harder to adopt healthy habits right now. If this sounds familiar, start with small changes like paying attention to how the foods you eat make you feel. Cultivating this mind-body awareness alone has been shown to improve the food choices we make.

Another small change to try is to view food as not only fuel, but also as a form of stress management and self-care. Take some time to prepare exactly what your body is craving. Lovingly prep some snacks for the next few days by peeling and chopping vegetables and fruits, or making your own trail mix out of dried goods you have on hand. Start a video call with a friend or family member while you're getting your dinner ready, or while you're eating so you can enjoy a meal "together." Getting back to the basics is just one approach that can have a small yet powerful impact on our emotional wellbeing.

## 2) Try the Mediterranean approach

Randomized control trials have recently shown a link between diet and depression through improved diet quality and intervention with a dietitian. One in particular showed a strong correlation between the Mediterranean diet and lower levels of inflammatory markers and processes, which are thought to play a role in the onset of depressive disorders.

Traditional Mediterranean diets are characterized by a high intake of plant foods such as fruit, vegetables, legumes, nuts, seeds, whole grains and extra virgin olive oil. Fish is consumed moderately, while red meat, processed foods and sweets are consumed very infrequently.

## 3) Reduce your intake of processed foods and sugar

Epidemiological studies have consistently shown that diets high in ultra-processed foods and sugar are linked to higher risk of depression and anxiety. Eating high-quality foods rich in vitamins, minerals and antioxidants on the other hand has been

shown to help nourish the brain, promote positive emotions, improve coping abilities, improve self-worth and overall quality of life. This boils down to two core recommendations:

- Incorporate a variety of colourful vegetables and fruits, whole grains, nuts and seeds, proteins such as fish, chicken, legumes, tofu and yogurt into your diet.
- Limit processed foods like takeout, deli and cured meats and most prepared foods that come from packages, as well as those with added sugars and refined flours such as juices, flavoured yogurts, cereals, baked goods and white breads and pasta.

Dietary improvement guided by a clinical dietitian may be helpful in the management of depression. Our team of registered dietitians are available to answer your questions during the COVID-19 pandemic. [\*\*Click here\*\*](#) to learn more about our nutrition services.

## 4) Feed your microbiome

Feel-good neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine are produced in the gut and highly influenced by the billions of "good" bacteria that make up your microbiome. These bacteria also help limit inflammation, play a role in immunity and nutrient absorption, and activate neural pathways that travel between the gut and the brain.

Recent research also suggests that our gut microbiota may have benefits for preventing and treating depression.

To start taking care of your gut, increase your intake of foods that promote digestive health, such as those rich in prebiotics and probiotics. Prebiotic foods including asparagus, bananas, garlic and onions are high in fibre and feed the friendly bacteria in your gut; healthy probiotic foods include yogurt, kefir, sauerkraut and kombucha. Supplemental probiotics may not be right for you, so be sure to check with your healthcare team before adding them to your diet.

**If you've been feeling worried, sad or even depressed during this unusual time, know that you are not alone. If your negative feelings are severe, it's important to contact your primary healthcare provider or access your virtual care platform. [\*\*Click here\*\*](#) to learn more about our virtual care services.**

### Sources

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# RECIPE: BLOOD-SUGAR BALANCING CHOCOLATE BARK

By Alissa Vieth, Registered Dietitian, Medisys Health Group





Vegan vegetarian gluten-free dairy-free (can be nut-free)

6-12 servings

Balancing our blood sugar plays an important role in keeping our mood stabilized. Blood sugar levels naturally rise and fall when we eat, but we want to support our bodies by promoting gradual rising and falling, as opposed to drastic spikes and drops.

This super simple homemade dark chocolate bark will satisfy your sweet tooth while combining important macronutrients like healthy fat from coconut oil and nuts, plant-based protein from hemp hearts and carbohydrates from dried fruits.

**Enjoy this treat straight from the freezer – it melts fast!**

## Ingredients

### Base:

- 1/2 cup coconut oil
- 1/2 cup cocoa powder
- 1/4 cup maple syrup

### Toppings:

- 1/4 cup hemp hearts
- 1/2 cup toppings of choice: chopped nuts or seeds (almonds, walnuts, pistachios, sunflower seeds), dried fruit (cranberries, blueberries, mangos, apricot), coconut flakes
- 1 tsp sea salt

## Instructions

1. Line a small baking sheet with parchment paper
2. Melt the coconut oil in the microwave for 40-60 seconds, stirring every 15 seconds
3. Stir in the cocoa powder and maple syrup
4. Stir in the hemp hearts and half of the other toppings
5. Pour the mixture onto the prepared tray, spreading it thinly and evenly
6. Sprinkle the rest of toppings and the sea salt evenly on top of the mixture
7. Place on a flat surface in the freezer to set for about 30 minutes (until rock solid), then remove and break into pieces
8. Store pieces in a freezer-safe container in the freezer



**Click [here](#)** to get your FREE copy of the Medisys #StayHome Recipe Guide featuring 13 pandemic-friendly recipes designed by our dietitians, plus grocery shopping and food storage tips!

