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Is it safe to go vegan in older age?

The diet takes vegetarianism to the extreme and poses a risk for nutrient deficiency. But it does offer health benefits.

If tofu turkey and meatless meatloaf are on your holiday menu this year, you may have made the switch to a vegetarian diet, eliminating at least some animal protein. But how much animal protein can you safely cut out of your diet?

Vegetarian diet benefits

Among the many types of vegetarian diets, three are particularly common: a pescatarian diet allows seafood; a lacto-ovo diet allows dairy products and eggs; finally, a vegan diet allows no seafood, dairy, or other animal products.

All of these approaches typically include lots of fruits, vegetables, legumes, whole grains, nuts, seeds, and healthy oils. These plant-based foods contain several healthy components:

- ▶ a wide variety of antioxidants, which have anti-inflammatory properties that are linked to better health
- ▶ lots of fiber, which helps prevent constipation, lowers LDL (bad) cholesterol, and controls blood sugar and weight
- ▶ low saturated fat compared with a non-vegetarian diet.

Compared with meat-containing diets, the health benefits of all vegetarian diets are well documented: lower rates of heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, and cancer. The picture isn't completely straightforward: a study published Sept. 4, 2019, by *The BMJ* found that along with lower rates of heart attacks, vegetarians had higher rates of hemorrhagic (bleeding) stroke, compared with



It's unclear if the vegan approach is safe for older adults eating plant-based diets.

meat eaters. The increase equaled about three more cases of hemorrhagic stroke per 1,000 people over 10 years. Most other studies have not identified such a risk.

Vegan diet benefits and challenges

If plant-based foods are generally healthier than animal-based foods, should you consider a vegan diet, banishing all animal products?

It seems like something to consider, with the increasing amount of vegan foods now sold in grocery stores and restaurants.

Whether a vegan diet has even greater benefits than a less restrictive vegetarian diet is unclear. "Because the vegan diet is restrictive, it can be a challenge to maintain over the long term," says Kathy McManus, director of the Department of Nutrition at Harvard-affiliated Brigham and Women's Hospital.

A study published in April 2019 in *The Journal of Nutrition* found that a vegan diet slightly outperformed a pescatarian diet and a lacto-ovo diet when it came to the amount of antioxidants and omega-3 fatty acids in the blood, and that a vegan diet significantly outperformed diets with meat. However, this is just one study. "Most studies don't separate vegan and vegetarian diets, so we don't have a lot of evidence comparing one vegetarian diet to the other," says McManus.

A vegan diet also comes with health risks, especially for older adults, although you can take action to counteract those risks. In

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FIVE THINGS TO DO THIS MONTH

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ASK THE DOCTOR

by ANTHONY L. KOMAROFF, M.D., *Editor in Chief*

Do vitamin D supplements reduce risk of early death?

Q *I've been taking vitamin D supplements for several years because my doctor said they might help me live longer. Am I wasting my money, or even causing myself harm?*

A You're right to be skeptical. Vitamin supplements of all types repeatedly have been tested for theoretical health benefits, and often the studies have shown none. There's no doubt that vitamin D supplements can help prevent or treat osteoporosis. Theoretically, they might reduce the risk of various diseases. What about the question you asked: whether vitamin D supplements help you live longer?

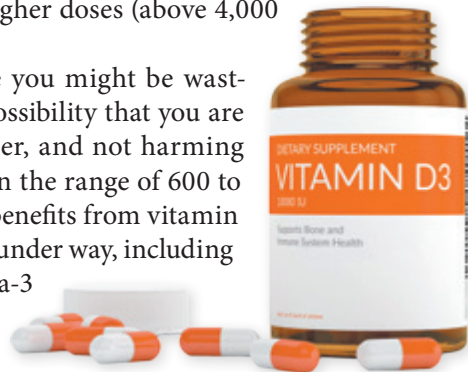
Many studies have found that people with very low blood levels of vitamin D die sooner. (Interestingly, those same studies report that people with relatively high levels of vitamin D might also have shorter life spans, but, for today, that's a tangent we won't pursue.) Our blood levels of vitamin D today probably are lower than they were for our forebears. That's because most vitamin D is produced when sunlight hits our skin, and our forebears were out in the sun a lot more than we are today.

