

BODYLESSONS: 10 not-so-traditional health tips

OK, so you're well versed in all the traditional guidelines for good health -- watch your fat intake, exercise regularly, drink lots of water, maintain a healthy weight, keep your food portions under control, and so on. Well, here are a few effective, not-so-traditional tips to round out your repertoire:

1 . Floss daily for more than oral hygiene. According to some research, individuals with gum disease are twice as likely to suffer from heart disease and have three times the risk of stroke. Also, periodontal disease can increase the risk of certain respiratory infections, trigger premature delivery in pregnant women and interfere in blood sugar control among diabetics. Apparently, poor oral hygiene allows unhealthy organisms to travel to other parts of the body where they can do harm. So boost your health quotient by flossing regularly.

2. Do volunteer work. A study at the University of Michigan found that individuals who did volunteer work increased their odds of living longer. The key, it seems, is to find one organization that you believe in and offer up to an hour of your time each week.

3. Socialize. Surround yourself with friends and family, and you may avoid catching a cold this year. According to a study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association healthy adults with six or more types of social relationships, from family to neighbors to co-workers, are four times less likely to become sick than those with three or fewer types of social ties.

4. Eat a banana before bed. Magnesium and potassium-rich bananas can help you fall asleep faster. The carbohydrates stimulate production of serotonin, which makes you drowsy.

5. Use your brain! Individuals who keep their minds challenged are less likely to suffer from senility. Mental activities like reading, crossword puzzles and balancing your checkbook strengthen neuron paths.

6. Avoid drinking too much decaffeinated coffee. A study conducted at the University of Alabama at Birmingham found that older women who drank four or more cups of decaf coffee a day were more than twice as likely to develop rheumatoid arthritis.

7. Hug your pet -- or someone else's. Animals can alleviate feelings of loneliness and isolation, and help you to relax and release tension. Better yet, take a dog for a walk and get some exercise, too.

8. Get a massage. Human touch is healing. Tension slips away and stress hormones drop by 24 percent, according to study at the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami.

9. Say thank you. Being appreciative elevates your mood and makes you less vulnerable to depression, according to research from Eastern Washington University in Cheney.

10. Protect your eyes. Eyestrain can cause everything from headaches to fatigue. Make sure work and reading areas are well lit and that you take regular breaks if you spend a good deal of time in front of a computer.

Certainly, exercise tops the list of traditional health tips...It's never too late to start a healthy habit...Go for walks together, visit the zoo, explore the local park on your bike, sign up for tennis lessons, go sledding, learn to ski or put up a basketball hoop. Even if you just practice salsa moves or toss a foam ball around the living room, you're still doing good things for your body. And by teaching your children that being active can be fun, they will want to participate -- and continue participating. Even if you don't think of yourself as athletic, grab a basketball and toss it back and forth. You may not be a pro, but you can still have fun and with practice you'll reap the rewards of getting better.

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