

9 Habits That Can Do More Harm Than Good

Discover which healthy actions might be having a negative impact on your body

The basics of staying healthy seem pretty easy to follow: Eat well, exercise, get enough sleep and you should be on the right track, right? Surprisingly, it can be more complicated than that. Oftentimes the very choices we make to benefit our health can be the same ones that hurt us in the long run. Read on to learn which unexpected habits—like brushing your teeth after every meal or slipping into a pair of comfortable sandals—might be causing you harm.

1. Compulsively using hand sanitizer.

If you reach for hand sanitizer any time you make contact with the outside world, you might want to take pause. Unless you're in an especially germ-prone place like a hospital, soap and water will work just fine, says Richard Gallo, MD, PhD, chief of the Division of Dermatology at the University of California-San Diego. When you're not near a sink, hand sanitizing gels can help, but be sure to read the label first. Recent research has shown that those containing triclosan may promote bacteria and virus resistance to antibiotic medications (this goes for antibacterial hand soaps that contain triclosan, too). Instead, choose brands like Purell, that contain at least 60% alcohol, which will kill 99% of bacteria on contact.



2. Experimenting with skincare products.

Who isn't tempted to buy the latest skin creams and serums promising to shed years from your face? While looking for something that works for you is a good idea, overhauling your routine every few weeks in search of the fountain of youth isn't. "I've always encouraged my patients to create a daily regimen and stick with it," says Jody Levine, MD, a dermatologist in New York City. "Women get easily bored with their beauty routine, especially if they don't see results right away. It can take between six and eight weeks to see changes; if you're using a product to increase collagen, expect to wait six months to see results." She often cautions patients against constantly changing products, noting that it may cause adult rosacea (a condition that results in red, patchy and sometimes inflamed skin). "People may be forming sensitive skin by trying out too many different products with high levels of fragrance and other sensitizers," Dr. Levine says. In lieu of always trying something new, stick with what works for you, or see your dermatologist to develop a new routine. And manage your expectations—according to Dr. Levine, a consistent regime should "keep your skin clear, clean and smooth. Make that your rule of thumb and don't expect miracles, especially when it comes to over-the-counter antiaging products."



3. Wearing flip-flops.

Forgoing sky-high heels and toe-pinching boots for the freedom of flip-flops is giving your feet a much-needed break, right? Not exactly. Turns out, your summer shoes aren't doing you any favors. According to Jordana Szpiro, DPM, a podiatrist and foot surgeon in Boston, "Flip-flops and other unsupportive sandals, which have no arch support and give no structural support to the foot, can lead to stress fractures since your uncushioned feet become strained when they try to support too much weight," she explains. "Extensor or flexor tendinitis is also a common problem that happens as a result of trying to keep your flip-flops on—the muscles on top or underneath your feet overexert themselves while trying to grip your shoes." She also advises against walking around shoeless, even if you're by the pool or in your gym's locker room. "Aside from not giving your feet any support, going barefoot can also be challenging for those prone to infectious skin diseases such as plantar warts and athlete's foot, which are easily spread poolside, in pedicure salons and in gyms." But that doesn't mean you need to spend your summer in closed toe shoes. Dr. Szpiro recommends comfortable sandals that also provide plenty of support.



4. Brushing your teeth after every meal.

Rushing to brush immediately after every meal may seem like a great way to keep your oral health in check, but according to Greg Diamond, DDS, a New York City periodontist, it's better to hold off. Food can leave acid on your teeth, which can weaken the enamel, "and brushing while the enamel is in a weakened state can actually scrub the enamel away." To dislodge any food particles that may remain after eating, he recommends simply rinsing your mouth out with water and saving the brushing for morning and night. Then when you do brush, be sure to do so in a circular motion. According to Dr. Diamond, this will improve your chances of removing harmful bacteria between the teeth and gums. Brushing up and down or back and forth, on the other hand, can leave behind harmful bacteria, causing gum disease; while applying too much pressure can lead to receding gums.



