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April 2020

Corona-Stress

Coronavirus has robbed us of certainty. When will there be a cure? When will there be a vaccine? How long do we have to live in isolation? When will our lives return to normal?

Feeling uncertain, says a 2016 study by neuroscientists at University College London, is a more stressful state to be in than actually knowing something bad will happen. We are much happier when we know what the future holds for us.

Uncertainty causes anxiety, so if you have been feeling fearful, stressed or worried due to COVID-19 you are not alone.

Anxiety is contagious. When people around us are stressed we become stressed – this explains why supermarket shelves have been stripped bare and people have been brawling over toilet paper. It may seem odd behaviour, but this is a reflection of how incredibly anxious our society has become.

Help manage your anxiety with these tips:

Limit your news feed

Constantly checking your news feed may feel like you are keeping abreast of the rapidly changing situation, however

information overload will only to exacerbate your anxiety. Try to limit yourself to checking the updates twice a day.

Know the facts

Rely on accurate information provided by the World Health Organisation and your Government. These sites are updated daily with advice from leading medical experts.

- [World Health Organization – coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\) outbreak](#)
- Your government's official site

Maintain social connections

What we need to do is “physically isolate” ourselves and increase our “social connection”. Staying in touch has never been so important. Have a coffee over FaceTime, use Skype to call a friend, use Zoom for work meetings. Remember to check on vulnerable and elderly friends and family.

Avoid rumours and speculation – disconnect from social media

Social media has fuelled the spread of misinformation about coronavirus. Outlandish claims that coronavirus can be cured by drinking hot water and exposure to sunlight have been shared online. Conspiracy theories and rumours create confusion and havoc with your mental health.

Minimise your risk of infection

To reduce your risk of infection, follow the guidelines: wash your hands regularly; cover your coughs and sneezes; clean surfaces with disinfectant and avoid close contact with others. Adhering to these rules can give you a sense of control and help to reduce your anxiety. ✕

RELIABLE RESOURCES

Beyond Blue has a [new page](#) dedicated specifically to mental health concerns during the Coronavirus outbreak. The Anxiety and Depression Association of America has a dedicated coronavirus [page](#). In the UK, the Mental Health Foundation has a [section on coronavirus](#).

To find these resources, click the above links or web search for the organisation and ‘coronavirus’. ✕



2 April is World Autism Day, and April is World Autism Month. Autism is a complex, lifelong development disability that affects a person's ability to communicate and interact with others. To increase global understanding and acceptance of autism, people around the world are invited to go blue. To find out more, visit goblueforautism.com.au

5 red flags of a fad diet

No fat, low fat, no sugar, low carb, high protein, keto, paleo, carnivore – there's no shortage of diets that promise quick and easy weight loss. But just how easy is it to tell a good diet from a fad?

Remember the cabbage soup diet? Grapefruit diet? Beverly Hills diet? They were all very popular for a short time, only to be replaced by another fad diet soon after.

Fad diets may be hard to spot. They are usually cleverly marketed and often come backed by celebrities who promise rapid weight loss or endless energy.

But a diet is likely to be a fad and best avoided if it:

1. Recommends cutting out entire food groups or healthy foods. Top of the list of many no-nos are carbs, grains, gluten, dairy, and even fruit. Some newer fad diets urge us to avoid legumes (beans and lentils) and nightshade vegetables (tomatoes, potatoes, capsicums and eggplant), while others restrict us even further to just one or two foods (like the carnivore diet).

While there is evidence we should cut out highly processed carbs, there's little research to back claims we should cut out food groups entirely. The exceptions are if you have an allergy or intolerance, or a special health condition that needs a restricted diet. You may also have ethical or religious reasons for avoiding certain foods (if you're vegan, for example).

Behind the calls to cull particular foods may be lots of fear mongering. Some eating plans fall under the umbrella term of 'clean eating', a term which implies that foods you regularly eat are 'unclean' or even 'toxic'. Dairy is a good example.

You can have a healthy diet without dairy, says Canadian dietitian Abby Langer, "but dairy is not the cause of obesity, cancer, diabetes, osteoporosis or heart disease, and is actually thought to be anti-inflammatory. Most of these associations have no evidence behind them.

"Unless you're specifically intolerant or allergic to dairy, gluten or legumes, there is absolutely no evidence that taking these foods out of your diet is a good idea."

Carbohydrates are also targeted by many diets. This really isn't justified, says Dr David Katz, founding Director of Yale University's Prevention Research Centre.

