



Your 28-Day Kickstart to Better Arterial Health

CONNEQT Health Guided Wellness Program

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

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Health



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Welcome to Your 28-Day Kickstart to Better Arterial Health

At CONNEQT Health, we believe that small, consistent changes can lead to life-changing results. That's why we've partnered with the American Heart Association to bring you this trusted, science-backed wellness program—designed to help you build sustainable habits that support better arterial and cardiovascular health.

Over the next four weeks, you'll be guided through practical, actionable steps that will empower you to take control of your well-being. Whether you're looking to eat healthier, move more, improve sleep, manage stress, or optimize your blood pressure, this program will provide clear guidance and tools to help you make lasting improvements.

Each week builds on the last, allowing you to progress naturally while exploring Life's Essential 8™—a framework for cardiovascular and metabolic health. From understanding nutrition and physical activity to learning how to monitor key health metrics like blood pressure and other key arterial biomarkers, this program will help you master habits that support a longer, healthier life.

What to Expect

- **Daily Learning & Actionable Steps** – Each day includes expert-backed articles and simple tasks to help you implement what you've learned.
- **Supportive & Practical Guidance** – No drastic changes—just small, manageable steps that fit into your daily routine.
- **Sustainable Habit Formation** – By the end of this program, you'll have built a solid foundation for long-term arterial health.

Track Your Starting Point

Before getting started, take a moment to record a few key health metrics. This will help you monitor progress throughout the program and see how small, consistent changes add up over time.

What to track:

- **Blood Pressure** – Take 2-3 readings following best practices, including sitting calmly, feet flat on the floor, and arm supported at heart level.
- **Weight** – If weight management is one of your goals, record your starting weight.
- **Activity Level** – Jot down how much physical activity you typically get each week.
- **Sleep Habits** – Reflect on how many hours of sleep you typically get each night.
- **Eating Habits** – Take note of the types of foods you eat most often—whole foods, processed foods, takeout, home-cooked meals, or a mix of everything.

Write these down in a journal, notes app, or tracking sheet—whatever works best for you. If you're using the CONNEQT Pulse, you can log your blood pressure results regularly to observe trends over time.

No need to overthink this! Just take note of where you're starting—you'll have plenty of time to build new habits as you go.

Now, let's get started.

Week 1: Building the Foundation

Welcome to Week 1: Building Your Foundation

Welcome to Week 1 of this 4-week journey designed to help you master Life's Essential 8™—a set of science-based steps to improve cardiovascular health and overall well-being. These steps, which include healthy eating, staying active, managing stress, and other key habits, are designed to help you build a foundation for a longer, healthier life.

This week, we'll focus on creating awareness and building habits that support heart and brain health. Each day, you'll engage with articles and tasks to help you make small, impactful changes. Together, we'll lay the groundwork for heart-healthy routines that last a lifetime.

Week-at-a-Glance

This week is all about creating a strong foundation for heart and brain health. You'll learn about Life's Essential 8, including healthy eating, physical activity, and managing blood pressure, while exploring small, actionable changes to improve your overall well-being.

Here's how to set yourself up for success:

- 1. Plan Ahead:** On Monday, take a moment to plan for the week by reviewing the tasks ahead. Preparing in advance will help you stay on track as you complete the program.
 - What you'll need this week:
 - A journal or notebook to jot down reflections and track progress.
 - Comfortable clothing and shoes for short walks or physical activity.

- [The CONNEQT Pulse](#) to monitor your blood pressure and other arterial health biomarkers.
- A food label from a packaged item in your pantry or fridge.
- *Optional:* If you'd like to try prepping a colorful salad as part of an energy-boosting activity, consider having ingredients like leafy greens, tomatoes, and avocados on hand.

- 2. Reflect on Your Baseline:** Think about your current habits, such as how often you exercise or what foods you typically eat. Use this week to identify where small improvements can have the biggest impact.
- 3. Explore Key Topics:** This week, you'll learn how to monitor blood pressure, incorporate physical activity into your day, and decode food labels. Each article and task will guide you through practical ways to start building heart-healthy habits.
- 4. Celebrate Progress:** Progress is more important than perfection. Each small step you take is a win.

Understanding where to focus your efforts is the key to long-term success.

That's where Life's Essential 8 comes in—a comprehensive guide to the habits that will help you achieve and maintain optimal health.



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Day 1: Starting Strong with Life's Essential 8™

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

Before you begin today's content, take a moment to check your blood pressure. Measuring at the same time each day helps you track trends and stay on top of your health. If you're using the CONNEQT Pulse, sync your readings with the CONNEQT App in order to monitor and track your progress throughout the program.

Improving and maintaining cardiovascular health, or CVH, can help you enjoy a longer, healthier life. Better CVH also has been associated with decreased risk for heart disease, stroke, cancer, dementia, and other major health problems.

Life's Essential 8 outlines a few actionable steps you can take to live a healthier lifestyle:

- **Eat Better:** Focus on whole foods, fruits, vegetables, lean protein, nuts, seeds, and healthy oils like olive and canola.
- **Be More Active:** Aim for 150 minutes of moderate or 75 minutes of vigorous activity weekly. Kids need 60 minutes daily.
- **Quit Tobacco:** Avoid nicotine products, including cigarettes and e-ciga-

rettes, and protect children from secondhand smoke.

- **Get Healthy Sleep:** Adults need 7–9 hours nightly. Too little or too much sleep can increase the risk of heart disease.
- **Manage Weight:** Maintain a healthy weight with an optimal BMI between 18.5 and 24.9.
- **Control Cholesterol:** Monitor non-HDL (bad) cholesterol and work with your healthcare provider to manage levels.
- **Manage Blood Sugar:** High blood sugar over time can damage your heart and other organs. Monitor hemoglobin A1c for long-term control.
- **Manage Blood Pressure:** Keep blood pressure below 120/80 mm Hg for optimal health.

Following this framework can lead to improved health, increased energy, and a reduced risk of chronic disease.

Your Task for Today

Take a moment to reflect on your goals for this program. Identify one area of Life's Essential 8 that resonates with you and write down a small, actionable SMART goal to focus on this week. SMART goals are:

- **Specific:** What exactly do you want to achieve?
- **Measurable:** How will you track your progress?
- **Achievable:** Is it realistic for your current situation?
- **Relevant:** Does it align with your health priorities?
- **Time-bound:** What's your deadline or timeframe?

Example: “I’ll prioritize getting healthy sleep by going to bed 30 minutes earlier each night this week and tracking my bedtime in a journal.”



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Day 2: Making Movement a Daily Habit

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

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Regular physical activity is important for good health because it reduces the risk of heart disease, stroke, and other chronic conditions such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, excess weight, and diabetes. Beyond the physical benefits, being active can help you feel better, boost your energy levels, and reduce stress and tension. This week, you'll focus on incorporating movement into your routine, starting with small, manageable steps.

Getting Started With Physical Activity

If you're not in the habit of being physically active, getting started is easier than you think. Follow these tips to build a sustainable routine:

- **Start Slowly:** Don't overdo it at first. Choose activities you enjoy and pick a

start date that works for your schedule.

- **Set Yourself Up for Success:** Wear comfortable clothes and shoes, drink water before and after exercising, and plan your sessions for the same time each day to create consistency.
- **Track Your Progress:** Write down the days you exercise, the distance or time, and how you feel after each session. Celebrate even the smallest milestones.
- **Begin with Walking:** Walking is a simple and effective way to get started. Gradually build toward at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic exercise each week. Add muscle-strengthening exercises at least two days a week.

Staying Motivated

Once you've started, staying consistent is key to making physical activity a way of life. Here are some tips to keep going:

- **Make It Social:** Get your family involved or join a community group or exercise class. A strong support system can help you stick with your routine.
- **Mix It Up:** Avoid boredom by doing a variety of activities. Take a brisk walk one day, go for a swim the next, or try a bike ride over the weekend.
- **Be Prepared:** Have a backup plan for bad weather, like walking in a mall instead of the park.

Physical activity is about progress, not perfection. Start where you are and take one step at a time. Over time, these small changes can lead to a stronger, healthier, and more flexible you. Making movement a part of your daily habit can help you not only manage your cardiovascular health but also improve your overall quality of life.

Your Task for Today

Energize yourself to stay active by implementing strategies from the [Power Up to Move More Infographic](#). Identify one tip to incorporate into your routine and reflect on how it helps you stay energized.

Example: "I'll hydrate throughout the day and go for a brisk walk immediately after work to avoid losing momentum."



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Day 3: How to Monitor Your Blood Pressure at Home

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

Before you begin today's content, take a moment to check your blood pressure. Measuring at the same time each day helps you track trends and stay on top of your health. If you're using the CONNEQT Pulse, sync your readings with the CONNEQT App in order to monitor and track your progress throughout the program.

Who Should Monitor Blood Pressure at Home?

The American Heart Association recommends home monitoring for anyone with high blood pressure as a valuable way to assess whether treatments are effective. Using the CONNEQT [Pulse](#), you can track your readings consistently and share insights with your healthcare professional.

Home monitoring can also help confirm a diagnosis of high blood pressure, offering a more complete picture of your cardiovascular health. However, it's important to remember that home monitoring complements, but does not replace, regular doctor visits. Always consult your healthcare professional before making

any changes to your blood pressure medication, regardless of your readings at home.

Monitoring at home is especially important for:

- Anyone diagnosed with high blood pressure.
- People starting or changing high blood pressure treatment to find if it's working.
- People who need closer monitoring. This is especially true for people with risk factors for high blood pressure and/or conditions related to high blood pressure.

How to Use the Pulse as a Home Blood Pressure Monitor

Discuss how to use your Pulse with your health care professional. It's important to have them make sure that you have the correct cuff size and fit. A cuff that is the incorrect size will cause an inaccurate blood pressure reading.

When preparing to take your blood pressure:

- **Plan ahead.** Don't smoke, drink caffeinated beverages or exercise within 30 minutes before taking your blood pressure. Empty your bladder.
- **Don't take the measurement over clothes.** Remove the clothing over the arm that will be used to measure blood pressure.
- **You can use either arm.** Usually there is not a big difference between readings on them but whatever arm you choose, try and use that arm consistently.
- **Be still.** Allow at least five minutes of quiet rest before measurements. Don't talk or use the phone.
- **Sit correctly.** Sit with your back straight and supported (on a dining chair, rather than a sofa). Your feet should be flat on the floor. Do not cross your legs. Support your arm on a flat surface. The middle of the cuff should be placed on the upper arm at heart level. Check your monitor's instructions for an illustration or have your health care professional show you how.
- **Measure at the same time every day.** Take the readings at the same time

each day. Talk with your health care professional about how often to take your blood pressure.

- **Take multiple readings and record the results.** Each time you measure, take two readings one minute apart.

Take Charge of Your Health

Home blood pressure monitoring is a simple but powerful tool for managing your heart health. It helps track how well treatments are working, provides critical information for your healthcare professional, and empowers you to take proactive steps toward healthier blood pressure levels.

By choosing the right monitor, using it correctly, and keeping a consistent routine, you can stay informed and in control. Always share your results with your healthcare team and discuss any concerns. Small, consistent steps can make a big impact on your cardiovascular health.

Your Task for Today

Plan to use your Pulse to take your blood pressure every day this week, including today, following the steps outlined above. Focus on accurate readings by preparing properly and recording your results to share with your healthcare professional.

Example: “I’ll use my Pulse to take my blood pressure reading every morning before breakfast this week and discuss the results with my healthcare provider at my next visit.”



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Day 4: Steps to Healthy Weight Management

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

Before you begin today's content, take a moment to check your blood pressure. Measuring at the same time each day helps you track trends and stay on top of your health. If you're using the CONNEQT Pulse, sync your readings with the CONNEQT App in order to monitor and track your progress throughout the program.

Reaching and maintaining a healthy weight is essential for your overall health and well-being. It can help reduce the risk of heart disease, stroke, and other chronic conditions while improving energy levels and quality of life. However, achieving a healthy weight can be challenging, and it often requires a combination of nutritious eating, physical activity, and lifestyle adjustments. While there's no one-size-fits-all solution, the key is to create a plan that works for you and your unique needs.

What Are the Keys to Healthy Weight Loss?

To lose weight, you need to consume fewer calories than you burn through normal metabolism and physical activity. This can be achieved by:

- **Watching what you eat:** Pay attention to portion sizes and make mindful food choices.
- **Choosing nutritious foods:** Opt for whole, minimally processed foods.
- **Following a healthy diet pattern:** Focus on balance and variety in your meals.
- **Getting and staying active:** Incorporate regular physical activity into your routine.

How Can I Make Better Food Choices?

Improving your diet doesn't have to be complicated. Follow these guidelines to create a healthy eating pattern:

- Eat a variety of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.
- Include lean protein sources such as poultry, fish, and nuts, and limit red meat.
- Reduce your intake of saturated and trans fats, added sugars, and sodium.
- Choose fat-free or low-fat (1%) dairy products.
- Limit foods and drinks that are high in calories but low in nutrition.
- Prepare meals with little or no salt, and be mindful of sodium in packaged foods.

What Happens When I Reach a Healthy Weight?

Reaching your target weight is an important milestone, but maintaining it is equally crucial. Here are some tips to help you stay on track:

- Balance the calories you consume with the energy you burn to maintain your weight.
- If you're still losing weight after reaching your goal, gradually add a few hun-

dred more calories to your daily intake.

- Adjust your eating habits if you increase or decrease physical activity levels.
- Keep a record of your meals and activity to monitor your progress and make adjustments as needed.

How Can I Stay at a Healthy Weight?

Maintaining a healthy weight is a lifelong commitment. Try these strategies to build sustainable habits:

- Keep low-calorie, heart-healthy foods, such as chopped fruits and vegetables, on hand for quick snacks.
- Use a shopping list and avoid grocery shopping when you're hungry.
- Plan meals ahead of time, especially if you're attending social events or dining out.
- When hunger strikes between meals, drink water or choose a small, nutritious snack like a piece of fruit.
- Satisfy cravings for high-calorie foods by eating a small portion instead of eliminating them entirely.
- Stay committed to your physical activity plan and incorporate movement into your daily routine.

What If I Go Back to Old Habits?

Old habits can be difficult to break, and it's normal to face setbacks along the way. If you find yourself overeating or skipping exercise, remember that this is not a failure. It's an opportunity to recommit to your goals and get back on track. Every small step you take is progress toward a healthier you.