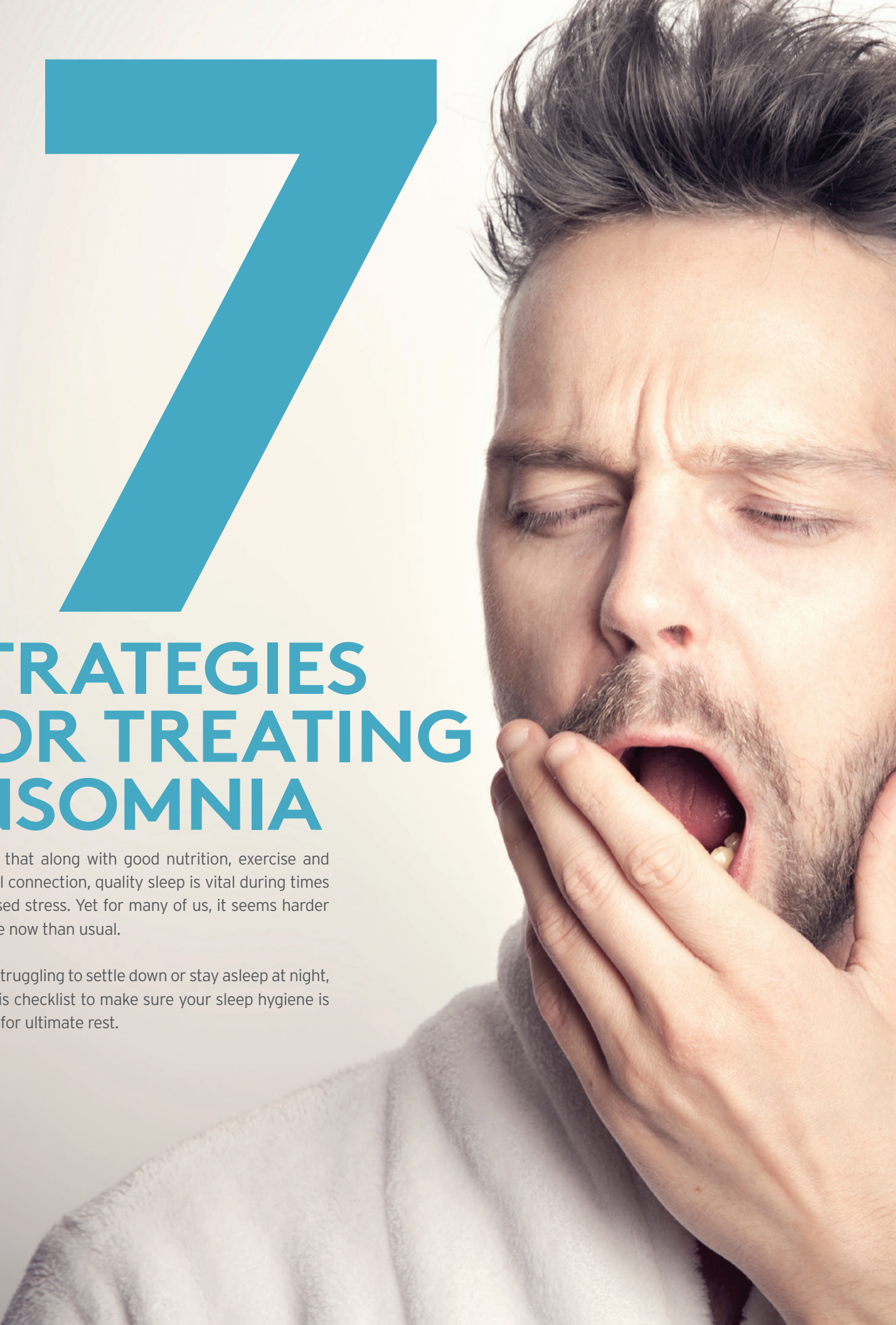


A large, bold, blue number 7, which serves as the first point in a list of strategies for treating insomnia.