"Everything from lentils to lollipops, pinto beans to jelly beans, tree nuts to doughnuts, is a carbohydrate source. Most plant foods are mostly carbohydrate. So if 'all carbs' are evil, then so are vegetables, fruits, whole grains, beans, lentils, nuts, and seeds."

Highly processed grains and added sugar

have few nutrients and can raise insulin levels. It's the junk food that's the problem, not the carbs, argues Dr Katz.

Cutting out food groups can mean you fall short of essential nutrients. Grains, for instance, provide fibre (essential for a healthy balance of gut bacteria) and B vitamins, important for energy production.

2. Promises quick but unrealistic results.

The diet's promise may be very specific: 'shed 10 kilos in six weeks!' If a diet leads to rapid weight loss (many detox diets fit this category) chances are that much of the weight loss is water and will quickly be regained.

3. Lacks credible scientific evidence.

Often diets make claims based on a single study, poorly designed studies, or rodent studies. The problem is that many fad diets contain half-truths, making it difficult to sort science from science-fiction. If you're not sure, discuss the diet with a healthcare professional first.

4. Is written by someone without nutrition qualifications.

Anyone can talk about nutrition and diet, but that doesn't mean you should be listening. Even writers with medical backgrounds aren't necessarily qualified in nutrition, and if they profess to



understand nutritional science but then reject it, that's a red flag, says Dr Katz. Often, they may want to steer you to books they have written, or products or supplements they sell – another red flag, cautions Langer.

5. Implies that food can change body chemistry. The alkaline diet, for instance, claims to slow ageing and cure cancer by balancing the pH of the blood. It divides food into either acid-producing or alkaline-producing, and asks you to avoid eating all acidic foods.

"This is a fad diet that cuts out three main food groups – meat, fish, poultry and eggs; grains; and dairy," accredited practising dietitian Melanie McGrice told *Choice* magazine. "It's essentially a very restrictive grain-free vegan diet."

As for the question of whether food can change the pH of your blood, McGrice says definitely not.

"There are no foods that you eat that can change the pH of your blood," she says. "Our pH is very tightly controlled, and if food was able to alter this to any extent our cells would stop working and we would die very quickly if untreated."

What's the healthiest diet?

There is no evidence that any one diet is 'best for health', says Dr David Katz. He says the best diet, in fact, is a theme: an emphasis on vegetables, fruit, whole grains, beans, lentils, nuts, seeds, and plain water to drink. That can be with or without seafood; with or without dairy; with or without eggs; with or without some meat; high or low in total fat.

This pattern of eating forms the backbone of the Mediterranean diet, regarded as one of the healthiest in the world and known to protect against cardiovascular disease, diabetes and cancer.

Leading Australian nutritionist Dr Rosemary Stanton agrees that the Mediterranean diet is an excellent way for people to eat.

"The main principles fit with all our dietary guidelines and we have a wealth of evidence to support these aspects of the diet," she says.



How to spot a heart attack

Heart disease is responsible for the most deaths worldwide for both men and women of all races. Heart attacks and strokes make up the majority of this group. The symptoms of a heart attack are not always obvious and can differ between men and women.

Women don't expect to have a heart attack. Even though men are twice as likely to have a heart attack, heart disease remains the second leading cause of death for women.

A heart attack occurs when blood supply to the heart becomes blocked, reducing the amount of oxygen getting to the heart muscle. This can lead to permanent heart damage.

Warning signs of a heart attack

We're familiar with the classic Hollywood heart attack of a man clutching at his chest and falling to the floor. The reality can be quite different. Heart attack symptoms are not always sudden or severe, can start slowly with only mild pain or discomfort, and may be different for men and women.

The most common symptoms, for both men and women, are sudden central chest pain or discomfort in the chest that doesn't go away. It can feel like pressure, tightness or squeezing.