Take It One Step at a Time

Weight management is a journey, and it's important to be patient with yourself. Celebrate small successes, and don't hesitate to seek support from loved ones or healthcare professionals.

Stay focused on your long-term health, and remember—you can do this!

Your Task for Today

At your next meal, evaluate your portion sizes and try reducing portions for higher-sodium or calorie-dense foods. Use the “plate method” as a guide to add balance and color to your meal. You can also explore the AHA’s Balanced Plate Infographic for inspiration.

Example: “I’ll use a smaller plate and ensure half of it is filled with vegetables during dinner tonight.”



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Day 5: Decoding Food Labels for Heart Health

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

Before you begin today's content, take a moment to check your blood pressure. Measuring at the same time each day helps you track trends and stay on top of your health. If you're using the CONNEQT Pulse, sync your readings with the CONNEQT App in order to monitor and track your progress throughout the program.

When it comes to building a heart-healthy diet, understanding what's in the foods and drinks you consume is crucial. Food labels are a powerful tool for identifying calories, nutrients, and ingredients, helping you make more informed choices. However, reading food labels can sometimes feel like deciphering a code.

This guide will help you break down the key information on food labels to better understand the ingredients in your diet, so you can take meaningful steps toward a healthier lifestyle.

The Nutrition Facts information is always displayed in the same orderly fashion. It helps you understand how much of certain nutrients that you need to limit are contained in the product per serving.

Understanding Nutrition Facts Labels

What do all those huge words mean? Can you always tell when something has a lot of sugar? How about sodium and trans fats? It may be hard to identify ingredients you want to reduce in your diet to keep it heart-healthy, such as saturated and trans fats, sodium, added sugars and cholesterol.

Some ingredients go by names other than what we expect. But with a little research you can know what you're eating.

Ingredients are listed in order of quantity, but that doesn't always tell the whole story. For example, if a jar of salsa lists tomatoes first, you know there are more tomatoes in the product than anything else.

But when it comes to sodium, added sugars and saturated and trans fats – which in excess can damage your heart health and increase your risk of heart disease and stroke – it can be difficult to tell just how much is in there.

These ingredients can go by several names.

Identifying Hidden Sugars

You might see sugar listed as the fourth ingredient in a product and think it's not so bad. But sugar can also be listed as high-fructose corn syrup or corn syrup, agave nectar, barley malt syrup or dehydrated cane juice, to name just a few.

Recognizing Sodium in Foods

There's salt, sodium benzoate, disodium or monosodium glutamate (MSG).

Sodium nitrite is a source of salt in our diets. It's in hot dogs, lunch meats and other processed meats. It's used to preserve fish and meats and control bacteria, so it has legitimate uses. But you should be aware that it contributes to your total salt intake. This is important to know because too much sodium can raise blood pressure, increasing the risk for heart disease and stroke. The American Heart Association recommends no more than 2,300 milligrams (mg) of sodium a day and moving toward an ideal limit of no more than 1,500 mg. Still, the average American consumes twice that much.

Understanding Trans Fats and Cholesterol

You won't find these listed as trans fats at all, but instead ingredients that contain trans fats: mainly partially hydrogenated oil and hydrogenated oil. Trans fats can elevate your risk of developing heart disease and stroke. These fats raise your bad cholesterol (LDL) and decrease your good cholesterol (HDL).

Making Healthier Choices

Food labels can seem overwhelming at first glance, but understanding their components can make all the difference in creating a heart-healthy diet. Pay attention to the Nutrition Facts and ingredient list to spot hidden sugars, sodium, and trans fats that could be compromising your health. The more you know about the foods you eat, the more confident you'll feel in making choices that support your heart health and overall well-being. Take one small step today by reviewing the ingredients on a product you commonly consume—you might be surprised by what you find!

Your Task for Today

Find a packaged food item in your pantry or fridge and read its label. Identify the amount of added sugars, sodium, and saturated fats. Reflect on whether it aligns with your heart-healthy goals, particularly in managing blood pressure.

Example: “I’ll compare the sodium content of my favorite snack to a low-sodium alternative the next time I shop.”



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Day 6: Boost Your Energy the Heart-Healthy Way

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

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Everyone wants to feel more energized, but finding sustainable ways to boost your energy can seem overwhelming. Instead of quick fixes or unhealthy habits, lasting lifestyle changes are the key to feeling more vibrant and active every day. Whether you're tackling a busy workday, chasing after kids, or simply looking to enjoy life more fully, these simple and heart-healthy energy boosters can help you recharge naturally.

Here's a quick rundown on ways to keep from feeling run down:

Eating for Energy

Eating a variety of good-for-you foods will provide you with the energy your body needs. Here's how:

- **Enjoy plenty of fruit and veggies.** The vitamins and minerals they contain are good for you. Keep a serving or two of your favorite fruit or vegetable handy so you have something healthy to snack on when you're feeling a bit hungry or tired in between meals.
- **Avoid big meals with too much salt, added sugar and saturated fat.** High-calorie foods with very little nutrients can leave you feeling groggy. Eating smaller amounts and more frequent nutrient-rich meals will help balance your blood sugar levels over the course of the day, helping you feel more alert and energetic.
- **Eat whole-grain, fiber-rich foods.** These are a great filler-upper. Fiber causes food to stay in your stomach longer, so you feel full longer than with coffee, high-calorie energy bars or drinks, and candy, for example. These quick fixes rely on caffeine and/or added sugar, which can lead to energy spikes and crashes.
- **Drink lots of water.** Dehydration reduces energy levels.

Staying Active to Fight Fatigue

In the short term, increasing your physical activity to increase your energy seems like the opposite of what you should be doing. But in the long term, it works. You don't have to be a marathoner to see benefits. Just start where you are and do more. If you don't exercise, walk around the block and gradually work up from there. Your goal should be to get at least 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity per week, preferably spread throughout the week. You don't have to do it all at once. Start slowly and stick with it.

Prioritizing Restful Sleep

How much is enough? Each person is different. Most adults need around seven hours, but you may need more. If you have sleep apnea, a condition that causes you to wake up many times during the night, you won't get the quality sleep you need and may feel sleepy all day. Heavy snoring is a major sign of sleep apnea. If your spouse or partner says you snore or that you periodically stop breathing for brief periods during sleep, tell your doctor. Sleep apnea can put you at risk for stroke.

Managing Weight for Better Energy

Carrying around extra pounds saps energy. It creates extra work for your heart and can raise blood pressure, too. Increasing your physical activity and eating a healthier diet to burn more calories than you take in is the way to go. And steer clear of fad diets; they don't work.

Reducing Stress to Prevent Energy Drain

Stress is an inevitable part of life. That's why learning to manage stress is important. Successfully managing stress means keeping a positive outlook and a healthy lifestyle, which helps fight energy-sapping depression. To take care of yourself, try taking regular physical activity breaks, meditating, taking time off and doing things you like. Avoid unhealthy ways to manage stress, which includes smoking, drinking excessive amounts of alcohol, overeating and relying on stimulants.

Boosting your energy doesn't have to be complicated. By adopting these heart-healthy habits, you'll not only feel more energized but also set yourself up for a longer, healthier life. Small, sustainable changes in your daily routine can make all the difference. Start today and enjoy the benefits of more energy, improved well-being, and a reduced risk of heart disease and stroke. You've got this!

Your Task for Today

Pick one energy-boosting activity to try today. This could be prepping a colorful salad, taking a 5-minute stretch break, or stepping outside for fresh air. Notice how it impacts your energy levels.

Example: "I'll prepare a colorful salad with leafy greens, tomatoes, and avocados, and notice how it boosts my energy and mood."



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Day 7: Define Your Fitness Journey

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

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You've decided to become more physically active — a major step toward better health and fitness. But what's next? Adults benefit from at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity each week. But everyone's goals are different, and you should tailor your exercise plan to your abilities and needs. Answer the following questions before starting a new fitness program or routine:

Assessing Your Current Fitness Level

How much physical activity you can do will depend on your current fitness level. Find your starting point by recording your first fitness scores when you begin your program. If you continue to record your scores regularly, you can track your progress. A health or fitness professional can help you learn how to get your scores.

To assess your aerobic and muscular fitness, flexibility and body composition, you should record:

- Your pulse rate before and right after walking one mile (1.6 kilometers)
- How long it takes you to walk one mile
- How many push-ups you can do without stopping to rest
- How far you can reach toward your toes while seated on the floor with your legs straight out in front of you
- Your waist circumference just above your hipbones
- Your weight compared to your height, which is measured in a body mass index

Considering Health Conditions Before Exercising

If you have a chronic medical condition, such as diabetes or heart disease, you should talk to your health care team before beginning a new exercise program. In general, healthy adults who plan small increases in their weekly physical activity do not need to consult a health care professional before becoming active. Don't wait to begin moving more and sitting less throughout your day.

Finding Activities You Enjoy

Research shows people are more likely to continue a fitness program they enjoy. If you have a blast on the dance floor, you might want to consider an aerobics class that includes dance moves. If you prefer to workout at home, try a virtual class, walking, running or even getting some simple equipment you can use at home such as hand-held weights or resistance bands.

Setting Fitness Goals

You are now ready to set your goals! Use your answers to the questions above as a guide.

- **General goal** - If you are just starting out, work toward meeting the American Heart Association Recommendations for Physical Activity in Adults.

Current guidelines recommend at least 150 minutes a week of moderate aerobic activity or 75 minutes a week of vigorous aerobic activity (or a combination of the two), plus strength training.

- **Specific goal** - If you have something more specific in mind, such as running a 5K race, create a plan to reach that goal. Consider starting or joining a virtual group to get help with your training plan.
- **Weight-loss goal** - If the goal of your physical activity program is to lose weight, you may want to talk with your health care professional to determine a healthy amount to lose each week. Along with managing calorie intake, physical activity is an important part of losing weight and keeping it off. The amount of activity needed to achieve a healthy weight is different for everyone.

You may want to ask a health or fitness professional what types and amounts of physical activity to do to reach your goal.

Clear goals can help motivate you when you're not in the mood to get moving. Tracking your progress can also help you stick with your program.

Your Task for Today

Reflect on your physical activity habits this week. Building on what you learned on Day 1 about setting SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) goals, create three fitness goals for the upcoming week. Focus on making your activities enjoyable and varied, drawing inspiration from AHA's [Make Movement More Fun infographic](#).

Example: "Next week, I'll join a dance workout class online on Monday, take a nature hike with friends on Wednesday, and do strength training at home on Friday. I'll schedule these activities on my calendar and reward myself with a relaxing playlist after each session."

Remember: Fitness should be fun and tailored to your interests and abilities. This is your journey—make it one you enjoy!

Week 2: Applying Knowledge and Building Habits

Welcome to Week 2: Applying Knowledge and Building Habits

Welcome to Week 2 of your journey toward mastering Life's Essential 8™! This week, we'll focus on turning the foundational knowledge you gained last week into practical habits that fit seamlessly into your daily life. Through small, consistent actions, you'll start to build momentum and confidence in your ability to maintain a heart-healthy lifestyle.

This week's topics include enhancing your nutrition, increasing physical activity, improving sleep routines, and better understanding how to manage key risk factors like weight and sodium intake. Together, we'll continue to make small changes that lead to big results.

Week-at-a-Glance

This week is all about applying what you've learned and taking actionable steps to solidify healthy habits. You'll explore ways to optimize your daily routines while focusing on manageable, impactful changes.

Here's how to set yourself up for success:

- 5. Add Color to Your Plate:** Start the week by learning how to incorporate more fruits and vegetables into every meal. As you read the article on "Make Fruits and Veggies Part of Every Meal," think about how you can "eat the rainbow" and bring variety to your diet. Use this as an opportunity to plan meals that meet your nutritional goals.
- 6. What You'll Need This Week:**

- Comfortable walking shoes for increasing your physical activity.
- Fresh produce for meal preparation and snacks. Consider trying fruits or vegetables you haven't had before to add diversity to your meals.
- A notebook or app to log your progress, whether it's steps walked, meals planned, or sleep hours tracked.
- A quiet space for practicing mindfulness or enhancing your bedtime routine.

7. Explore Key Topics:

- **Nutrition:** Incorporate more fruits and vegetables into every meal.
- **Physical Activity:** Discover how walking and other simple exercises can benefit your body and mind.
- **Sleep:** Learn how to create a bedtime routine that supports better rest and recovery.
- **Weight and Sodium Management:** Understand how these factors impact your heart health and discover strategies to address them.

8. Celebrate Progress: At the end of the week, reflect on what's working well and where you can improve. Every small step forward is a step closer to lasting change.

Let's dive in with your first article of the week: "Make Fruits and Veggies Part of Every Meal." This article will guide you on how to bring more color and nutrition to your plate as you build healthier habits.



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Day 8: Make Fruits and Veggies Part of Every Meal

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

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Adding more fruit and vegetables can provide you a wide variety of health benefits, including weight management. Whether you cook at home or eat out, adding more colorful, nutritious and delicious vegetables and fruit into your snacks and meals is important for a healthy eating pattern.

Which fruits and vegetables are best?

The fact is that they're all good for you. When you eat many different types of fruits and vegetables, you'll get a variety of vitamins and minerals to support good health. The American Heart Association suggests filling half your plate with fruits and veggies as a way to meet the recommendation of 2 1/2 cups of vege-

tables and 2 cups of fruit each every day.

All produce counts towards the goal of 4 1/2 cups, including canned, fresh and frozen fruits and vegetables. When shopping for canned or frozen fruit and vegetables, be sure to compare Nutrition Facts labels and choose the products with the lowest amount of sodium and added sugars.

Eating the Rainbow: Why Color Matters

All fruits and vegetables contain vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients that may help prevent heart disease, cancer, and other illnesses. Some key nutrients include fiber, potassium, folate, and vitamins A and C. The best way to get a variety of nutrients is to eat fruits and vegetables in many different colors. Here are examples from each color group to inspire your choices:

- **Red & Pink:** Strawberries, tomatoes, red peppers, watermelon, pomegranates.
- **Blue & Purple:** Blueberries, eggplants, plums, purple grapes.
- **Yellow & Orange:** Carrots, mangoes, sweet potatoes, oranges.
- **White:** Garlic, onions, bananas, cauliflower.
- **Green:** Spinach, broccoli, cucumbers, green grapes.

By choosing a variety of colors each day, you'll ensure your diet is packed with essential nutrients for better overall health.