Even if it's true that people with very low blood levels of vitamin D have shorter life spans, and I think it probably is, that's no guarantee that raising blood levels by taking vitamin D supplements will extend life. The gold standard for seeing whether a treatment has a benefit is the randomized trial. Recently, scientists pooled the results of 52 randomized trials of vitamin D that involved over 75,000 people, publishing their results in the summer of 2019 in *The BMJ*.

The scientists concluded that vitamin D supplements did not reduce mortality from all causes, nor mortality from heart and other cardiovascular diseases. However, vitamin D supplements did appear to reduce the risk of mortality from cancer by 16%. This was particularly true for supplements containing vitamin D₃ (vitamin D₂ also is sold as a supplement).

The doses of vitamin D used by the studies in this analysis were not reported, but probably ranged from around 600 to 2,000 international units (IU) per day. Other recent studies have found that higher doses (above 4,000 IU/day) may even have harmful effects.

So, to answer your question: While you might be wasting your money, there is a reasonable possibility that you are reducing your risk of dying from cancer, and not harming yourself (if your dose of vitamin D₃ is in the range of 600 to 2,000 IU/day). And there may be other benefits from vitamin D supplements. Many studies of this are under way, including the longer-term Vitamin D and Omega-3 Trial (VITAL), which is based here at Harvard Medical School. Stay tuned. ♥



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Is it too late to save your posture?

Even if your posture has been a problem for years, it's possible to make improvements.

Rounded shoulders and a hunched stance may seem like they're set in stone by the time we reach a certain age, and you may feel you've missed the boat for better posture. But there's a good chance you can still stand up taller.

"It's not as hard as you may think. Better posture is often just a matter of changing your activities and strengthening your muscles," says Saloni Doshi, a physical therapist with Harvard-affiliated Brigham and Women's Hospital.

What causes posture problems?

Poor posture often stems from modern-day habits like working in front of a computer, slouching on a couch while watching TV, or looking down at a smartphone. Poor posture could also be due to many hours spent carrying heavy objects (like equipment at work, grocery bags, or a heavy purse).

All of these activities can make you stoop or bring your shoulders forward. "This overstretches and weakens the

muscles in the back of your shoulders, and shortens the muscles in the front of your shoulders and in your chest. Gravity then pulls the muscles forward, because the muscles are too weak to pull them back up," Doshi explains.

If the core muscles in your back and abdomen have grown weak from inactivity, that can also cause you to lean forward. Those muscles are crucial to lifting your frame and keeping you upright.

Another cause of poor posture, as we reported in September, comes from broken bones in your back. People with brittle bones (osteoporosis) may experience compression fractures when the bones in the back (vertebrae) aren't strong enough to support the load placed on them. The bone collapses on the front side, the part closest to the chest. As collapsed vertebrae stack up, the spine becomes rounded and bends forward, a condition called dowager's hump (dorsal kyphosis).

Poor posture consequences

"Sometimes people ask, 'Why should I change my posture? I don't mind it.' But one of the big things that happens with forward posture is that your center of gravity goes forward. This increases the risk of falling," Doshi says.

Poor posture can also cause back or neck pain, headaches, trouble breathing, or trouble walking. "Back and neck pain seem to be the most common," Doshi says.

Perk up your posture

If you have a spinal cord injury or you've had surgery to fuse or remove bones in your back, there may be some limitations to your posture improvement.

Otherwise, Doshi says, it's usually not too late to correct posture, even



Strengthening your shoulder muscles can help improve your posture.

if you've had broken vertebrae (once they've healed and your doctor says it's okay). "In that case, we'd try to prevent fractures in other segments of your back," she says. "We can't change bones, but we can change muscle mass."

Tips to stand taller

The key to fixing poor posture is strengthening and stretching the muscles in the upper back, chest, and core.