# STRATEGIES FOR TREATING INSOMNIA

We know that along with good nutrition, exercise and emotional connection, quality sleep is vital during times of increased stress. Yet for many of us, it seems harder to achieve now than usual.

If you're struggling to settle down or stay asleep at night, review this checklist to make sure your sleep hygiene is designed for ultimate rest.



### ❑ Get the right light exposure.

Blue light exposure from the TV, laptop or phone inhibits melatonin production – a vital sleep driver. Skip late evening social media scrolling and binge-watching and opt for reading under dim light instead.

Equally important is getting ample natural light exposure in the morning and early afternoon because it helps maintain the body's natural wake-sleep cycle. Prioritize getting outside (even on a rainy or overcast day).

### ❑ Prioritize connection.

Feeling emotionally secure plays a significant role in being able to sleep well. Make time for connecting with your spouse, a family member or friend – while maintaining proper social distancing etiquette – and discuss your worries and fears so that they are less likely to fill your mind at bedtime.

### ❑ Curate your news intake.

It's important to stay informed, but information overload can inhibit our ability to calm down before sleep. Following 9/11, PTSD-like stress symptoms were present in people who weren't anywhere near the tragedy – so it's crucial to set boundaries. Select one or two trusted news sources to refer to and devote a limited time to reading updates each day, as opposed to keeping the radio or TV on at all times.

### ❑ Sweat.

Your body needs to be physically tired in order to sleep well. Schedule time each day to exercise outdoors or using a virtual program – ideally before you eat dinner. Exercise endorphins are a fantastic mood-booster, but they are stimulating and can also interfere with sleep.

### ❑ Resist naps.

Suffering from insomnia and working from home can make it tempting and convenient to enjoy a nap. Unfortunately, long naps or those taking place too close to bedtime can wreak havoc on your circadian rhythm and make it harder to get back on track.

### ❑ Skip the nightcap.

A drink or two may seem like an effective way to unwind before bed, but it's actually one of the top culprits of interrupted sleep. If you choose to have an alcoholic drink on occasion, enjoying it earlier in the evening is a better choice.

### ❑ Establish a consistent sleep schedule.

If staying home has derailed your normal sleep schedule, setting a consistent daily bedtime and wake time is one of the easiest ways to reset it. Our bodies are designed to function on a 24-hour cycle that coincides with natural light – even during a pandemic.

For more information, check out [\*\*\*Sleep hygiene to fight COVID-19\*\*\*](#), by Dr. Diane McIntosh, Psychiatrist, Chief Neuroscience Officer, TELUS.



If you're experiencing persistent insomnia, contact your primary care physician or log onto your [\*\*\*virtual care platform\*\*\*](#) for advice.

Medisys is always publishing downloadable content, articles, webinars (and much more) to help support our community and clients.



If there are specific COVID-19-related topics you want to learn about, whether through a webinar or articles, please [\*\*\*click here\*\*\*](#) to fill out a quick survey.





## Q&A WITH DR. LYNDALL SCHUMANN, CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST, UNION HEALTH

Dr. Lyndall Schumann is a registered clinical psychologist who supports children, adolescents, and adults by providing assessment, diagnosis and treatment services at Union Health Clinic as well as on the Akira by TELUS Health app. Dr. Schumann employs client-centred and evidence-based methods, and typically works within Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and emotion-focused frameworks.

**Q: How has your practice changed since the COVID-19 outbreak?**

A: My practice went from primarily in person treatment sessions to exclusively virtual sessions in one day. Many of my in-person patients have put their treatment on hold while many new patients have started up virtual sessions with me through Akira. As a result I'm fielding a lot of different needs from a variety of different people, mostly working from home, who had not previously engaged in psychotherapy. Some are only now finding time to work with a psychologist. Others are finding that the stress of the global COVID situation has made coping with other underlying issues of depression, anxiety, OCD, etc. more difficult and are seeking support.

**Q: How can we best protect our mental health during these challenging times?**

A: Our social support networks are incredibly important to cope with today's stresses – and all mental health challenges – and yet we are required to distance ourselves from others. My recommendations are usually very individualized to the specific challenges my patients are facing. Some common tips include maintaining social contact with others virtually, perhaps by having chats or get-togethers with friends or family via videoconference or phone. Sometimes this is needed daily. Exercise, sleep, and eating well are also aspects of our health that we cannot neglect without negative impacts on our mental health. Taking action to improve your own wellbeing and doing for others is helpful to maintain a sense of agency in uncertain times. Acceptance of what we cannot control in this situation is also critical. Small actions in the right direction can have ripple effects that lift mood and strengthen our ability to cope.