Ways to Add More Fruits and Vegetables

Breakfast

- Add fruit to whole-grain cereal, such as sliced bananas, raisins or dried unsweetened cranberries.
- Add fruit to plain fat-free/low-fat yogurt or fat-free/low-fat cottage cheese such as berries, sliced cherries or pineapple.
- Add fruit to oatmeal, such as sliced peaches, apples or pears.
- Eat whole fruits. However, if you drink fruit or vegetable juice, keep your serving to ½ cup, and be sure it's labeled 100%. Skip fruit drinks, punches or fruit cocktails. They are often loaded with excess sodium and/or added sugar.

- Add chopped vegetables, such as onions, bell peppers and/or spinach, to eggs.

Lunch

- Choose a fruit or vegetable salad as your entree.
- Bulk up a sandwich with vegetables, such as cucumber spears, sliced tomato, sliced avocado and dark green leafy lettuce.
- Enjoy a bowl of soup that's full of vegetables. You can make easy soup recipes at home. If you buy canned soups, be sure to compare the Nutrition Facts labels and choose the product with the lowest amount of sodium.
- Choose celery sticks or baby carrots with a dip as a side dish instead of chips.

Snacks

- Wash and cut raw veggies, such as bell peppers, celery, carrots, radishes and broccoli, ahead of time so they're easy to grab for a snack. Pair them with a healthy dip.
- Prepare snack bags with dried fruit, such as raisins, dates or unsweetened apricots and dry-roasted nuts, such as pecans, almonds and walnuts. (Although nutritious dried fruits and nuts are high in calories, so enjoy as a ¼ cup-serving.)
- Keep grab-and-go fruit, such as grapes, cherries, oranges and bananas, easily available when you're on the run.
- Enjoy eating frozen fruits or vegetables, such as grapes, peas or sliced bananas.

Dinner

- Fill half your plate with vegetables and/or fruit.
- Keep lots of frozen vegetables on hand. They can be easily steamed or microwaved within minutes while the entree is cooking.
- Bake or roast vegetables, such as a sweet potato or asparagus if you're using the oven for an entree.
- Always add extra chopped vegetables, such as sliced, celery, carrot rounds, chopped tomatoes or spinach, to any soup stew or sauce.
- Stir in cooked frozen or leftover vegetables, such as peas, chopped aspara-

gus or sliced mushrooms, halved Brussels sprouts, to cooked brown rice.

- Throw some vegetables, such as sliced zucchini or yellow squash, corn on the cob, halved bell peppers, on the barbecue too when you're grilling chicken or another entree.
- Make extra vegetables so you can easily have them again for another meal.

By adding more fruits and vegetables to your meals, you'll not only improve your overall health but also discover how delicious and versatile these colorful foods can be. Small, consistent changes—like filling half your plate with produce or incorporating them into snacks—can lead to lasting habits. Start today and take one step closer to a heart-healthy lifestyle, one bite at a time.

Your Task for Today

Plan meals for tomorrow, ensuring each includes at least one serving of fruits or vegetables. Use the [Eat More Color Infographic](#) for inspiration to add variety and balance to your plate. Explore the [AHA Healthy Recipes page](#) to find heart-healthy meal ideas. As an option, consider preparing veggie tacos or another colorful dish and reflect on how adding produce to your meals impacts your energy and mood.

Example: “Tomorrow, I’ll start my day with oatmeal topped with berries for breakfast, have a colorful salad with lunch, and make veggie tacos for dinner. For snacks, I’ll prepare cucumber slices with hummus.”



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Day 9: Move for Whole Body Health

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

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When it comes to simple ways to be healthy, walking is all the rage. Follow these tips to get started and learn more about fitness walking.

You can get active in lots of ways, but walking is one of the easiest! For most people, it's safe, easy to stick with and low- or no-cost. It doesn't require any special skills or equipment. For such a simple activity, it has so many benefits.

Research has shown that walking at a brisk pace at least 150 minutes a week can help you:

- Think better, feel better and sleep better.
- Reduce your risk of serious diseases like heart disease, stroke, diabetes and several types of cancer.
- Improve your blood pressure, blood sugar and blood cholesterol levels.

- Increase your energy and stamina.
- Improve your mental and emotional well-being and reduce your risk of depression.
- Improve memory and reduce your risk of dementia.
- Boost bone strength and reduce your risk of osteoporosis.
- Prevent weight gain.

If 150 minutes sounds like a lot, remember that **even short activity sessions can be added up** over the week to reach this goal. And it's easy to fit in a few minutes of walking several times a day. This could be 10 minutes of brisk walking after breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Walking Versus Running

Did you know more Americans walk for fitness than run? Maybe you're not that into running. Or maybe you've had an injury and can't run anymore. Then walk — every step counts. Walking briskly can help your health as much as running.

How to Walk for Fitness

Gear up. All you need to get started are comfortable clothes and supportive shoes. Keep your cool by layering clothing, because exercise raises your body's temperature. Shoes designed for walking or running are best, but not required. Just make sure you have a little wiggle room (about half an inch) between your longest toe and the end of the shoe. Avoid cotton socks because they retain moisture and can lead to blisters. (Who knew?!)

Easy does it. If you're out of shape, begin with short distances. Start with a stroll that feels comfortable (perhaps 10–15 minutes), and gradually increase your time or distance. If it's easier on your body and your schedule, stick with a couple of 10- to 20-minute walks a day instead of one long walk.

Focus on form. Keep your head lifted (no texting!), abs engaged and shoulders relaxed. Swing your arms naturally. Avoid carrying heavy items or hand weights because they can put extra stress on your elbows and shoulders – try a backpack instead. Stick to a comfortable, natural stride.

Breathe. If you can't talk or catch your breath while walking, slow down. At first, forget about speed. Just get out there and walk!

Pick up the pace. To warm up, walk at an easy pace for the first several minutes.

Then gradually increase your speed.

Add variety and challenge. Try brisk intervals. For example, walk one block fast, two blocks slow and repeat several times. Over time you'll be able to add more fast intervals with shorter recovery periods. Walking hills or stairs is a great way to increase muscle strength and burn more calories.

Stretch. The end of your walk is a great time to stretch as your body is warmed up. Stretch your hamstrings, calves, chest, shoulders and back. Hold each stretch for 15 to 30 seconds.

Track your progress. Fit walking into your schedule whenever you can. That may mean several short walks a day. When you can fit it in, longer walks will help you improve your stamina. Just remember your overall goal is at least 150 minutes each week.

Stay Safe While Walking

Be alert. Listening to music while you walk can help keep you energized. And making phone calls is a good way to multitask. But if you use headphones, keep the volume low and watch out for traffic that you may not hear. Don't text or stare at your device while walking; keep your eyes on the road.

Stand out. Wear light colors or reflective clothing and carry a flashlight or glow stick (it adds to the fun!) if you walk when visibility is low.

Be street smart. Walking on sidewalks is best, but if you have to walk on the street, stick to streets with lower speed limits, and make sure drivers can see you.

Know the neighborhood. Note which businesses are open when you'll be walking and the location of emergency telephones. Walk on well-traveled streets rather than taking shortcuts through alleys or parking lots.

Listen to your body. If you have foot, knee, hip or back pain when walking, stop and check with your health care team to find out the cause. You may need different shoes or another form of activity like cycling or water exercise. But don't give up! Find the activity that's right for you.

Just Walk

Maybe you haven't been active for a while. No problem! Just get started. It's not all or nothing; it's step by step. Even if you're already active, here are some easy ways you can add more steps to your day:

- Grab the leash, and take the dog out for a walk.
- Forget about rock star parking. Park a bit farther from the entrance to your workplace, school, grocery store, restaurants and other places you visit.
- Take the stairs instead of the elevator, even if just for one or two floors.
- Catch up with a friend by walking around the block while you chat on the phone.

Walking is one of the simplest and most effective ways to improve your health and well-being. By taking even a few small steps each day, you can build a habit that supports your heart, mind, and body. Whether you're just starting or looking to enhance your routine, walking offers endless opportunities to stay active and energized. Remember, every step counts—so lace up your shoes, head outside, and enjoy the journey toward a healthier you.

Your Task for Today

Incorporate intervals into your walk or activity. For example, alternate between 1 minute of brisk walking and 2 minutes of a moderate pace for 20 minutes. Reflect on how this adds variety and challenges your routine.

Example: “During my evening walk, I’ll alternate between walking briskly for 1 minute and slowing down for 2 minutes. Next week, I’ll aim to reduce the slower intervals.”



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Day 10: Crafting a Sleep Routine for Better Health

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

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Getting healthy sleep is one of Life's Essential 8 — key measures for improving and maintaining cardiovascular health, as defined by the American Heart Association. Better cardiovascular health helps lower the risk for heart disease, stroke and other major health problems.

Scheduling the Sandman

Sleeping is something you've done all your life, but the older you get, the harder it can be to sleep like a baby. Busy schedules, the stresses of work or school, and a hundred other distractions can keep you wide awake.

But you can take steps to put yourself in the best state of mind for seven to nine hours of deep sleep. Here are some ways to plan your bedtime routines so you wake up feeling well rested and ready for the next day.

First, Set an Alarm

Not to wake up, but to go to sleep. Even for adults, the best sleep requires a set bedtime. It's easy to forget about the clock while streaming another episode of your favorite show, so set a nighttime alarm as a reminder. But don't hit the sack right away when the bell tolls — leave some time for your routine.

Spend 15 Minutes to Prep for Tomorrow

A restless mind is not a restful mind. Dwelling on the minutiae of the morning could keep you awake. Knock out a few chores the night before.

And don't forget to make a to-do list. There are tasks you need to complete, and you're afraid you'll forget about them by morning. Jotting down a to-do list gets them off your mind and planned so you can rest easy. If your list gets you stressed, there are ways to take care of yourself.

Next, Address That Stress

Practicing mindfulness has proved to reduce anxiety, improve sleep quality and even help with insomnia. Meditation puts you in the perfect mindset to drift off to dreamland. There are many videos available in apps or online.

Journaling is another simple way to quiet your mind by getting your thoughts and feelings down on paper. Go analog and get yourself an inspiring journal to write in to avoid all the distractions on your computer.

Finally, Wind Down to Drift Off

Reading before bed is an excellent way to relax the brain and fall asleep. It can cut stress levels in half in about six minutes. A good work of fiction can take you out of the real world and into the realm of imagination — wouldn't you rather focus on an epic battle between made-up kings than the epic battle you might face getting your toddler ready in the morning? And try a real book made of paper. (Remember those?)

Avoid all screens at bedtime. The bright light of a TV, computer or smartphone can affect your sleep patterns and keep you alert when you should be getting sleepy. Leave the electronics and social media behind.

If You Still Can't Get to Sleep...

Don't lie in bed tossing and turning if you're restless. It's better to get up and reset. Try some of the activities above for a short time before getting back to bed. Ten minutes of meditation or reading might save you hours of staring at the ceiling.

Rest Easy and Reap the Benefits

Quality sleep doesn't just happen—it's a habit you can cultivate. By following these tips and committing to a better bedtime routine, you'll feel more refreshed, energized, and ready to take on each day.

Your Task for Today

Explore how quality sleep impacts your health by reviewing the [How Sleep Affects Your Health Infographic](#). Build on your bedtime routine by adding a relaxation activity like stretching, breathing exercises, or listening to calming music. Reflect on how this improves your sleep quality.

Example: “Tonight, I’ll stretch for 5 minutes before bed and review the infographic tips to maintain my sleep schedule.”



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Day 11: Manage Weight for a Healthier Heart

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

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Achieving and maintaining a healthy weight isn't just about looking good—it's about feeling good and protecting your heart. Weight management plays a critical role in reducing the risk of high blood pressure, a condition that can damage your heart, blood vessels, and overall health over time. By focusing on small, sustainable changes in your diet and physical activity, you can take significant steps toward better heart health and well-being.

Reasons to Manage Your Weight

1. A little weight loss can bring a lot of health gains. You might gain health

benefits from losing as few as **10** pounds. Even a small weight loss can help manage or prevent high blood pressure.

2. Being overweight puts extra strain on your heart. This can increase the risk for:

- High blood pressure
- Damage to your blood vessels
- Serious health threats, such as heart attack and stroke

Increase Activity to Lose Weight

If your health care professional recommends that you lose weight, there's a simple rule to follow – move more and eat well:

- Gradually increase your physical activity beyond the American Heart Association's recommendation of 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity per week
- Lower the number of calories you take in
- Eat a healthy diet

You don't have to join a gym or buy equipment to fit in physical activity. These low- or no-cost community resources can offer access to safe places to exercise:

- YMCA
- Community centers or senior centers
- Parks and recreation departments
- Faith-based groups

Once you reach your goal weight, you can decide which dietary and fitness choices work best for maintaining your weight.

Talk to your health care professional about a healthy approach to weight loss. They can help you figure out how many calories you need to lose weight and which types of activities are best for you.

Take Control of Your Health, One Step at a Time

Managing your weight is one of the most impactful steps you can take to control high blood pressure and improve your overall health. It doesn't require perfection—just progress. Whether you start by adding a 10-minute walk to your day or swapping out a sugary snack for fresh fruit, every positive change counts.

Take the first step today toward a healthier heart and a healthier you. Your future self will thank you!

Your Task for Today

Prepare a healthy, balanced meal that aligns with your weight management goals. Focus on portion control and ensure your plate includes lean protein, whole grains, and a variety of vegetables.

Example: “Tonight, I’ll prepare rosemary-grilled chicken, zesty lemon cous-cous with feta, and roasted broccoli with garlic. Next week, I’ll experiment with adding a new whole grain to my meals.”



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Day 12: Smoking, Alcohol, and Your Blood Pressure

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

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Maintaining heart health is critical for overall well-being, and understanding how certain habits like alcohol consumption and smoking impact your cardiovascular system can empower you to make healthier choices. Excessive alcohol and smoking not only harm your heart but also raise your blood pressure, increasing the risk of heart attack, stroke, and other serious health issues. Let's explore these risks and ways to make meaningful changes to protect your heart.

Can Too Much Alcohol Affect Your Blood Pressure?

Drinking too much alcohol can raise your blood pressure. If you have high blood

pressure, also known as hypertension, your health care professional may ask you to cut back on drinking.

Preventing High Blood Pressure

Science tells us that it's best to limit alcohol. The American Heart Association recommends no more than two drinks per day for men and one drink per day for women for people who choose to drink alcohol. Generally, one drink equals:

- 12-ounce beer (5% alcohol)
- 8-ounce malt liquor (7% alcohol)
- 5-ounce glass of wine (12% alcohol)
- 1.5 ounces of 80-proof liquor

Is Red Wine Heart Healthy?