Shoulder strengtheners include scapula squeezes (squeezing your shoulder blades together for 30 seconds at a time) and rows (using a resistance band to pull back your elbows like you're rowing).

Core strengtheners include modified planks (in which you hold a push-up position while propped up on your elbows) or simply tightening your abdominal muscles, pulling your navel in toward your spine.

An easy way to stretch your chest muscles: simply put your arms behind your back, grasp both elbows (or forearms if that's as far as you can reach), and hold the position.

You'll also have to work on your posture in everyday activities. A simple trick when you're sitting (even watching TV): "Put a rolled towel behind your shoulders. It makes you sit up straight so the towel won't fall," Doshi suggests.

Cut down on activities that have led to poor posture, too. Take breaks from computer and TV time, and exercise more. "In six to 12 weeks," says Doshi, "you'll see an improvement in your posture." ♥

MOVE OF THE MONTH: SEATED CHEST STRETCH



Sit up straight facing sideways in a chair. Clasp your hands behind you, locking your fingers so your palms face you. Lift your hands upward to the point of tightness. Hold 10 seconds and return to the starting position. Repeat two to four times.

Photo by Michael Carroll



Top tools to make bathing safer and simpler

A wide range of gadgets and equipment can help you avoid injury and maintain independence.

You used to hop into the tub or shower for a quick wash and rinse off, and then be on your way. These days, maybe knee arthritis makes it hard to lift your legs to get into a tub; shoulder pain makes it hard to reach up and wash your hair; or imbalance puts you at high risk for a fall, especially in a slippery setting. Take heart: lots of tools can make bathing safer and easier.

Instant upgrades

A few tools from a drugstore or big-box store can help you make immediate improvements to your bathing routine.

A small stationary shower bench or chair (\$25 and up) is helpful for people with fatigue, imbalance, weakness, low energy, or chronic pain in the hip, knee, or back. “Check the shower stool’s weight limit and make sure you’ll fit on it. Don’t get one that’s so low that it’s hard to stand up,” says Gayle Lang, an occupational therapist with Harvard-affiliated Brigham and Women’s Hospital.

Non-slip floor treads or a rubber mat (either for less than \$10) will cut down on slippery floors and bathtubs.

A combination shampoo and body wash that comes in one bottle (\$10 or less) will simplify washing.

A long-handled back scrubber (\$10) isn’t just for backs; use it for hard-to-reach spots, like the backs of your legs. Scrubbers are available with bristles, loofahs (for exfoliating), or soft “poufs” for washing.

Special orders

You may have to turn to a medical supply store or the Internet for other bath-related tools. For example, if a standard back scrubber won’t do, there are specialty long-handled gadgets

(\$10 to \$20) designed to help you wash the spaces in between your toes, and long-handled hygienic aids that reach your bottom.

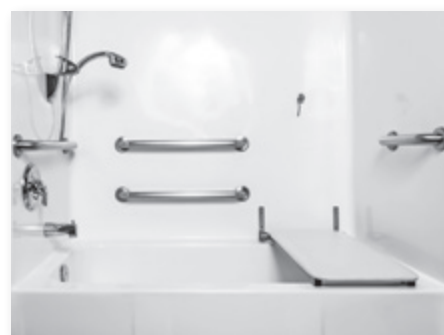
Another item: a shower transfer bench (\$100 and up). The bench is placed over the wall of a bathtub (with one end in the tub, the other on the floor). It allows you to sit down and slide over the wall of the tub, which is helpful if you have trouble lifting your legs high enough while you’re standing. Make sure the seat has a locking mechanism.

A waterproof alert button (\$50 and up) is a handy bathroom gadget if you need to call for help. It can be worn on the wrist or around your neck. Some buttons are tied to your phone line; they simply dial specific phone numbers you’ve programmed into the device (cost: about \$100). Other buttons contact paramedics. These require a start-up fee (\$50 to \$100), offer 24-hour monitoring services, and charge monthly fees (\$20 and up per month). The price depends on how many bells and whistles you want (for example, do you need the alert button to work wherever you go, beyond the bathroom? Do you want it to have cellphone capability or fall detection?).