**Q: This situation poses different challenges for everyone. What is your #1 tip for people who are living alone, juggling work and childcare at home, or have lost their jobs?**

A: If you are living alone, chat daily with a friend or family. If you can, do this via video, since communication is richer when

we can see each other's non-verbal cues: smiles, mannerisms, movements.

If you are juggling work and childcare at home, lower your expectations for yourself and let anything nonessential fall away. You have been given an impossible task of working a job and simultaneously taking care of children. Try to get your kids moving their bodies and join in.

If you have lost your job, accept that you are not in control of the situation and find something that you can put your effort into that is useful; maybe something you've been meaning to do but have never had the time to do. Remind yourself that this is temporary and that you are in the company of many of us who are in similar situations.

**Q: What is one challenge you've faced during this pandemic?**

A: I've got two kids aged 1 and 4 with me at home and a spouse who is also working. After a few arguments we have needed to tighten up our communication around logistics of trading off child watching but also when we are feeling frustrated or not appreciated. Everyone's stress level is heightened and we need to communicate our emotions and needs clearly. It's important to ask for what you need or want but also to negotiate without either party getting defensive. Add to this that my older kid misses school, routine and his friends and has lots of big feelings that can erupt into challenging behaviour.

**Q: What is one silver lining you've experienced during this pandemic?**

A: There's a little less pollution in the atmosphere. Also I enjoy the thought that the natural world is still waking up in spring time just like it always has, but maybe has a bit more space and quiet to do so now.

**[Click here](#) to learn more about mental health support services at Medisys**



# BENEFITS OF YOGA

By Andrea Stokes, Registered Dietitian, Medisys Health Group

Yoga has been practiced for more than 5,000 years and continues to gain in popularity, thanks to its wide range of physical and mental health benefits for people of all ages and abilities.

If you're still hesitant to give it a try, see below for a quick overview – and an invitation to practice with Medisys in the coming weeks for free!





## What is yoga?

Yoga consists of a series of precise body-weight postures and movements that are designed to improve both strength and flexibility at the same time. The exercise is combined with paying close attention to your breathing in order to control and optimize your breath, as well as maintain your focus throughout the practice.

## Common styles of yoga include:

**Vinyasa or Flow:** a fluid style of yoga linking each breath with a movement, which tends to be faster-paced. It's ideal for anyone looking for a more athletic workout.

**Hatha:** a classic form of yoga that most other styles have originated from, which focuses on foundational postures. Generally poses are held for 3-5 rounds of breath before moving to the next posture.

**Yin:** focuses on stillness and spending more time (3-5 minutes) in each pose to lengthen connective tissue.

**Restorative:** uses props like bolsters, blocks and blankets to support the student fully in each pose for ultimate relaxation. Poses are generally held for 10-20 minutes.

**Hot or Bikram:** a vigorous style of yoga performed in a heated and humid room, designed to raise the heart rate and tire the muscles.

## Physical health benefits of yoga can include:

- Improved flexibility
- Improved strength and muscle tone
- Better posture and balance
- A more protected spine
- Improved bone health
- Increased blood flow and circulation
- Reduced pain

## Mental health benefits of yoga can include:

- Improved ability to relax and manage stress
- Improved sleep
- Boosted self-esteem and sense of self-worth
- Improved outlook on life

### Try it out!

Medisys supported by TELUS Health is excited to offer complimentary yoga classes starting Wednesday April 22 to help you and your team stay active while we practice physical distancing.

The #StayHome Virtual Yoga Series will offer a gentle, low-impact practice that will leave you feeling refreshed and recharged. This series is intended for all levels, even those with no previous yoga or fitness experience.

[Click here](#) to learn more and to register!



Interested in offering private yoga classes to your team? Inquire by emailing [info@definitionsonline.com](mailto:info@definitionsonline.com).





# FREE WEBINAR:

HEALTHY LIVING DURING COVID-19.  
THIS THURSDAY, APRIL 23, 12PM - 1PM EST.

This is a challenging time for all of us, and it can take a toll in several ways. This interactive, Q&A style webinar will discuss realistic health strategies for coping with #StayingHome during COVID-19, presented from a range of perspectives, namely:

- General health
- Mental health
- Physical activity & body mechanics
- Diet & nutrition

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND TO REGISTER, [CLICK HERE](#)