You can also experience symptoms you may not expect, such as:

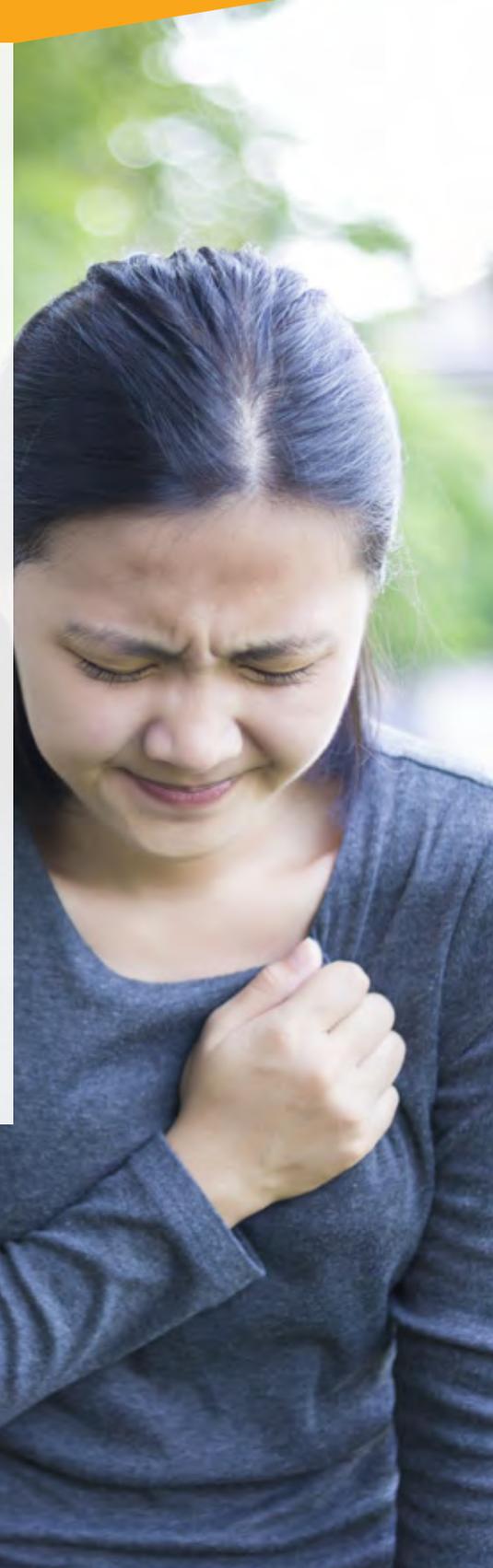
- pain radiating down the left or both arms
- dizziness and/or nausea
- pain in the jaw, back, neck or shoulders
- stomach pain or reflux (burning feeling in the throat)
- fatigue.

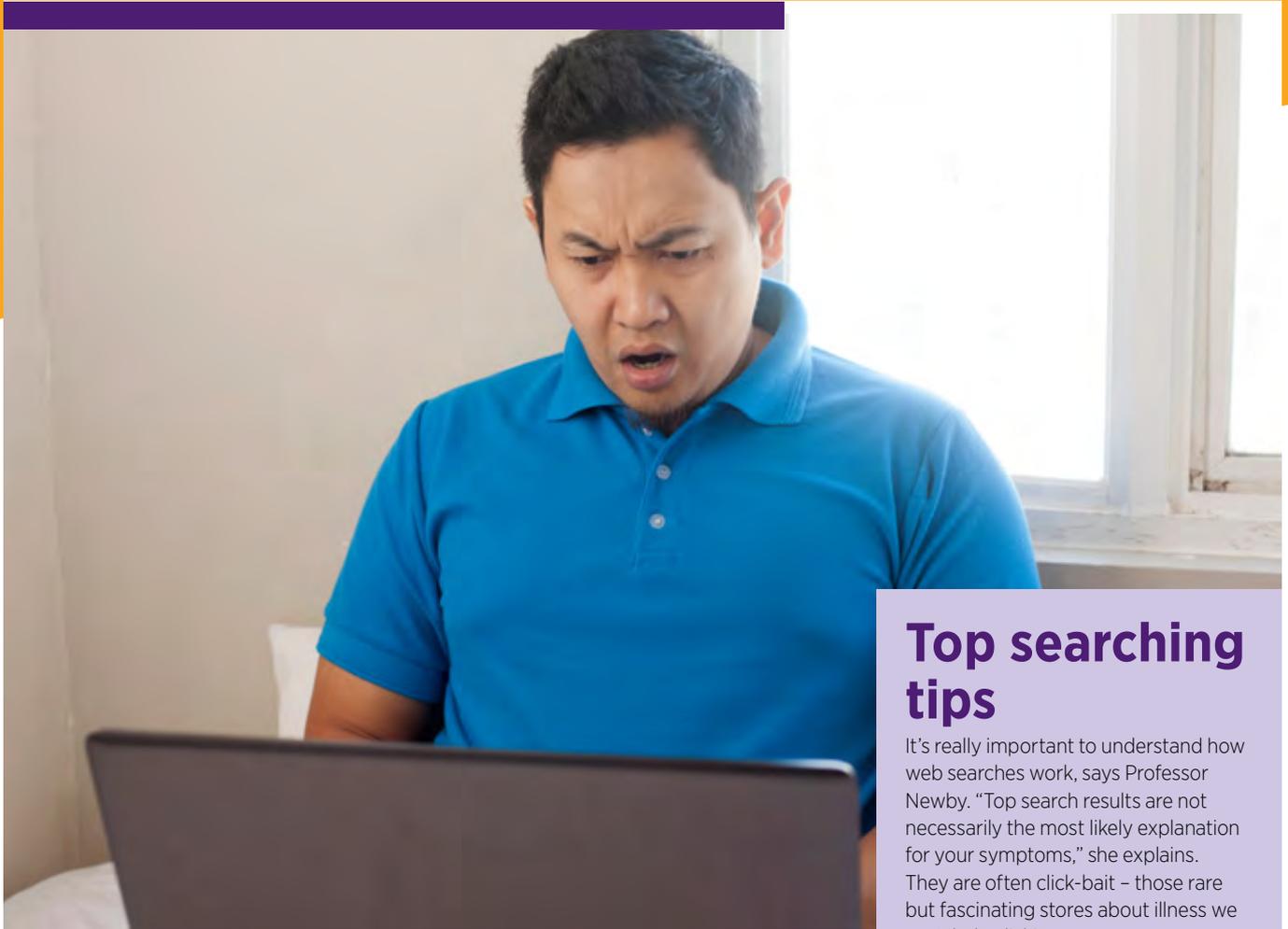
Research shows that men and women can have different heart attack symptoms. The Australian Heart Foundation says that just over half of women who have a heart attack experience chest pain. Many other women will only experience non-typical symptoms like breathlessness, nausea and arm or jaw pain.