Assistance required

Some shower tools must be installed by a handyman (which might be you) or a contractor. One very important tool is a grab bar. “Don’t get the kind that sticks to the wall with suction cups. It might come off if you put pressure on it,” warns Lang. “Have someone properly install metal grab bars in the bathroom so that they’re bolted to the wall.”

Grab bars come in all kinds of designs to match other hardware, such as faucets or towel bars. Prices start at



Adding a bench, handheld showerhead, and grab bars to your bath makes bathing easier.

\$10 and can go up to hundreds of dollars per grab bar, depending on the design, material, and finish.

A handheld showerhead (\$25 and up) will enable you to aim water where you need it, a big benefit if you’re seated. “Choose a lightweight showerhead if you have arthritic hands or shoulders. Make sure it has a bracket for mounting and a shutoff button on the handle, so you don’t have to put it back on the holder with the water running, which can be challenging,” Lang says.

The priciest tool is a walk-in shower to replace a bathtub. One-piece fiberglass shower kits start at about \$1,000. The project will cost more, however, when you add labor and other necessary parts. If you want tile instead of a fiberglass shower surround, prices can easily reach many thousands of dollars.

But the benefit of a walk-in shower, especially one that’s level with your bathroom floor, is that you won’t have to lift your legs over the side of a bathtub. If you use a walker or wheelchair, you may even be able to roll right in. “But keep in mind that walk-in showers are sloped toward the drain, and the incline may cause you to lose your balance if you’re unaware of it,” Lang points out.

Not sure where to start?

An occupational therapist can do an in-home assessment to determine your bathing needs. Medicare may cover this if you qualify for home health care. Otherwise, it may cost a few hundred dollars. ♥



7 strategies to fight winter breathing problems

Simple steps can help you avoid complications that come from breathing cold, dry air.

A blast of cold air in the face as you step outside is a brisk reminder that the harshness of winter has arrived. And a deep breath of icy air can be risky for people with respiratory conditions such as asthma, bronchitis, or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD—which includes chronic bronchitis and emphysema). The cold temperatures can trigger symptoms such as wheezing, coughing, and shortness of breath.

Even in healthy people, cold, dry air can irritate the airways and lungs. It causes the upper airways to narrow, which makes it a little harder to breathe.

“Cold air can also disrupt the moisture layer that lines the lower airways in the lungs by causing it to evaporate faster than it can be replaced. This effect may be more exaggerated in people with respiratory problems,” says Dr. Craig Jones, an ear, nose, and throat specialist with Harvard-affiliated Massachusetts Eye and Ear.

Another potential cold air issue: “In people with inflammatory respiratory conditions like asthma and COPD, cold air can trigger more inflammatory cells to migrate to the airways, which also worsens symptoms,” Dr. Jones says.

Mouth-breathing challenges

When you breathe through your nose, cold air is warmed and moisturized as it passes through the nose, throat, and upper airway, so by the time it reaches the lower airway, it is usually warm enough not to disrupt the moisture layer there.



When outside, covering your mouth and nose with a scarf helps warm the air you breathe.

“If someone is breathing mainly through the mouth, however, the air is no longer warmed and humidified by the nose, so the drying effect on the lower airway may contribute to respiratory symptoms,” Dr. Jones explains.

What can you do

A number of strategies will help you combat cold air breathing problems this winter.

1 Stay on top of medication regimens. If you have a respiratory condition, work with your doctor in advance to optimize medications for the winter months. For example, Dr. Jones usually recommends that his patients with asthma who are sensitive to cold air use an inhaled short-acting



Using saline sprays may decrease mouth breathing and increase nose breathing, which warms the air you breathe.

bronchodilator, such as albuterol (Proventil, Ventolin, ProAir), before going outside. But the right approach depends on your particular needs.

2 Moisturize. Dr. Jones recommends artificially moistening the nasal cavities each day. “A dry nose generally feels like a congested nose, which results in mouth breathing,” he says. “Regular use of a nasal saline spray or nasal saline gel, available over the counter in drugstores, may help decrease the sense of nasal congestion, which will decrease mouth breathing.”