Red wine is not a miracle drink for heart health. Some scientific studies have shown small amounts of red wine may be linked to improved heart health. But the link reported in many studies may be due to lifestyle factors other than alcohol. Like any dietary or lifestyle choice, if you choose to drink red wine, it's about moderation

If You Need Help

Ask your health care professional about getting help if cutting back on alcohol is hard. Getting help is easier than you may think. And there's no shame in seeking help. Many people struggle with alcohol.

Does Smoking Increase Your High Blood Pressure Risk?

Smoking is the leading cause of preventable death in the United States. Smoking is a risk factor for high blood pressure, which can lead to heart attack and stroke.

Smoking and exposure to secondhand smoke increase the risk for the buildup of plaque inside the arteries called atherosclerosis. High blood pressure, also called hypertension, is known to speed up this process. Blood pressure increases in the short term every time you smoke.

Why You Should Quit Smoking

You should avoid all forms of tobacco as well as secondhand smoke. This can reduce your risk for heart attack and stroke. It also can improve your overall health.

Quitting smoking can reduce your risk of health problems. The earlier you quit, the greater the benefit. Some immediate benefits of quitting include:

- Lower heart rate and blood pressure
- Less carbon monoxide in the blood (carbon monoxide reduces the blood's ability to carry oxygen)
- Better circulation
- Less coughing and wheezing

Protecting Your Heart

Heart health begins with identifying and addressing habits that may harm it. By reducing alcohol intake, quitting smoking, or tackling other negative behaviors, you're making a powerful commitment to a healthier, longer life. While change can be challenging, the benefits—lower blood pressure, reduced heart disease risk, and enhanced quality of life—make it well worth the effort.

Your Task for Today

Identify one habit that negatively impacts your health, such as excessive alcohol consumption, smoking, or another behavior like eating too much fast food. Write down a plan for addressing this habit and how it aligns with your heart-health goals.

Example: "I'll limit my alcohol intake to no more than one glass of wine per evening and avoid drinking on weekdays. If I feel tempted to drink, I'll try herbal tea as a substitute. Additionally, I'll spend 15 minutes organizing my space or reading a book during moments when I would typically engage in this habit to foster a positive and calming routine."



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Day 13: Understanding Sodium: Small Changes, Big Impact

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

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Sodium is an essential mineral that supports vital functions in your body, but too much of it can lead to serious health issues, including high blood pressure and heart disease. Whether you have risk factors for high blood pressure or simply want to take proactive steps to protect your health, understanding sodium's role in your diet is a great place to start. This article will help you recognize where sodium hides in your food and how small, manageable changes can lead to big health improvements.

How Does Sodium Affect Your Health?

Sodium is a mineral that supports vital functions. It's regulated by your kidneys, and helps control your body's fluid balance. It also affects nerve impulses and muscle function.

How Does Sodium Affect My Heart?

Excess sodium in your bloodstream pulls water into your blood vessels, increasing the amount (volume) of blood inside them. When more blood flows through your blood vessels, blood pressure increases. It's like turning up the water supply to a garden hose — the pressure in the hose increases as more water is blasted through it. Increased blood flow also makes the heart work harder to pump more blood through the body.

Over time, high blood pressure may overstretch or injure the blood vessel walls and speed the buildup of sticky plaque that can block blood flow. And extra water in your body can lead to bloating and weight gain.

High blood pressure is known as the “silent killer” because its symptoms aren't always obvious. It's one of the major risk factors for heart disease, the No. 1 killer worldwide.

About 90% of adults in the United States are expected to develop high blood pressure over their lifetimes.

Sodium may affect your blood pressure even more dramatically if you're sensitive to salt.

Certain factors may influence your blood pressure when you eat salt:

- Age
- Weight
- Race/Ethnicity
- Gender
- Medical conditions such as diabetes or chronic kidney disease

Even if you don't have high blood pressure, eating less sodium can help blunt the rise in blood pressure that occurs as you age. It can also reduce your risk of heart attack, heart failure, stroke, kidney disease, osteoporosis, stomach cancer and even headaches.

Where Does Sodium Come From?

Table salt is a combination of two minerals — about 40% sodium and 60% chloride.

Yet, before we use the salt shaker at the table, some foods are already loaded with too much sodium. More than 70% of the sodium we consume comes from packaged, prepared and restaurant foods due to salt added for flavoring, stabilizing, preserving and reducing bacterial risk.

The rest of sodium in the diet comes naturally in food (about 15%) or from salt added when cooking food or to our plates (about 11%).

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend that we consume less than 2,300 milligrams (mg) of sodium daily. Yet, we typically consume about 50% more, or 3,400 mg. An AHA survey found that about 75% of adults in the U.S. prefer less sodium in processed and restaurant foods. So it's important to know the amount of sodium in foods you eat.

The top 10 food sources of sodium in food and our diet are:

- Breads/Rolls
- Pizza
- Sandwiches
- Cold cuts, luncheon and cured meats
- Soups
- Burritos/Tacos
- Savory snacks (chips, crackers, pretzels, popcorn, snack mixes)
- Poultry
- Cheese
- Egg Dishes/Omelets

It may come as a surprise that some of the foods are on this list because they may not taste salty.

The average amount of sodium in a few foods include:

- 1 slice cheese pizza = 600 milligrams (mg) sodium
- 1 serving fast food chicken tenders = 800 milligrams (mg) sodium
- 1 slice cooked bacon = 400 milligrams (mg) sodium

What Are the Benefits of Cutting Down on Sodium?

Eating less sodium can reduce your risk for high blood pressure, fluid retention, heart disease, stroke, kidney issues, osteoporosis and cancer.

If people in the U.S. consume an average 1,500 mg/day sodium, it could result in a 25.6% decrease in high blood pressure and an estimated \$26.2 billion in health care savings. Another estimate projects that achieving this goal would reduce cardiovascular disease deaths from 500,000 to nearly 1.2 million over the next 10 years.

What Are the FDA Sodium Targets?

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and AHA support the food industry's volunteer sodium average intake target from 3,400 mg to 3,000 mg. Some food companies are already reducing sodium in many of their products. Other food manufacturers and restaurants will lower the amount of sodium in their foods to meet the new targets. That means healthier foods for you and millions of other consumers.

The FDA plans to review its guidance to the food industry and take further steps to lower sodium in the food supply to meet the 2,300 mg of sodium limit recommended by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

Is Sodium Really That Bad?

The science behind sodium reduction is clear. Significant evidence links excess sodium intake with high blood pressure, which increases the risk of heart attack, stroke and heart failure.

While some newer research questions the link between sodium and health problems, the connection is well-established. Much of that research is flawed, including inaccurate sodium intake measurements and an emphasis on studying people who are sick rather than the general population. Often, the studies with paradoxical findings are poorly designed to examine the relationship between sodium intake and health outcomes.

Take Control of Your Sodium Intake for a Healthier Future

Reducing your sodium intake is one of the simplest yet most impactful steps you can take toward better health. Whether it's reading labels more carefully, opting for fresh or frozen foods over processed ones, or cutting back on added salt, small efforts can add up over time. Start with one or two changes this week, like swapping a high-sodium snack for a healthier option. Every step brings you closer to better heart health and a longer, healthier life.

Your Task for Today

Cook one low-sodium meal, focusing on using herbs and spices for flavor instead of salt. As an option, try making the [Grilled Chicken with Vegetables](#) recipe. Reflect on how this impacts the taste of your meal and your awareness of sodium content.

Example: “Tonight, I’ll prepare grilled chicken with roasted vegetables, using garlic and rosemary for flavor. Next week, I’ll experiment with more spice blends to enhance my cooking.”



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Day 14: Heart-Healthy Snacking Tips for Every Day

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

Before you begin today's content, take a moment to check your blood pressure. Measuring at the same time each day helps you track trends and stay on top of your health. If you're using the CONNEQT Pulse, sync your readings with the CONNEQT App in order to monitor and track your progress throughout the program.

A snack doesn't have to be a guilty pleasure—it can be a small step toward better health. The right snacks can help fuel your body, keep your energy steady throughout the day, and even support your heart health. Whether you're craving something crunchy, creamy, or refreshing, smart snacking choices can make a big difference in your overall well-being.

Why Healthy Snacking Matters

Snacking can play a crucial role in maintaining energy levels, managing blood sugar, and supporting heart health. By choosing nutrient-dense snacks, you can fuel your body, avoid overeating at meals, and stay on track with your health.

goals. Whether you're at home or on the go, healthy snacking can be an opportunity to boost your well-being.

Here are some snack ideas to add to your grocery list:

Munchies That Crunch

- Apples sliced with a tablespoon of low-sodium peanut butter.
- Pears dipped in fat-free/low-fat cottage cheese.
- Vegetables paired with hummus or tzatziki sauce, such as:
 - Carrot and celery sticks.
 - Bell pepper slices.
 - Zucchini or cucumber rounds.
 - Broccoli and cauliflower florets.
 - Cherry or grape tomatoes.
- Roasted chickpeas.
- [Popcorn](#) (air-popped or made with a nontropical vegetable oil).
- Rice cakes and whole-grain crackers.
- Unsalted nuts and seeds.

Rethink Your Drink

If you drink regular soda or energy drinks, look at the amount of added sugar on the Nutrition Facts label. Sugar drinks easily can add excess calories and pounds. Instead, try:

- Plain or sparkling water. Add citrus or cucumber slices, mint or other herbs for flavor.
- Fat-free/low-fat dairy milk, plain soy milk or unsweetened oat or nut milk.
- Unsweetened tea or coffee.
- 100% fruit juice.
- Low-sodium tomato or mixed-vegetable juice.

Other Simple, Healthy Snacks

- Whole-grain toast with low-sodium peanut butter or other nut butter.
- Fat-free/low-fat cheese.
- Fat-free/low-fat plain with fruit.
- Fruit and veggie smoothie.
- Whole-grain crackers with canned very low sodium tuna or low-sodium salmon.
- Canned fruit (packed in its own juice, water or light syrup).
- Baked or raw apples sprinkled with cinnamon.
- Raisins, dates, figs and other unsweetened dried fruits.
- Frozen banana.
- Frozen grapes.
- Fresh fruit salad flavored with fresh herbs, such as mint, or fresh gingerroot.
- For packaged snacks, be sure to read the Nutrition Facts label. Look at the serving size to determine how many calories, added sugars and sodium are included.

Fuel Your Day with Healthy Choices

Snacking doesn't have to be complicated or unhealthy. With a little planning and mindful choices, you can make snacking work for your heart and your overall health. Start today by choosing one heart-smart snack and see how easy it can be to stay energized and focused throughout your day.

Your Task for Today

Reflect on your progress across multiple areas of Life's Essential 8 this week, such as physical activity, sleep, and managing stress. Identify one accomplishment you're proud of and one area to focus on next week. As part of your reflection, consider planning to make a heart-healthy recipe like [Green Avocado Hummus](#) next week to support your goals. Think about how preparing healthy snacks can help you stay on track.

Example:

- Accomplishment: “I’m proud that I walked briskly three times this week, improving my stamina.”
- Improvement: “Next week, I’ll focus on incorporating healthier snacks into my day to boost my energy.”
- Plan: “I’ll plan to make Green Avocado Hummus next week to enjoy with fresh veggies as part of my snack routine.”

Week 3: Strengthening Habits

Welcome to Week 3: Strengthening Habits

This week, we'll focus on taking the habits you've been building and making them stronger, both mentally and physically. Whether it's through strength training, understanding how sodium and cholesterol impact your body, or learning the importance of mental health in overall well-being, each day's content is designed to reinforce the foundation of your heart health journey. Let's make this week about building resilience—inside and out.

Week-at-a-Glance

This week's focus is on strengthening both your physical and mental health habits. You'll learn how to incorporate resistance training into your exercise routine, reduce sodium in your diet, and understand your cholesterol levels. Additionally, we'll explore how mindfulness can support your heart and how potassium-rich foods can help you manage blood pressure.

Here's how to approach the week ahead:

- 1. Strength Training:** Explore how simple resistance exercises can boost your overall fitness and metabolism.
- 2. Understanding Risks:** Learn about the long-term effects of high blood pressure and cholesterol, and practical steps to manage them.
- 3. Mindfulness and Mental Health:** Discover the powerful connection between stress management, mental health, and heart health.
- 4. Nutrition and Sodium:** Find actionable ways to reduce sodium intake and balance it with potassium-rich foods to optimize heart health.
- 5. Consistency:** Build on the habits from previous weeks and apply them to this week's new tasks for a holistic approach to well-being.

Tips for Success:

- Set aside a consistent time each day to engage with the program.
- Reflect on the tasks daily to better integrate the lessons into your lifestyle.
- Don't forget to celebrate the small victories as you build healthier habits.

As we dive into this week, let's start with a key focus area: building strength for a healthier you.



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Day 15: Building Strength for a Healthier You

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

Before you begin today's content, take a moment to check your blood pressure. Measuring at the same time each day helps you track trends and stay on top of your health. If you're using the CONNEQT Pulse, sync your readings with the CONNEQT App in order to monitor and track your progress throughout the program.

Strength and resistance training exercise is one of the four types of exercise along with endurance, balance and flexibility. Ideally, all four types of exercise would be included in a healthy workout routine and AHA provides easy-to-follow guidelines for endurance and strength-training in its Recommendations for Physical Activity in Adults.

All of the types of exercises don't need to be done every day, but variety helps keep the body fit and healthy, and makes exercise interesting. You can do a variety of exercises to keep the body fit and healthy and to keep your physical activity routine exciting.

The American Heart Association recommends strength training at least twice a week.

Strengthening your muscles gives you the ability to perform everyday activities and helps protect your body from injury. Stronger muscles also lead to a boost in your metabolic rate, which means you'll burn more calories even when your body is at rest.

Don't worry – we're not talking about professional bodybuilding. Simple, weight-bearing exercises that use free weights, machines or your body's own resistance are the focus. You can do these workouts separately from your cardio activity or add resistance to an existing workout. Choose the time and type of activity that works for you.