5. Doing only cardio when you work out.

It's easy to assume that the best way to lose weight is to stick to the same cardio workout, but "if you only do cardio, your body will become so accustomed to the routine that you'll start to burn less fat over time," says Joseph Ciccone, DPT, CSCS, a physical therapist at ColumbiaDoctors Eastside Sports Therapy in New York. Plus, going through repeated motions on the treadmill or elliptical machine can create tight muscles and lead to injury. Trade in a few of your cardio workouts for circuit training, which involves doing a number of different strength training exercises with little rest between moves in order to keep your heart rate up while also working out your entire body, ensuring that you'll burn the most calories—without burning out. Integrating resistance training into your routine will create muscle mass, which will help you burn more calories throughout the day, even when you're at rest, says Jennifer Fleischer, exercise and nutrition coach and owner of Holistic Fitness in San Francisco. She also recommends revamping your cardio routine by mixing in interval training once a week. Try doing 30 seconds of high intensity motion, whether you're on the treadmill, elliptical machine or in the swimming pool, followed by 90 seconds of recovery at a moderate pace, working your way up to 10 repetitions. The bursts of intensity followed by recovery will effectively and efficiently blast calories and fat.



6. Skipping meals to "save up" for later.

"Women have gotten into the habit of saving their calories for the fun stuff later on," says Danine Fruge, MD, associate medical director at Pritikin Longevity Center + Spa in Miami. For example, many women will hold off on eating lunch so that they can have a few glasses of wine to unwind at the end of the day. Not a problem as long as you're carefully allocating your calories, right? "Unfortunately when you don't eat breakfast or lunch you can develop cravings and irritability, which can lead to overeating later on in the day," she explains. A smarter approach to eating: Fill up on protein-packed meals and nutrient-rich snacks that'll keep you satisfied all day, so when dinnertime or cocktail hour rolls around you won't be tempted to fill your plate with calorie-rich and high-fat foods.



7. Drinking only bottled water.

By reaching for a bottle of H₂O you may think you're doing your body some good by avoiding tap water, which can be filled with who-knows-what. But that's not the case. "Bottled water contains no fluoride, and we're seeing more and more adults suffer from a fluoride deficiency, which can lead to tooth decay," says Dr. Diamond. "Instead, fill your glass with water purified by a Brita or PUR water filtration system" which will keep your water free from impurities commonly found in tap water, but still allow you to reap the benefits of fluoride.



8. Cleaning with disinfecting products.

While keeping your home pristine and germ-free may seem like the path to perfect health, using cleansers that boast antibacterial or disinfecting properties could have the opposite effect. "These products haven't been proven to be any more effective than regular cleaning products, and there is significant evidence that the chemicals in these disinfecting cleansers—called quaternary ammonium compounds—can lead to asthma," says Rebecca Sutton, PhD, senior scientist at the Environmental Working Group. Other cleaning product chemicals to avoid include 2-butoxyethanol, which the Environmental Protection Agency considers a human carcinogen and has been linked to cancer; alkylphenol ethoxylates, which can disrupt hormones; and ethanolamines, which can cause asthma. But because cleaning product companies aren't required to list most ingredients on their product labels (you can call or go online instead), it can be tough to know what to buy. However, Seventh Generation, an eco-friendly company, clearly lists their ingredients on their labels, so that's one option. Another, which Dr. Sutton recommends, is cleaning with a mixture of one part water and one part vinegar, or scrubbing surfaces with baking soda, both of which have natural antibacterial properties. She emphasizes that when it comes to ousting germs, the key is cleaning often and thoroughly—not blasting every surface with the harshest cleaner you can find. "Your goal should be to clean regularly," says Dr. Sutton. "That way you'll get rid of dirt, so there's no place for bacteria to grow."



9. Loading up on nutritional supplements

When it comes to vitamins and minerals, more is better, right? Not always, says Christine Rosenbloom, PhD, RD, professor emerita at Georgia State University. "People often take nutritional supplements without really understanding what they're consuming, or if they really need them." Because so many foods are fortified these days, she notes that chances are many of us don't have any major nutritional deficiencies. If you are already getting enough of what you need, the best case scenario is that the supplements will have no effect on you. But there are more serious side effects of carelessly popping pills: Vitamin A in large amounts can be toxic to a developing fetus, vitamin C in large doses can cause gastrointestinal distress as well as interfere with glucose readings in people on diabetes medications and too much vitamin B6 can cause nerve damage. Since a 2009 study in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* concluded that in the absence of a deficiency, eating food instead of taking supplements should be the primary way to fulfill nutritional requirements and deliver health benefits, Dr. Rosenbloom suggests visiting MyPyramidTracker.gov where you can input the foods that you eat daily and the site will tell you what you need to add to your diet. If you find out that you need to up your intake of, say, calcium, "try integrating calcium-rich foods into your diet, like a glass of skim milk or a spinach salad," before making a beeline to the supplements aisle. If you do learn that supplements are the best choice to remedy a deficiency, look for "USP" printed on the label, which signifies that the pill meets the standards of the testing organization U.S. Pharmacopeia.