3 Bundle up. Cover your nose and mouth with a scarf when you’re outside. “It reduces symptoms by warming the face, warming the air you breathe, and increasing the moisture in the air you breathe,” Dr. Jones says.

4 Stay inside. “People with respiratory conditions should avoid spending time in the cold whenever possible, especially when exercising, as this will further increase the dryness of the airways and potentially increase symptoms or the risk of an asthma attack,” says Dr. Jones. The need to move your exercise routine indoors during the winter months is a good opportunity to take an exercise class at a gym, start a home workout program, or join a walking club at a local mall.

5 Adjust the indoor air. Even when you’re inside, you can reduce your risk for cold air breathing problems by keeping the air warm and moist. Don’t let the indoor air temperature fall below 64° F. And use a humidifier to keep the air from becoming too dry.

6 Avoid lung irritants. The smell of smoke from wood-burning fireplaces is common during the winter. But if you have respiratory problems, the smoke may irritate your lungs. Try to avoid it when you’re outside.

7 Play it safe. If you feel that your respiratory symptoms are worsening, contact your physician. Together, you can come up with a plan to breathe easier this winter. ♥



Can a dietary supplement help ease your depression?

It's not clear that supplements are effective, but some evidence is encouraging.

Some people are wary of taking antidepressants to treat their mild or moderate depression. They may not want to deal with the hassle of prescriptions, the costs, the potential side effects (such as sexual dysfunction), or the worry that medication treatment could mean an endless commitment.

But what about over-the-counter supplements—are they a safe choice to ease depression symptoms?

“Supplements are usually not high-risk, but anyone giving them a try should take a careful approach,” says Dr. Michael Craig Miller, an assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.

Supplements to ease depression

Some supplements are commonly used to help ease the symptoms of depression. Any of the following may provide some relief:

Fish oil. Oily fish like salmon and sardines are abundant in omega-3 fatty acids. “Omega-3 fatty acids are a basic building block of nerve cell membranes. They are essential for healthy nervous system function and

may combat inflammation,” Dr. Miller says. If you don't think you're getting enough in your diet, you can supplement your intake with a fish oil pill.

Methylfolate. A form of the B vitamin folate, methylfolate helps break down the amino acid homocysteine. High blood levels of homocysteine are associated with depression (as well as dementia, heart disease, and stroke). Folate deficiencies are also associated with depression in some studies.

N-acetylcysteine. This substance is a precursor to the antioxidant glutathione (which neutralizes unstable, potentially toxic molecules in the body). It may help fight inflammation and promote the healthy signaling of nerve cells.

S-adenosylmethionine (SAME). This compound is also made naturally in the body. “It is involved in the synthesis of hormones and neurotransmitters, the chemicals that send messages from nerve to nerve,” Dr. Miller explains.

St. John's wort. This herb comes from a flower (*Hypericum perforatum*) and has been used to treat depression for centuries in Europe. “St. John's wort is



Supplements may help reduce depression symptoms, but they come with certain risks.

thought to be a promoter of serotonin, so it should generally not be combined with serotonin-specific antidepressants,” such as SSRIs, Dr. Miller says.

Vitamin D. The brain has receptors for vitamin D in areas involved in depression, such as the prefrontal cortex. “Vitamin D is thought to be involved in the healthy production of neurotransmitters,” Dr. Miller says. A lack of vitamin D is associated with depression.

Not so simple

While it's easy to go to the corner drug-store and buy a bottle of supplements, it's hard to know if the pills will actually work. Part of the problem is that the FDA doesn't regulate the manufacture of over-the-counter supplements as it does for prescription medications, so manufacturers don't have to prove

Other ways to fight depression

It usually takes more than pills to control symptoms of depression. “There are many things that people need to maintain their well-being,” says Dr. Michael Craig Miller, an assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. “Living a healthy, meaningful life requires more than tweaking your biology with a prescription medication or a nutritional supplement.” Here are some approaches that have been shown to help ease depression symptoms.