The Benefits of Strength Training

A well-rounded strength-training program provides the following benefits:

- Increased strength of bones, muscles and connective tissues (tendons and ligaments)
- Lower risk of injury
- Increased muscle mass, which makes it easier for your body to burn calories and thus maintain a healthy weight
- Better quality of life

You may wish to consult with a certified fitness professional to learn safe techniques before beginning a strength-training program. One set of eight to 12 repetitions, working the muscles to the point of fatigue, is usually sufficient for each muscle group.

Aim to exercise each muscle group at least two times per week, with a minimum of two days of rest between workouts.

As you progress and get stronger, add more weight or more days a week of strength training. Adding more sets or increasing frequency may lead to slightly greater gains.

Strength Training After a Cardiac Event or Stroke

Some people are afraid to exercise after a heart attack. But regular physical activity can help reduce your chances of having another heart attack.

The AHA published a statement in 2021 saying that exercise interventions positively affect disability, aerobic fitness, mobility (walking speed) and functional

balance after stroke.

If you've had a heart attack or stroke, talk with your health care team before starting any exercise to be sure you're following a safe, effective physical activity program.

Strength for a Healthier Life

Strength training is a vital part of a well-rounded fitness routine, offering benefits that go beyond muscle building. From improving daily functionality and boosting metabolism to protecting against injury, it's a powerful tool for long-term health. Whether you're new to exercise or looking to enhance your routine, start with simple, effective movements and progress at your own pace. With consistency and variety, strength training can support a healthier, stronger you every step of the way.

Your Task for Today

Plan three workouts for the week, ensuring that at least one includes a strength-based activity like bodyweight exercises, resistance bands, or free weights. Combine this with cardio activities, such as a 15-minute jog, and make sure to have proper footwear to protect your joints. Reflect on how strength training and cardio together enhance your cardiovascular health and overall fitness.

Example: "I'll jog for 15 minutes on Monday, do a 20-minute strength workout on Wednesday with squats, push-ups, and resistance bands, and take a brisk walk on Friday. I'll focus on proper form during strength training and track how my energy levels improve over the week."

Tips:

- Make strength training part of your fitness routine at least twice this week.
- Start with one set of 8–12 repetitions for each muscle group and work towards adding more weight or sets as you progress.
- Remember that regular strength training boosts your metabolism and supports a healthy weight.

By incorporating both cardio and strength training into your routine, you're building a solid foundation for long-term heart health and overall wellness.



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Day 16: Understanding Risks of High Blood Pressure

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

Before you begin today's content, take a moment to check your blood pressure. Measuring at the same time each day helps you track trends and stay on top of your health. If you're using the CONNEQT Pulse, sync your readings with the CONNEQT App in order to monitor and track your progress throughout the program.

High blood pressure, also known as hypertension, is a condition that often develops silently, yet its effects can be far-reaching and severe. Over time, uncontrolled high blood pressure can damage vital organs, increase the risk of heart disease and stroke, and lead to other chronic health issues. Recognizing the risks and taking proactive steps to manage blood pressure is essential for protecting your health and improving your quality of life.

High Blood Pressure Threatens Your Health and Quality of Life

In most cases damage from high blood pressure (also known as hypertension) happens over time. If not detected and controlled, high blood pressure can lead to:

- Heart attack — The arteries can become blocked and prevent blood flow to the heart muscle.
- Stroke — Blood vessels that supply blood and oxygen to the brain to become blocked or burst.
- Heart failure — High blood pressure makes the heart work harder. This can cause the heart to get bigger and struggle to pump enough blood to the body.
- Kidney disease or failure — Damage in the arteries around the kidneys can stop them from filtering blood the right way.
- Vision loss — Blood vessels in the eyes can get strained or damaged.
- Sexual dysfunction — High blood pressure can lead to erectile dysfunction (not being able to have or maintain an erection) in men and may cause a lower sex drive in women.
- Heart disease — Over time, high blood pressure can lead to heart disease. [Angina](#) is chest pain that is a common symptom.
- Atherosclerosis (plaque buildup in the arteries) — High blood pressure can damage arteries in the body and allow plaque to build up.

How Can Hypertension Cause Other Health Problems?

When blood pressure is high for too long, it can damage the walls of blood vessels, causing them to develop tiny tears. To fix these damaged areas, the body sends special cells that stick to the site. Over time, substances such as cholesterol and fats may also build up at these damaged spots, forming plaque.

As plaque slowly builds, a process called atherosclerosis, it can make the inside of the arteries narrower. This narrowing can block the flow of blood, increasing the risk for serious conditions such as a heart attack or stroke.

Protect Yourself

- **Know your numbers.** The best way to know if you have high blood pressure is to have your blood pressure checked. You can measure your blood pressure at home or at public places that have blood pressure monitors, but only a health care professional can diagnose high blood pressure.
- **Learn what could make you more likely to develop high blood pressure and other serious health problems.**
- **Make changes that matter.** Take steps to reduce your risk and manage your blood pressure:
 - Make heart-healthy lifestyle changes.
 - Take your medication as prescribed.
 - Work with your health care professionals.

High Blood Pressure and Hypertensive Crisis

Call 911 if your blood pressure is higher than 180/120 mm Hg and if you are having signs or symptoms that may include:

- | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| • Chest pain | • Change in vision |
| • Shortness of breath | • Difficulty speaking |
| • Back pain | • Confusion |
| • Numbness | • Dizziness |
| • Weakness | • Vomiting |

If your blood pressure reading is higher than 180/120 mm Hg, you could be having a hypertensive crisis. Wait at least 1-2 minutes and then take your blood pressure again.

Contact your health care professional right away if your readings are still above 180/120 mm Hg and you aren't having any other symptoms that may include:

- | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| • Chest pain | • Change in vision |
| • Shortness of breath | • Difficulty speaking |
| • Back pain | • Confusion |
| • Numbness | • Dizziness |
| • Weakness | • Vomiting |

High Blood Pressure and Metabolic Syndrome

Metabolic syndrome is a group of factors that raise your risk of major health problems including heart disease, diabetes and stroke. High blood pressure is one of those factors.

Metabolic syndrome may be diagnosed when you have three or more of these:

- High blood glucose (sugar)
- Low levels of HDL cholesterol in the blood (HDL is the “good” kind)
- High levels of triglycerides in the blood
- Large waist or “apple-shaped” body
- High blood pressure

Taking Control of Your Blood Pressure

High blood pressure may be a serious health threat, but it’s one you can manage and often prevent with the right approach. By monitoring your blood pressure regularly, making heart-healthy lifestyle changes, and working closely with your healthcare team, you can reduce your risk of complications such as heart attack, stroke, or kidney disease. Remember, even small steps—like improving your diet, staying active, or taking prescribed medications—can make a significant difference. Knowledge is power, and by staying informed and proactive, you can protect yourself from the silent but serious dangers of hypertension.

Your Task for Today

[Review AHA’s infographic](#) on the consequences of high blood pressure and identify how hypertension might affect your long-term health goals. Reflect on your current habits and write down a specific, measurable action you will take this week to better manage your blood pressure. Use the [CONNEQT App](#) to monitor your daily readings and track trends over time. Focus on integrating a habit you’ve already started, such as consistent monitoring, with a new strategy to reduce risk factors.

Example: “I’ll monitor my blood pressure using the CONNEQT App every morning this week and track trends to see the impact of reducing sodium. To start, I’ll prepare three low-sodium dinners using fresh herbs and spices instead of salt.”



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Day 17: How to Reduce Sodium in Your Diet

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

Before you begin today's content, take a moment to check your blood pressure. Measuring at the same time each day helps you track trends and stay on top of your health. If you're using the CONNEQT Pulse, sync your readings with the CONNEQT App in order to monitor and track your progress throughout the program.

Even if you never pick up the salt shaker, you might be getting more sodium than you need. That's because more than 70% of the sodium we eat comes from prepared, packaged and restaurant foods. These foods can make it hard to control how much sodium you eat.

Most people should cut back on sodium to improve their health.

Making Low-Sodium Choices When Shopping

When shopping for food:

- Choose packaged and prepared foods carefully. Compare labels and choose the product with the lowest amount of sodium per serving you can

find. Different brands of the same food can have lower or higher sodium levels.

- Pick fresh and frozen poultry that hasn't been injected with a sodium solution. Check the fine print on the packaging for terms like "broth," "saline" or "sodium solution." Sodium levels in unseasoned fresh meats are around 100 milligrams or less per 4-ounce serving. Compare this with the same serving of prepared rotisserie chicken pre-seasoned with sodium, which can have 400 mg of sodium a serving!
- Select condiments with care. For example, soy sauce, bottled salad dressings, dips, ketchup, jarred salsas, capers, mustard, pickles, olives and relish can be loaded with sodium. Look for reduced-sodium or lower-sodium versions.
- Buy canned vegetables labeled "no salt added" and frozen vegetables without salty sauces. When canned and frozen veggies are added to casseroles, soups or other mixed dishes you won't miss the salt.
- Look for foods labeled with the American Heart Association's Heart-Check mark. The Heart-Check mark designates foods that can be part of an overall healthy dietary pattern. While it doesn't necessarily mean a product is "low sodium," it does mean that the food meets the AHA's sodium criteria to earn the Heart-Check mark.

You can eat foods with varying amounts of sodium and still achieve a balanced and heart-healthy diet.

Reducing Sodium While Cooking

- Use flavorful ingredients. Onions, garlic, herbs, spices, citrus juices and vinegars can add flavor in place of some, or all, of the salt. Our [recipes](#) and tips can help!
- Drain and rinse canned beans and vegetables. This can help cut the sodium by up to 40%.
- Combine lower-sodium versions of food with regular versions. If you don't like the taste of lower-sodium foods right now, try combining them in equal parts with a regular version of the same food. You'll get less salt and probably won't notice much difference in taste. This works especially well for broths, soups and tomato-based pasta sauces.

- Cook pasta, rice and hot cereal without salt. You'll probably add other flavorful ingredients, so you won't miss the salt.
- Grill, braise, roast, sear or sauté. These cooking methods can bring out natural flavors and reduce the need to add salt.
- Enjoy high-potassium foods regularly. These include sweet potatoes, potatoes, greens, tomatoes and lower-sodium tomato sauce, white beans, kidney beans, nonfat yogurt, oranges, bananas and cantaloupe. Potassium helps counter the effects of sodium and may help lower your blood pressure.

Managing Sodium Intake at Restaurants

- Tell them how you like it. Ask for your dish to be made without extra salt and for sauces, dressings and gravies to be served on the side to use sparingly.
- Taste your food before adding salt. If you think it needs a boost of flavor, add freshly ground black pepper or a squeeze of fresh lemon or lime and taste it again before adding salt. Lemon and pepper are especially good on fish, chicken and vegetables.
- Watch out for these food words: *pickled, brined, barbecued, cured, smoked, broth, au jus, soy sauce, miso or teriyaki sauce*. These tend to be high in sodium. Foods that are steamed, baked, grilled, poached or roasted may have less sodium.
- Control portion sizes. When you cut calories, you usually cut the sodium, too. Ask if smaller portions are available, share the meal with a friend or ask for a to-go box when you order and place half the meal in the box to eat later.

Ask about the sodium content of menu items. Chain restaurants with 20 or more locations must provide nutrition information, including sodium content, to customers upon request.

Does Less Salt Mean Bland Taste?

When you use less salt, you can taste the food's natural flavor, especially when you use cooking techniques and flavorful ingredients (see tips above) to enhance it.

Over time, your taste buds can adjust to less salt. Studies show that when people follow a lower-sodium diet, they start to prefer it, and that the foods they

once enjoyed taste too salty. Try it and see for yourself!

What About Salt Substitutes?

There are several salt substitutes on the market that replace some or all of the sodium with potassium. Potassium salt tastes similar to sodium chloride, except when heated it can have a bitter aftertaste. Most people can try potassium salt, but certain medical conditions (like kidney disease) and medications can have implications on your body's potassium level. Talk with your health care professional about whether a salt substitute is right for you.

Taking Steps Toward a Healthier Sodium Balance

Reducing sodium doesn't mean sacrificing flavor or enjoyment in your meals. By making informed choices when shopping, preparing meals with fresh and flavorful ingredients, and being mindful when dining out, you can take control of your sodium intake without feeling restricted. Over time, your taste buds will adapt, allowing you to fully appreciate the natural flavors of food while reaping the health benefits of a lower-sodium diet. Whether it's opting for high-potassium foods, experimenting with herbs and spices, or choosing lower-sodium alternatives, every small change you make supports your journey toward better heart health and well-being.

Your Task for Today

Create a plan to reduce sodium in your meals for the next three days. Review the strategies from the article, such as using fresh ingredients, rinsing canned goods, or choosing lower-sodium options at the store. Implement at least two of these strategies in your next meal and reflect on how it impacts the flavor.

Example: "I'll prepare a vegetable stir-fry using fresh produce, low-sodium soy sauce, and garlic for flavor. I'll also rinse canned beans to reduce sodium and incorporate potassium-rich sweet potatoes for balance."



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Day 18: Decoding Your Cholesterol Levels

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

Before you begin today's content, take a moment to check your blood pressure. Measuring at the same time each day helps you track trends and stay on top of your health. If you're using the CONNEQT Pulse, sync your readings with the CONNEQT App in order to monitor and track your progress throughout the program.

Understanding Your Cholesterol Levels

Cholesterol plays a critical role in your overall heart health. Maintaining healthy cholesterol levels can significantly reduce your risk of heart disease and stroke. However, achieving this begins with understanding your cholesterol numbers. By regularly checking your cholesterol levels and working with your healthcare professional to assess your risk, you can take proactive steps to protect your heart and improve your overall well-being.

What the American Heart Association Recommends

All adults age 20 or older should have their cholesterol and other traditional risk factors checked every four to six years as long as risk remains low. If certain factors put you at high risk, or if you already have heart disease, your health care professional may ask you to check it more often. Work together to determine your risk for cardiovascular disease and stroke and create a plan to reduce your risk.

Your Test Results: A Preview

Your test results will show your cholesterol levels in milligrams per deciliter of blood, or mg/dL. Total cholesterol and HDL (good) cholesterol are among numerous factors your health care professional can use to predict your lifetime or 10-year risk for a heart attack or stroke. Your health care professional will also consider other risk factors, such as age, family history, smoking status, diabetes and high blood pressure.

Lipid profile or lipid panel is a blood test that will give you results for your HDL cholesterol, LDL cholesterol, triglycerides and total blood cholesterol.

HDL Cholesterol

HDL cholesterol is called “good” cholesterol. A healthy HDL-cholesterol level may help protect against heart attack and stroke. Your health care professional will evaluate your HDL and other cholesterol levels and other factors to assess your risk for heart attack or stroke.