Exercise. Getting your heart and lungs pumping helps increase blood flow to the brain and encourages the brain to produce natural nerve growth factors. Both of those effects make nerves healthier. For some people, exercise is enough to treat mild depression. Try a daily walk (30 minutes at a brisk pace) to boost your mood and energy.

Diet. Eating healthfully is associated with enhanced mood and a lower risk for depression. Put down the junk food and other processed foods and focus on lean animal protein (like fish or poultry), fruits and vegetables, nuts, legumes (peas and beans), and seeds.

Mindfulness meditation. Many studies have linked mindfulness meditation to better mood and reduced anxiety and depression. You can do it almost anywhere and anytime. Just sit comfortably, focus on your breath, and bring your attention to the present. The longer you can practice being mindful throughout the day, the better you'll become at it.



that the supplements are effective or tell you what the pills are really made of (despite ingredient lists on labels).

The other part of the problem is that we don't have much evidence on some supplements. That means we may not know the side effects, and there may not be firm data indicating that the supplements reduce depression symptoms. The research is too limited, and the existing studies have produced mixed results.

But some encouraging findings do suggest certain over-the-counter supplements may improve the symptoms of depression. For example:

- ▶ A 2016 review of 40 studies, published June 1, 2016, in *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, found evidence to support the use of SAMe,

methylfolate, omega-3, and vitamin D to reduce depression symptoms.

- ▶ A review of five randomized trials published April 2016 in *The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* suggested that N-acetylcysteine was well tolerated and eased depression symptoms.

What you should do

Dr. Miller advises letting your doctor know that you would like to try a supplement to treat your depression. Together you can weigh options for your particular situation and avoid unsafe drug combinations. "For example," Dr. Miller warns, "St. John's wort has been shown to reduce the effectiveness of many drugs, and omega-3 supplements may increase bleeding risk in people taking blood thinners."



Ask your doctor if a supplement for depression symptoms will interfere with your medications.

If you decide that you do want to try a supplement to fight depression symptoms, make sure to track its use. "Keep a record of what you're taking and notes on your symptoms. Give it a month or two to see if it's helpful, then re-evaluate how you're feeling," Dr. Miller says. "If you don't feel better, review alternatives with your doctor." ♥

Vegan diet ... from p. 1

particular, McManus notes, when you cut out animal products, you may come up short on certain nutrients:

Calcium. Calcium is important to many functions, especially bone, dental, heart, nerve, and blood health.

Protein. We need protein to build strong muscles, bones, and skin—particularly as we age and lose muscle and bone mass and have a harder time healing from wounds.

Vitamin B₁₂. This vitamin comes only from animal-based foods. B₁₂ is crucial to our DNA, red blood cell formation, new cell growth, glucose metabolism, and maintaining our nervous system and thinking skills.

In addition, you may have trouble getting enough calories on a highly restricted diet. If you don't give your body enough fuel, you may become tired or malnourished.

Avoiding deficiencies

"You have to be selective when choosing a plant-based diet to ensure that you get enough calories and nutrients," McManus says. Here's how to avoid

the potential pitfalls of a vegan diet—or, for that matter, any other type of vegetarian diet:

Avoid calcium deficiency. Eat plant-based foods that are rich in calcium: almonds, dark leafy greens (kale, spinach), figs, tofu, and oranges. A medium-sized orange has about 50 milligrams (mg) of calcium; a cup of cooked collard greens has 268 mg of calcium. Aim for 1,000 to 1,200 mg of calcium per day.

Get enough protein. Eat protein-rich plant foods: soy products (tofu, tempeh, and edamame), legumes (beans, lentils), nuts (walnuts, almonds), chia seeds, and spirulina (blue or green algae). For example, a cup of canned navy beans has 20 grams of protein. Chia seeds have about 4.5 grams of

protein per ounce, and sunflower seeds have about 6 grams per ounce. You need about 7 grams of protein daily for every 20 pounds of body weight.

Avoid vitamin B₁₂ deficiency. Try B₁₂-enriched vegan foods such as fortified plant milks (like almond or soy milk) or fortified cereals. McManus says you may need to take a B₁₂ supplement while on a vegan diet. We also advise that your doctor check your blood level of vitamin B₁₂ regularly.

How should you start?

Get the okay from your doctor before starting a vegan diet, and then seek advice from a registered dietitian, who can tailor an eating plan to your nutritional needs.

Combine plant food sources for the maximum amount of vitamins and nutrients. Soups, salads, and smoothies with lots of different kinds of foods will help you maximize calories and nutrients.

And by all means, take it slowly. "Get rid of red meat, and then poultry, and then dairy products and fish," McManus says, "But don't feel that you have to eliminate all of them at once." ♥



Vegan burgers are made without meat, like these burgers made from lentils.



Bit by bit, Americans are eating healthier

Americans are starting to eat a healthier diet, but we still have a long way to go, suggests a study (which included Harvard research) published Sept. 24, 2019, in *JAMA*. Researchers looked at health survey responses gathered from 1999 to 2016 from almost 44,000 American men and women. The good news: during the study, participants improved on the 100-point Healthy Eating Index, thanks to higher intakes of high-quality carbohydrates (such as whole grains), plant protein (such as whole grains and nuts), and unsaturated fats; and lower intakes of added sugars. The not-so-good news: 42% of the American diet is still coming from low-quality carbs, and about 12% is

coming from saturated fat. Like turning a massive battleship, it takes time to change eating patterns. These findings confirm that a winning strategy includes swapping low-quality carbs for higher-quality ones, replacing some saturated fats (like those in red meat) with unsaturated fats (like those in nuts and fish), and reducing calories from carbs over all (fewer snacks and drinks with added sugars and refined grains). An outstanding and popular book to guide healthy eating is *Eat, Drink and Be Healthy*, by Walter Willett and P. J. Skerrett, from Harvard Health Publishing.



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What to do about the heartburn medication recall

By now, you've probably heard about the recall of a popular heartburn medication. Some drugs that contain ranitidine (best known as Zantac) have been found by the FDA to have unacceptable amounts of N-nitrosodimethylamine (NDMA), a possible cancer-causing chemical (which also triggered recalls of certain lots of the blood pressure drugs called angiotensin-receptor blockers). While the FDA investigates ranitidine, you're advised to talk to your doctor about whether to keep taking it. One alternative: switching to a similar drug, such as over-the-counter famotidine (Pepcid) or cimetidine (Tagamet). They're all in a class of medications known as H2 blockers, which block a chemical that

signals the stomach to produce acid. "They're fairly interchangeable, working equally well for most people," says Dr. Kyle Staller, a gastroenterologist with Harvard-affiliated Massachusetts General Hospital.

Stronger heartburn medications include a class of drugs called proton-pump inhibitors, or PPIs, such as over-the-counter lansoprazole (Prevacid) or omeprazole (Prilosec). Long-term use of PPIs has been linked to reduced levels of vitamin B12, magnesium, and calcium, as well as an increased risk for hip fractures, pneumonia, and other life-threatening conditions. But Dr. Staller says the data supporting those risks aren't conclusive, and there's no evidence of risks from long-term use of H2 blockers.



A free, easy way to help your health

Want something simple to boost your health? Try looking on the bright side. A large observational study published online Sept. 27, 2019, by *JAMA Network Open* tied optimism to fewer heart attacks and a lower risk for premature death. Researchers combed through 15 studies that included almost 230,000 people who were followed for an average of 14 years. Being optimistic was associated with a 35% lower risk for cardiovascular events and a 14% lower risk for an early death, compared with being

pessimistic. The findings don't prove that seeing the glass half-full causes better health, but many other studies have reported similar findings. "Optimistic people may have healthier habits, such as regular exercise and healthy diets; and they may be better at regulating their emotions in stressful situations, which could also contribute to lower levels of inflammation. But we need more research to confirm it," says Dr. Laura Kubzansky, a study author and co-director of the Lee Kum Sheung Center for Health and Happiness at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. ♥



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What's coming up:

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