People with high blood triglycerides may also have lower levels of HDL. Genetic factors, diabetes, smoking, being overweight and being sedentary can all lower HDL cholesterol. Men between ages 20 and 39 tend to have higher levels of HDL cholesterol than women do, but women’s risk increases after menopause.

LDL Cholesterol

Since LDL is the bad kind of cholesterol, a low LDL level is considered good for your heart health.

LDL levels are one factor among many to consider when evaluating cardiovascular risk. Talk to your health care professional about your LDL cholesterol level as well as other factors that impact your cardiovascular health.

A diet high in saturated and trans [fat](#) is unhealthy because it tends to raise LDL cholesterol levels.

How low can I go with my LDL?

- Various research studies on LDL have shown “lower is better.”
- While there is no ideal target blood level for LDL-C, the 2018 guideline recognizes, in principle, that “lower is better.” Studies suggest that an optimal total cholesterol level is about 150 mg/dL, with LDL-C at or below 100 mg/dL, and adults with LDL-C in this level have lower rates of heart disease and stroke.
- Talk to your health care professional. If you’re healthy, aim for an LDL below 100 mg/dL. Additionally, for individuals with a history of heart attack or stroke and are already on a cholesterol-lowering medication, your doctor may aim for at least 50% reduction in your LDL-C level to 70 mg/dL or lower.

Triglycerides

Triglycerides are the most common type of fat in your body. They come from food, and your body also makes them.

People with high triglycerides may also have a high total cholesterol level, including a high LDL cholesterol level and a low HDL cholesterol level. Many people with metabolic syndrome or diabetes also have high triglyceride levels.

Factors that can contribute to elevated triglyceride levels include:

- Overweight or obesity
- Insulin resistance or metabolic syndrome
- Diabetes mellitus
- Alcohol consumption, especially in excess
- Excess sugar intake, especially from sugary drinks
- Eating processed foods
- High saturated fat intake
- Hypothyroidism
- Chronic kidney disease
- Physical inactivity
- Insulin resistance or metabolic syndrome
- Pregnancy, especially in the third trimester

- Inflammatory diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis, systemic lupus erythematosus

Some medications may also increase triglycerides.

Total Blood Cholesterol

This part of your test results is a composite of different measurements. Your total blood cholesterol is the sum of your HDL and LDL cholesterol levels, plus 20% of your triglyceride level.

While cholesterol levels above “normal ranges” are important in your overall cardiovascular risk, like HDL and LDL cholesterol levels, your total blood cholesterol level should be considered in context with your other known risk factors.

Your health care professional can recommend treatment approaches based on your risk.

Take Control of Your Cholesterol

Knowing your cholesterol levels is the first step toward better heart health. With a clear understanding of your HDL, LDL, triglycerides, and total cholesterol, you and your healthcare professional can create a personalized plan to lower your risk and maintain healthy levels. Whether it’s through lifestyle changes, dietary adjustments, or medication when needed, taking charge of your cholesterol is a powerful way to support your heart and improve your quality of life.

Your Task for Today

Review your latest cholesterol test results or learn about cholesterol if you haven’t been tested recently. Focus on understanding HDL, LDL, and triglycerides from today’s article, and reflect on how improving your cholesterol levels aligns with your heart-health goals.

Example: “I’ll schedule a cholesterol test next month and aim to increase my HDL by adding more physical activity. I’ll also limit processed foods to lower my triglycerides.”



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Day 19: The Power of Meditation for Heart Health

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

Before you begin today's content, take a moment to check your blood pressure. Measuring at the same time each day helps you track trends and stay on top of your health. If you're using the CONNEQT Pulse, sync your readings with the CONNEQT App in order to monitor and track your progress throughout the program.

Practicing mindfulness and meditation may help you manage stress and high blood pressure, sleep better, feel more balanced and connected and even lower your risk of heart disease.

Meditation and mindfulness are practices — often using breathing, quiet contemplation or sustained focus on something, such as an image, phrase or sound — that help you let go of stress and feel more calm and peaceful. Think of it as a mini-vacation from the stress in your life! Stress is your body's natural alarm system. It releases a hormone called adrenaline that makes your breathing speed up and your heart rate and blood pressure rise. It kicks us into action, which can be a good thing when we're faced with a real danger or need to perform.

But that “fight or flight” response can take a toll on your body when it goes on too long or is a regular occurrence. Mindfulness meditation provides a method for handling stress in a healthier way.

Meditation Can Improve Well-Being and Quality of Life

Recent studies have offered promising results about the impact of meditation in reducing blood pressure. There is also evidence that it can help people manage insomnia, depression and anxiety.

Some research suggests that meditation physically changes the brain and could help:

- Increase ability to process information.
- Slow the cognitive effects of aging.
- Reduce inflammation.
- Support the immune system.
- Reduce symptoms of menopause.
- Control the brain’s response to pain.
- Improve sleep.

More research is needed, but it’s clear that meditation’s effects on the body and brain are a no-brainer!

Find the Method That Works for You

There are many different types of meditation, including:

- Compassion (metta or loving-kindness)
- Insight (Vipassana)
- Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR)
- Transcendental Zen

Meditating could be as simple as sitting quietly and focusing on your breathing. When your mind wanders (and it will), gently bring it back to the breathing again. Gradually increase the amount of time you’re able to stay focused. If you’re not

sure how to get started, look for online classes on meditation, get recommendations from friends or research different types that interest you.

Transcendental meditation is a technique that allows your mind to focus inward, staying alert to other thoughts or sensations without allowing them to interfere. It's typically done seated with your eyes closed for 20 minutes, twice a day.

Mindfulness meditation may use an object of focus, such as the ringing of a bell, chanting, touching beads or gazing at an image. Prayer can also be a form of mediation.

Not all meditation is done sitting down with your legs crossed and eyes closed. Moving meditation forms include qigong, Tai Chi and yoga.

The Bottom Line

While meditation can help you manage stress, sleep well and feel better, it shouldn't replace lifestyle changes such as eating healthier, managing your weight, and getting regular physical activity. It's also not a substitute for medication or medical treatment your health care team may have prescribed.

- Try different types of meditation to find what works for you, and make it a regular part of your healthy lifestyle.

Your Task for Today

Try a 5-minute meditation or deep breathing exercise to reduce stress and enhance focus. Visit AHA's [Meditation Videos](#) page to guide your session. Reflect on how it affects your mood and energy.

Example: "Tonight, I'll spend 5 minutes focusing on my breath and notice how it helps me unwind before bed."



Day 20: Potassium's Role in Heart Health

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

Before you begin today's content, take a moment to check your blood pressure. Measuring at the same time each day helps you track trends and stay on top of your health. If you're using the CONNEQT Pulse, sync your readings with the CONNEQT App in order to monitor and track your progress throughout the program.

How Does Potassium Affect My Heart Health?

Potassium is a mineral that your body needs to stay healthy. Foods with potassium can help control blood pressure by blunting the effects of sodium. The more potassium you eat, the more sodium you process out of the body. It also helps relax blood vessel walls, which helps lower blood pressure.

How Much Potassium Should I Eat?

Most women should get 2,600 milligrams of potassium a day and men should get 3,400 milligrams a day, but most of us fall short. On average, men eat about 3,000 mg/day, and women eat about 2,300 mg/day.

Potassium is part of an overall heart-healthy eating pattern. Other dietary factors that may affect blood pressure include amount and type of fats, cholesterol, protein, fiber, calcium, magnesium, and of course, sodium.

The [DASH \(Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension\) diet study](#) found that a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products, whole-grain foods, fish, poultry, beans, seeds and unsalted nuts reduced blood pressure compared to a typical American diet. The DASH eating plan also included less sodium, added sugars, saturated fats and trans fats as well as fewer sweets, sugary beverages and red meats than the typical American diet.

What Foods Have Potassium?

Many foods in the DASH diet can be good natural sources of potassium. For example, a medium banana has about 450 mg of potassium, and a medium sweet potato has more than 500 mg.

Other foods with potassium include:

- Apricots
- Avocados
- Beets
- Cantaloupe and honeydew melon
- Coconut water
- Fat-free or low-fat milk
- Fat-free, no-sugar-added yogurt
- Grapefruit and grapefruit juice
(Talk to your health care professional if you're taking a cholesterol-lowering drug.)
- Halibut
- Leafy greens
- Lima beans
- Molasses
- Mushrooms
- Nuts and seeds
- Oranges and 100% orange juice
- Peas
- Potatoes
- Prunes and 100% prune juice
- Raisins and dates
- Salmon
- Spinach
- Tomatoes, 100% tomato juice and tomato sauce
- Tuna
- Whole grains

Is It Possible to Have Too Much Potassium?

Too much potassium can be harmful in older people and those with kidney disorders since potassium affects the balance of fluids in the body. As you get older, your kidneys become less able to remove potassium from your blood. Before taking any over-the-counter potassium supplement, talk to your health care professional.

What Are Other Ways I Can Get More Potassium?

Take potassium supplements or try drinking potassium-enriched water. When cooking, use potassium-rich foods, liquids such as low-sodium broth or tomato juice, flavored with spices and herbs, such as parsley, coriander and paprika. Certain salt substitutes have a lot of potassium and very little sodium. They are not expensive and can be used freely unless you have certain medical conditions, such as kidney disease, or take certain medications. Talk to your health care professional about whether a particular salt substitute, or potassium supplement is right for you.

Harnessing the Power of Potassium

Potassium is a vital nutrient that supports heart health by counteracting sodium's effects, relaxing blood vessels, and lowering blood pressure. Incorporating potassium-rich foods like fruits, vegetables, and whole grains into your diet can help you meet your daily needs and improve overall well-being. Along with other heart-healthy habits, such as following the DASH diet, potassium plays a key role in managing blood pressure and protecting your cardiovascular health.

Your Task for Today

Explore how potassium supports heart health and helps manage blood pressure. Identify one potassium-rich food to add to your meals this week. Reflect on how incorporating this mineral can strengthen your overall heart-healthy eating pattern.

Example: "I'll add a baked sweet potato to dinner tonight for its high potassium content and think about including spinach in my lunch salads this week."



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Day 21: How Mental Health Impacts Heart Health

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

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When life feels overwhelming, prioritizing heart health can seem like a low priority. Yet, mental health and heart health are deeply connected, and taking care of one often supports the other. Even when you're feeling down, small, manageable changes can protect your heart and improve your well-being. Let's explore the ways depression, anxiety, and stress can impact heart health and simple steps you can take to regain control.

How to Stay Heart Healthy—Even When You're Down

When you're feeling down, it's easy to reach for your favorite comfort food or

skip a workout. But thinking about your heart health is important, even when you're not feeling upbeat.

When people are stressed, anxious or depressed, they may feel overwhelmed. They're less likely to make healthy lifestyle choices. They may be more likely to:

- Smoke more
- Be physically inactive
- Sleep too little or too much
- Drink too much alcohol
- Not take their prescribed medications

Over time, these unhealthy behaviors can increase the risk of heart disease.

Trauma, depression, anxiety and stress can lead to changes that can affect your health, and not just because you may fall into habits that are bad for your heart. Research shows that mental health also has physiological effects on the body.

Depression is reported in over one-third of Americans ages 18 and older. It is estimated that one in five U.S. adults is living with a mental illness.

Can Depression Cause Heart Disease or Heart Attack?

When you experience depression, anxiety or stress, many changes happen in your body that can increase your risk for heart disease. Depression and anxiety can also develop after cardiac events, including heart failure, stroke and heart attack.

What Can I Do to Help My Stress, Anxiety, or Depression?

If you're struggling with depression, stress or anxiety, taking three key steps can help.

1. Identify the cause of your depression, stress or anxiety and address it.

Seek therapy if needed.

You may sometimes feel down for a couple of days, but if it goes on for two weeks or more, you may need to seek help. Depression is a problem when

it causes a loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed, along with other issues such as trouble sleeping and changes in weight and/or persistent feelings of sadness most of the day, nearly every day. It can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems and can lower your ability to function at work and home.

2. Choose healthy habits and don't rush it.

If you aren't in the habit of exercising, start gradually.

Something as simple as walking 30 minutes a day, even if you do only 10 minutes at a time, can help your heart. Physical activity improves your mood while you're doing it, but regular physical activity can also improve your mental well-being, lower the risk of depression and improve your overall quality of life. The AHA recommends 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity every week.

If reaching for unhealthy foods has become a habit, try using healthier cooking techniques or substituting ingredients to reduce fat, added sugar, sodium and calories. Grab healthy snacks, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, or choose undressed salads and other low-fat dishes when eating out.

3. Incorporate other healthy lifestyle changes one at a time.

Don't try to "fix" everything at once. That's especially true if one of the habits you want to break is smoking.

Quitting smoking can be difficult. If you smoke, talk with your health care professional to decide if you need medications or other therapies to help you quit. Therapies may include nicotine replacement or prescription medications. You could also ask for a referral for a smoking cessation program.

Ultimately, you have to take care of yourself to break the cycle of feeling down. That could be doing something structured, such as yoga, tai chi or something you can do anywhere, such as meditating, listening to music or reading a book.

Finding Balance Between Mental and Physical Health

Your mental health and heart health are closely connected, and taking small,

positive steps can create a powerful ripple effect for both. Whether it's identifying the causes of your stress, making gradual lifestyle changes, or seeking professional help when needed, you have the tools to improve your health. Remember, even the smallest efforts—like a short walk or choosing a healthier snack—can make a meaningful difference. Prioritize self-care and give yourself the grace to take things one step at a time. Your heart and mind will thank you.

Your Task for Today

Reflect on how your mental health has impacted your heart health habits. Think about behaviors like physical activity, nutrition, and stress management that may have been influenced by your mood or emotional state. Identify one small, actionable step you can take to align your mental and heart health goals this week.

Example: “I’ll focus on my mental well-being by incorporating a 10-minute meditation session every evening to reduce stress and improve my mood. This will help me stay consistent with my daily walks and mindful eating.”

Week 4: Mastering Maintenance

Welcome to Week 4: Celebrating Progress and Sustaining Success

Congratulations on reaching the final week of your journey! This week, we celebrate the incredible progress you've made while equipping you with tools to sustain your success beyond the program. As you reflect on everything you've learned, this week's focus will be on gratitude, resilience, and strategies to maintain and build on your healthy habits.

From understanding how thankfulness impacts well-being to exploring the role of willpower in sustaining healthy choices, you'll gain insights and actionable steps to solidify your progress. Let's finish strong and prepare for a lifetime of wellness.

Week-at-a-Glance

This week is about wrapping up your journey with reflection, resilience, and future planning. Each day will provide you with strategies to maintain your habits and celebrate your achievements.

1. **Gratitude:** Learn how practicing thankfulness can enhance both your mental and physical health.
2. **Diabetes Prevention:** Understand the steps to reduce your risk and manage this condition for better overall health.
3. **Whole Grains:** Discover how incorporating diverse whole grains into your diet supports heart health and nutrition.
4. **Better Sleep:** Explore lifestyle habits that can improve your sleep quality and boost overall well-being.

5. **Overcoming Setbacks:** Embrace the inevitability of challenges and learn strategies to recover and stay on track.
6. **Mindful Eating:** Practice mindfulness during meals to enhance satisfaction and encourage healthier choices.
7. **Sustaining Willpower:** Develop techniques to strengthen your willpower and maintain motivation for long-term success.

As we dive into this final week, let's begin with a focus on gratitude—an often overlooked yet powerful tool for improving both mental and physical health. By practicing thankfulness, you can shift your perspective, reduce stress, and enhance overall well-being. Let's explore how cultivating gratitude can transform your approach to health and happiness.



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Day 22: Transforming Health Through Thankfulness

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

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Gratitude is more than a buzzword. It's a habit and practice that may change your perception of well-being.

Feeling overwhelmed? Do you sometimes feel like you just can't catch a break? You know — the truck cuts you off, you get negative feedback from your boss, you can't get the grocery item you need because it's never on the store shelf?

Do you sometimes feel negative and cynical? Sure, we all do. But a lot can lead to depression — which is linked to poor heart health, including inflammation and a weak immune system. Yikes!

Some neuroscience experts think our brains focus on negative information to remember pain so we can avoid it in the future. They call this "negativity bias." To

balance out this natural tendency, we can practice gratitude — a good medicine. Research has shown that the practice of gratitude is associated with many positive effects in a person's physical and mental health. Expressing gratitude can improve sleep, mood and immunity, and can decrease depression, anxiety, chronic pain and disease.

So being grateful is the gift that keeps on giving, right? Who couldn't use all these benefits right now?

Here's a simple way to get started:

Write these down before you go to bed or share them around the dinner table. In five minutes, you can practice gratitude from the heart.

1. **Health:** What did your body do for you today?

You take about 8 million breaths per year, based on 15-16 breaths per minute. Your feet can take you up a mountain; your arms can hold someone you love. Take a minute to marvel at the finely tuned machinery of your body and thank yourself for the steps you take every day to keep it safe and healthy.

2. **Eat:** What did you feed your body to nourish yourself today?

Was it an old favorite, something you made or something new and different? If you eat three meals a day, you'll eat about a thousand meals this year. Take a minute to savor an especially yummy meal. And check out some healthy options on the [AHA's recipe hub](#).

3. **Activity:** What did you enjoy doing today?

Did you give it your all when exercising today, or find a quiet moment while sitting in traffic to reflect? Take a minute to think back on one particularly awesome moment.

4. **Relationship:** With whom do you look forward to connecting?

Is it someone who sets your heart on fire, always has a smile for you, has your back or makes you laugh until you cry? Take a minute to smile as you think about this special person. Then plan to get together or talk with them soon.

5. **Time:** What are you doing right now?

Every single day you wake up with 24 brand new hours. The past is history, the future is a mystery and today is a gift — that’s why it’s called the present! Take a minute to be thankful for the gift of time, including any extra time you have right now for your family or yourself.

Embracing Gratitude for Lasting Well-Being

Gratitude isn’t just a fleeting emotion—it’s a practice that can transform how we view ourselves and the world around us. By focusing on the positive aspects of our health, relationships, and daily lives, we can counterbalance negativity and nurture both our physical and mental well-being. Whether it’s savoring a moment of joy, appreciating your body’s resilience, or cherishing time with loved ones, gratitude has the power to improve your mood, strengthen your heart, and bring greater meaning to each day. Start small, stay consistent, and let thankfulness pave the way to a healthier, happier you.

Let’s do this — and be Healthy for Good!

Your Task for Today

Practice gratitude by reflecting on the positive aspects of your day. Visit the AHA’s [Simple Ways to Practice Gratitude](#) infographic for ideas and inspiration. Choose one activity to complete, such as writing down three things you’re thankful for or expressing appreciation to someone in your life. Reflect on how practicing gratitude affects your mood and perspective.

Example: “Today, I’m thankful for my body allowing me to complete a yoga session, the homemade smoothie I enjoyed for breakfast, reconnecting with an old friend over the phone, and taking a moment to admire the sunset. Tomorrow, I’ll share gratitude with someone special by texting them three things I appreciate about them.”



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Day 23: Steps to Prevent and Manage Diabetes

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

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Diabetes is a condition that impacts millions of people, but it's not inevitable. If you have risk factors such as a family history of diabetes, prediabetes, or lifestyle habits that could increase your chances, it's never too early—or too late—to take action. By adopting heart-healthy habits, you can reduce your risk, delay the onset of diabetes, or effectively manage it to maintain a high quality of life.

Whether you're looking to prevent diabetes or already managing it, the steps you take today can make a meaningful difference in your overall health.

Why Managing Diabetes Matters

Lifestyle changes such as losing weight, eating healthy and engaging in regular, moderate physical activity may reduce the progression of prediabetes and help control diabetes.

They can also minimize other risk factors such as high blood pressure, blood cholesterol and even heart attacks and strokes.

In many instances, medications are needed in addition to lifestyle changes to control blood glucose levels, high blood pressure and cholesterol. This complementary regimen may also prevent heart attack and stroke.

Diabetes can be successfully managed. Work with your health care team to set personal goals. And be sure to monitor your critical health numbers, including your:

- Blood sugar level
- Weight
- Blood cholesterol level
- Blood pressure

Taking these steps may also help prevent serious complications that can arise from diabetes.

Healthy Living Tips for People With Diabetes

Becoming healthier isn't as difficult as you might think if you follow these simple tips.

- **Choose a healthy lifestyle:** By managing your weight through proper nutrition and regular physical activity, quitting smoking, and finding healthy ways to deal with stress, you can prevent or delay the onset of diabetes or minimize its impact on your body. A healthy lifestyle will also reduce your risk of developing other medical conditions.
- **Know your numbers:** Through home monitoring and regular visits with your health care team, you can keep track of your blood sugar, blood pressure, blood cholesterol and weight. These critical health numbers provide insight into how well your treatment plan is working to manage your diabetes and safeguard your overall health.
- **Work with your health care team:** Diabetes can effect your vision, feet, legs and heart and can require special medications and a special diet. So, your

health care team may include a number of medical professionals with various specialties. Your team can guide you through your diabetes treatment plan and help minimize its effects on your body.

Your Health, Your Choice

Even if diabetes runs in your family or you've been diagnosed with prediabetes, you have the power to take control of your health. Small, intentional steps—like eating more vegetables, walking daily, or monitoring your key health numbers—can make a big impact over time.

By focusing on prevention and early action, you can protect your heart health, reduce your risks, and live a longer, healthier life. Take the first step today and invest in your future—you're worth it!

Your Task for Today

Make a simple change to your daily routine by replacing one less healthy choice with a heart-healthy alternative. Swap your afternoon soda for a refreshing glass of sparkling water with a squeeze of lemon. Notice how this small change makes you feel, and consider experimenting with more swaps next week.

Example: “Today, I’ll replace my afternoon soda with sparkling water and lemon. Next week, I’ll explore another beverage swap, like unsweetened iced tea or infused water.”



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Day 24: Exploring Whole Grains: Tasty Options for Heart Health

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

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The Benefits of Whole Grains

Whole grains are important sources of fiber and nutrients. The American Heart Association recommends eating three or more servings of fiber-rich whole grains every day.

While you may be familiar with brown rice and 100% whole-wheat bread, there are many whole-grain options. And most are money savers, especially when you buy them in bulk.

Here's how to expand your whole-grain horizons:

Understanding Different Types of Whole Grains

Whole Grain: Barley

Description: Barley is high in fiber. It has a chewy texture and nutty taste like brown rice. Barley is also found in packaged granolas, hot cereals and soup mixes. Hulled barley has the most fiber because its bran layer is not removed, and it takes the longest to cook.

Common Sources: Hulled or hull-less barley or whole-grain barley

Cooking Tips: Bring 3 cups of water to a boil. Add 1 cup of hulled barley. Reduce the heat to medium low. Cover and cook for 40 to 45 minutes. Cooked barley adds bulk and flavor to soups, casseroles, cooked vegetables. Almost any recipe that calls for rice can be replaced with barley. Toss cooked barley with your favorite cooked beans, chopped onions and fresh herbs for a twist on plain rice and beans.

Whole Grain: Bulgur

Description: Bulgur is made from wheat kernels that have been dried and boiled. It's usually sold as fine or coarse. Sometimes bulgur is confused with cracked wheat, which isn't previously boiled so it needs to be cooked longer than bulgur.

Common Sources: Bulgur wheat

Cooking Tips: Soak 1 cup bulgur in 1½ cups very hot water, and it's ready in 15 minutes! Bulgur can be added to soups, meatballs, meatloaf or substituted for rice in cold and hot dishes. To make tabbouleh, a popular Middle Eastern grain salad, mix cooked bulgur with chopped parsley, mint, tomatoes, lemon juice and a drizzle of olive oil.

Whole Grain: Corn

Description: Corn is a whole grain that's available in many forms and is inexpensive, too. When buying corn products (flour, meal, grits) other than kernels, look for the words "whole-grain corn" in the ingredient list.

Common Sources: Whole kernels (fresh, frozen or canned), popcorn, whole cornmeal, whole grits, corn tortillas (made with whole-grain corn or whole cornmeal)

Cooking Tips: To cook cornmeal (polenta), mix 1 cup whole cornmeal with 1 cup cool water. Bring 3 cups water to a boil. Slowly whisk in cornmeal mixture. Reduce the heat to medium. Cover and cook for 10 to 15 minutes, stirring often. Use whole cornmeal to make muffins, cornbread or pancakes. Add corn kernels to salads, soups and casseroles.

Whole Grain: Millet

Description: When cooked, tiny yellow balls fluff up like rice. Millet has a delicious, nutty flavor.

Common Sources: Hulled millet or whole millet

Cooking Tips: Bring 2½ cups of water to a boil. Add 1 cup millet. Reduce the heat to medium. Cover and cook for 20 to 25 minutes. After cooking, whip millet like mashed potatoes. For extra flavor, toast millet in a pan for 10 minutes before cooking. Add ½ cup to batter for banana bread or corn muffins for an added crunch.

Whole Grain: Oats

Description: Oats are one of the most popular whole grains in America. They are inexpensive and easy to make. Choose steel-cut or old-fashioned oats. The plain bulk versions have no sodium, no sugar and no preservatives. Skip the flavored oatmeal products.

Common Sources: Steel-cut oats, old-fashioned/rolled oats, quick or instant oats, whole oat flour

Cooking Tips: Bring 2 cups water and 1 cup old-fashioned oats to a boil. Reduce the heat to medium. Cook for 8 to 10 minutes, or until creamy, stirring frequently. Cook your oatmeal in fat-free or low-fat milk for a creamier taste and extra nutrients. Mix in unsweetened dried fruit and unsalted nuts for a filling breakfast.

Whole Grain: Quinoa

Description: Quinoa has a slightly crunchy texture. It is a high-protein whole grain.

Common Sources: Whole-grain quinoa, whole-quinoa flakes, whole-quinoa flour

Cooking Tips: To prevent it from tasting bitter, rinse quinoa before cooking. Bring 2 cups of water to a boil. Add 1 cup quinoa. Reduce the heat to medium. Cover and cook for 20 minutes. Use in salads, casseroles, hot breakfast cereals and bean dishes for a boost of nutrition and a nutty crunch.

Whole Grain: Sorghum

Description: Sorghum is a cereal grain that originated from Africa and is now a major staple in the United States. It's gluten free, making it a great option for those with celiac disease or gluten intolerances.

Common Sources: Breakfast cereals, gluten-free breads and pasta, granola, syrups

Cooking Tips: Make sure to rinse and drain whole-grain sorghum before using. Bring 3 cups of water to boil. Add 1 cup of sorghum. Reduce the heat to low. Simmer for 40 to 55 minutes, or until tender. Drain well. Use as a side dish, in pastas or hot cereal; make into overnight oats; or add some crunch to salads. Pop it to make popcorn.

Expanding Your Whole-Grain Horizons

Whole grains are a versatile and nutrient-packed addition to any heart-healthy diet. With so many options available—from quinoa and millet to barley and sorghum—you can easily incorporate a variety of flavors, textures, and nutritional benefits into your meals. By experimenting with these grains and cooking techniques, you'll not only support your overall health but also add excitement to your daily meals. Start small, try something new, and enjoy the journey toward a healthier, more delicious lifestyle.

Your Task for Today

Learn more about the benefits of whole grains and their role in a heart-healthy diet. Consider trying the [Overnight No-Cook Banana Oatmeal recipe](#) this week to explore how oats can be an easy, nutritious breakfast option. Reflect on how incorporating whole grains can enhance your overall nutrition.

Example: “I’ll prepare the banana oatmeal recipe for tomorrow’s breakfast and see how it boosts my energy and keeps me feeling full. Next week, I’ll explore another grain like quinoa or bulgur.”



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Day 25: Lifestyle Choices for Better Sleep and Wellness

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

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Why Sleep Is Essential for Heart Health

If you want to get better rest at night, consider all the lifestyle choices you make during the day. As more research is finding, there's a deep connection between how well you sleep and your physical activity, diet and stress levels.

"It's absolutely a vicious cycle. Not sleeping well may lead to making poorer choices in all facets of life," said Marie-Pierre St-Onge, associate professor of nutritional medicine at Columbia University in New York. "Missing sleep may lead to not thinking as clearly, which then leads to poorer choices during the day. The idea is to break this cycle to have healthier sleep at night."

St-Onge, who is a leading researcher on the links between sleep and overall health, suggests these healthy habits to improve sleep quality.

The ABCs of Better Sleep

A. Increase your physical activity — and make it a morning routine.

Exercising in the morning can “help jump-start your day,” St-Onge said. Plus, the exposure to light is good for your circadian rhythm, a natural, internal process that controls the sleep-wake cycle.

Of course, any exercise is better than none, so work out later in the day if that works best for you.

B. Eat a healthy diet.

Enjoy plenty of fiber-rich vegetables, fruits, legumes and whole grains. Include nuts and fish. Minimize processed meats, refined carbohydrates and sugary drinks. Avoid trans fats.

This eating style will help you live a longer, healthier life and may help improve your sleep. One study found that eating more saturated fat and sugar led to less deep sleep, and eating more fiber led to more deep sleep.

C. Balance your calories throughout the day.

When you get more calories late at night, sleep may be less peaceful, St-Onge said.

Drinking too many sugary, caffeinated or alcoholic beverages may also lead to more disruptions during the night. Keep in mind that your dietary needs may change with age. For example, you may be more affected by caffeine as you get older. You might need to have your last cup of coffee earlier in the day, especially if it's keeping you up at night.

D. Find a relaxing ritual.

If stress is taking a toll on your sleep, find practices to help you relax. These can include meditation, deep breathing or writing.

Gratitude may help you sleep better, according to some research, so try a gratitude practice or journal.

"I'm a list maker, so when I'm stressed, I look at my calendar and plan out when to get everything done. That's what calms me down," St-Onge said.

Take a look at how your late-night habits may be affecting your sleep.

"You need to prioritize what's more important. Do you really need this right now?" She said.

"Was that extra hour of work late at night worth it? Was staying up later beneficial? Or did it hurt your sleep and make you more stressed the next day?"

E. Go low-tech.

If you're seeking better sleep, try not using cell phones and other devices late in the evening. St-Onge gives her phone a bedtime: It's off from 10 p.m. to 7 a.m. every day.

"Shining a bright light in your face before bedtime is counterproductive," she said.

F. Keep trying.

Some of these lifestyle changes are based on personal preference, and it may take some trial and error to find what works best for you.

Apps and watches that monitor sleep can be helpful, but not foolproof.

When in doubt, St-Onge said, "trust your instincts."

"Forget about your watch," she said. "If in the morning you are feeling good and refreshed and wake up before your alarm, then it's a good indication you got good sleep."

Creating Habits for Restful Sleep

Better sleep doesn't happen overnight, but small, consistent changes in your daily habits can make a big difference. By prioritizing physical activity, maintaining a balanced diet, managing stress, and creating a low-tech evening routine, you can improve your sleep quality and overall well-being. Remember, it's about finding what works best for you through trial and error. With patience and persistence, you can break the cycle of poor sleep and wake up feeling refreshed, ready to take on the day.

Your Task for Today

Evaluate your daily habits and how they might impact your sleep. Using the *Tips for Better Sleep* article, identify one lifestyle change to focus on this week, such as adjusting your caffeine intake, creating a relaxing bedtime ritual, or increasing morning physical activity. Set a SMART goal for implementing this change and reflect on how it improves your rest.

Example: “I’ll stop drinking caffeinated beverages after 2 p.m. this week and replace my evening coffee with herbal tea. I’ll note how this affects my ability to fall asleep and my energy levels the next day.”



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Day 26: Turning Setbacks into Comebacks: Building Resilience

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

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Setbacks are a normal part of the change process. We tend to expect a quick fix based on our determination despite it not being realistic. When we don't see results of our efforts early on, we can get discouraged and relapse into old behaviors.

Don't look at it as a failure if this happens to you. Instead, turn it into an opportunity to fine-tune your strategy or reclaim your rhythm through a new approach. Try a dance class if counting sit-ups isn't working for you. Find an engaging self-help book with new suggestions on how to stay motivated.

Perhaps you'd follow through better if you had a reminder, such as the alarm in your car that prompts you to lock your seatbelt. Set a watch or your phone to

cue you if you're not drinking enough water throughout the day. Create reminders on your laptop to get up and stretch on the hour if you're not moving enough during an office workday.

The important point is not to let yourself slip back into old patterns until the new behavior can take hold. It can take an average of around 10 weeks to establish a new habit, research suggests. If you're finding it difficult, try rewarding yourself for small achievements to keep the momentum going. Buy a new song for your media player after you resist fried food or beer every week, for instance.

Track Your Progress

Monitoring your behavior through a diary or digital app can help you stay on track. Write down what time you went to bed and how many hours of sleep you got. Carry a device or use an app to count the steps you take daily. Recording what you eat can be particularly helpful for people trying to lose weight.

Also, consider whether talking to a counselor will help you maintain focus and succeed. You may have a behavioral blind spot or underlying psychological issue that needs addressing before you take on the work of behavioral change.

Be Ready for Bumps in the Road

Occasional slip-ups happen to everyone. Don't beat yourself up. Perfection isn't required to develop new habits. Learning from it is the best thing to do when you have a setback. Think of your previous attempt as "practice" and keep moving forward. You're playing the long game: What matters is making it to the final goalpost on your own terms.

Always have a backup plan, too, for when you miss a scheduled task. Giving yourself leeway is a better approach than skipping over your plan. Say you missed your Thursday morning workout. Instead of writing it off, visit the gym or jog around the neighborhood at a more convenient time later. Being flexible can help in making healthy behavior stick.

Lastly, to boost your resilience during tough times, revisit the moment you became inspired to change. Remind yourself why you set this goal and how it will improve your life.

Embracing Progress, Not Perfection

Change is a journey, not a straight path. Setbacks are part of the process, but they don't define your success. By staying flexible, tracking your progress, and revisiting your motivations, you can keep moving forward and create habits that truly last. Remember, it's the small, consistent steps that lead to long-term transformation.

Your Task for Today

Reflect on your entire journey and how you've overcome challenges. Identify one strategy to maintain resilience moving forward and celebrate your success with an activity that aligns with your health goals.

Example: "I'll celebrate by taking a relaxing hike and remind myself that setbacks are normal and opportunities for growth."



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Day 27: Mindful Eating: Savor The Flavor

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

Before you begin today's content, take a moment to check your blood pressure. Measuring at the same time each day helps you track trends and stay on top of your health. If you're using the CONNEQT Pulse, sync your readings with the CONNEQT App in order to monitor and track your progress throughout the program.

Mindful eating is a simple yet powerful way to build healthier habits, now and in the future. By slowing down and paying attention to your meals, you can enjoy food more fully while making thoughtful choices about what and how much you eat. As you approach the end of this program, practicing mindful eating can help you carry these positive changes into your daily life, ensuring your hard work pays off long term.

Mindful Eating: A Practice of Awareness

How do you meditate while eating? Slow down. Being mindful and paying attention to the food you eat could help you eat healthier, with more appreciation and intention. Learn how to make every meal a practice of awareness.

Focus on the Food

Mindfulness has become as buzzworthy as cold-pressed coffee. One simple way to eat healthier may be to simply be mindful when eating.

And guess what? Mindful eating doesn't mean dieting or restrictions. It's about taking a moment to take it in. There are a lot of methods out there, but we've simplified it for you.

Ponder: Before you eat, ask yourself, "Am I really hungry?" Sometimes we think we want to eat something, not because we're hungry, but simply to enjoy the pleasure that the food brings. Check in, do you need nourishment in the form of food or do you need something else?

Appraise: When your food is in front of you, take a moment. How does it look? How does it smell? Do you really want it? Is it more than you need?

Slow: Slow down, like way down. Put your fork down between bites. Really chew your food and taste it. Slowing down can help your brain catch up with your stomach.

Savor: Really enjoy your food. How does the texture feel in your mouth? What are all the complex flavors you can taste? Take a moment to savor the satisfaction of each bite.

Stop: Stop when you're full. Sounds obvious, right? But hey, cleaning your plate isn't necessary. By noticing when you're full and stopping, you may avoid unnecessary calories and indigestion.

Carry Mindful Eating Forward

Mindful eating is more than a practice—it's a mindset you can take with you beyond this program. By focusing on your food, listening to your body's hunger and fullness cues, and savoring each bite, you can make healthier choices with ease. Let mindful eating guide you as a lifelong tool for staying intentional and connected to your health goals.

Your Task for Today

Practice mindful eating at one meal today by removing distractions, chewing slowly, and focusing on flavors and textures. Reflect on how this affects your satisfaction and digestion.

Example: “I’ll enjoy lunch without my phone, focusing on the textures and flavors of my quinoa salad and grilled chicken.”



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Day 28: Strengthen Your Willpower for Healthy Choices

Daily Blood Pressure Reminder

Before you begin today's content, take a moment to check your blood pressure. Measuring at the same time each day helps you track trends and stay on top of your health. If you're using the CONNEQT Pulse, sync your readings with the CONNEQT App in order to monitor and track your progress throughout the program.

Congratulations on completing this program! Today marks the final day of your guided journey toward better health and well-being. Over the past four weeks, you've built a foundation of habits, knowledge, and strategies to support your long-term goals. As we close out this program, we'll focus on willpower—a key ingredient for maintaining the progress you've achieved and staying motivated as you move forward.

Willpower May Be a Finite Resource

Willpower is the epic battle in your prefrontal cortex between the will of your logic and the power of your emotions.

You know this battle so well. Do you choose the chili cheese fries or have a side of grilled asparagus? After a hard day, do you hit the gym or have margaritas with your crew? Our lives are a constant game of “this or that” that often ends up feeling like “would you rather.”

Exerting your willpower can be exhausting. Sometimes you feel like you can’t make the best choice and you just can’t resist any longer. And there’s a reason for that.

Your willpower may be an exhaustible, limited resource. It may be used up over the course of a day in lots of tiny ways. This is called ego depletion.

Research by social psychologist Roy Baumeister and others suggests that if someone initially resists a temptation such as warm chocolate chip cookies, the person is then less capable of resisting another willpower challenge or making a difficult decision.

Translation: Doing something tough may use up some willpower, which makes resisting temptation super hard.

What can you do about this depletion? Here are some simple strategies to level up your willpower.

Strategies to Strengthen Your Willpower

Clean. Get rid of all the temptations. If all the junk food is gone, you won’t have to resist later.

Commit. If you have a plan with a friend for spin class, you won’t have to wonder what you’re doing later.

Optimize. Change your timing for tasks, such as grocery shopping right after a meal when your willpower is strong. If you don’t use your willpower to battle the cookie aisle in the store, you’ll have reserves for resisting dessert later tonight.

Boost Willpower When Facing Temptation

Postpone. “Not now, maybe later.” Saying a simple phrase like this can reduce your impulse to listen to that devil on your shoulder.

Distract. Try distracting yourself to see if your impulse chills out. Giving yourself something else to focus on can calm the brewing willpower battle.

Hide. Remove the temptation from your view or remove yourself from the situation. In the classic “marshmallow experiment,” even little kids trying to use willpower to wait for a delicious, squishy marshmallow had more luck if they simply

hid it from their view. One kid sat on it to get it out of view! If a kid can do it, so can you.

Learn How to Strengthen Your Willpower

Meditate. Even brief, 10-minute mindfulness meditations done over time can improve your self-control. Mindfulness teaches you to bring your thoughts back to the present moment as they start to wander. And every time you do this, you're flexing your willpower muscle.

Sleep. It always comes back to getting enough sleep. Studies show that getting enough sleep matters for your willpower, too. Healthy sleep can lower psychological strain, give you better self-control and replenish self-regulatory energy. That's all a fancy way of saying, "Get to bed!"

Stop swearing. It's not a joke. Baumeister suggests that challenging yourself to change a speech pattern, such as using "hello" instead of "hey" or dropping that expletive and replacing it with something else, can help you learn to extend your willpower.

Excuse Your Setback and Get on With It!

Forgiving yourself for an oops moment frees up your willpower so you can resist next time. It's OK, — you're human, and you're going to make mistakes.

In other words, using the first letter of each of these strategies, A-B-L-E, be able! Using your willpower doesn't have to use up all your willpower.

Harnessing Willpower for Lifelong Success

As you wrap up this program, remember that willpower is not just about resisting temptation—it's about building strategies that make healthy choices easier and more sustainable. By arranging your environment, practicing mindfulness, and learning from setbacks, you can strengthen your willpower over time. The techniques you've learned, from planning ahead to forgiving yourself for slip-ups, will help you stay on track and maintain the progress you've worked so hard to achieve.

Your willpower is a tool you can refine over time, helping you make choices that align with your long-term goals. The key is to keep moving forward, one decision at a time.

Keep the Momentum Going

You've made it through 28 days of learning, growth, and action. That's no small feat. You've built habits, gained knowledge, and taken control of your health in ways that will serve you for years to come. But this isn't the end—it's the beginning of something even greater.

True transformation doesn't happen in a month. It's built through small, consistent actions over time. Maybe your progress has been subtle, or maybe you've seen big shifts in how you feel. Either way, what matters is that you've started. And that first step is often the hardest.

Now, the challenge is to keep going. Old habits may try to creep back in, and there will be days when motivation feels low. That's normal. What matters is that you don't let a setback turn into a stop. Every choice you make—every meal, every workout, every moment of self-care—keeps you moving in the right direction.

If your results feel small right now, don't worry. Every step forward is a step toward something bigger. The people who see lasting change are the ones who stay consistent, even when progress feels slow. Keep showing up for yourself.

Set new challenges that push you forward, whether it's increasing your activity, improving your sleep, or refining your nutrition. When setbacks happen, acknowledge them, adjust, and move forward. What matters isn't perfection—it's persistence.

This program may be complete, but your journey is far from over. Health isn't a destination—it's a lifelong investment in yourself. Keep building on what you've started, stay committed, and believe in what's possible.

You've already taken the hardest step: getting started. Now, keep going. You've got this. And we're here to support you every step of the way.

Your Task for Today

Take a moment to reflect on everything you've learned and accomplished during this program. Think about the strategies, habits, and knowledge you've gained to improve your health and well-being. How have these tools helped you make positive changes in your life?

Now, consider how you'll keep this momentum going. Identify one or two ways you'll continue applying what you've learned to maintain your progress. Reflect on what keeps you motivated and how you'll overcome challenges in the future.

Example: “This program taught me how small changes, like practicing mindfulness and eating more fruits and vegetables, can have a big impact. I’ll continue scheduling workouts into my week and focusing on meal prep to stay consistent. When challenges arise, I’ll remind myself of how much better I feel when I stick to my healthy habits.”

Celebrate how far you’ve come, and remember that this is just the beginning of your journey toward long-term health and well-being. Keep going—you’ve got this!

The CONNEQT Health Team



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