The American Heart Association agrees. According to their 2016 statement published in the journal *Circulation*, women can report shortness of breath, muscle weakness and fatigue, anxiety, loss of appetite, and profuse, cold sweating.

Women are more likely to put down their symptoms to less life-threatening conditions like acid reflux, the flu or normal ageing and as a consequence will take longer to reach a hospital and get treatment.

By knowing the warning signs and acting quickly you can reduce the damage to your heart muscle and increase your chance of survival. If you experience any symptoms you suspect might be a heart attack, stop, rest, and call emergency services. ✕





Top searching tips

It's really important to understand how web searches work, says Professor Newby. "Top search results are not necessarily the most likely explanation for your symptoms," she explains. They are often click-bait – those rare but fascinating stories about illness we can't help clicking.

Limit your search to reliable websites with high quality, balanced information. Symptom-checker sites are often inaccurate, found a study published in the *British Medical Journal*. Only one third of symptom checkers came back with a correct diagnosis, and only half included the right diagnosis in their top three suggestions.

Websites that are government-run or written by medical professionals are the best bet – stay away from blogs, forums, or social media.

Recommended health sites include:

- WebMD at webmd.com
- OpenMD at openmd.com
- Healthdirect at healthdirect.gov.au
- Better Health Channel at betterhealth.vic.gov.au
- My Dr. at mydr.com.au
- Beyond Blue (mental health support) at beyondblue.org.au

A trusted health professional, like your GP, should always be your first port of call if you have any health concerns.

Official government websites are also usually reliable.

Is Dr Google making you sick?

Whatever you want to know, it's tempting to 'just Google it' to get the answer. But what about our health? By relying on an online diagnosis, do we risk becoming overly anxious?

Got a symptom you want to check out? Search 'I have a headache' online and you're likely to find all sorts of benign causes – from stress and lack of sleep to caffeine withdrawal. The information can be quite helpful and may mean you resolve your symptoms without a visit to the doctor.

But keep looking and chances are you'll find a more sinister diagnosis. Online data shows that 47 per cent of searches for an illness brings up at least one cancer result.

When searching makes us anxious

Read too many frightening diagnoses and you can end up convinced you're seriously ill. For

many of us, this cycle has become common, says Clinical Psychologist and Associate Professor Jill Newby, of the University of NSW, writing in *The Conversation*. It can trigger anxiety, may impact our day-to-day functioning and in many cases, cause unnecessary medical visits.

"The term 'cyberchondria' describes the anxiety we experience as a result of excessive web searches about symptoms or diseases," explains Professor Newby. "It's not an official diagnosis but is an obvious play on the word 'hypochondria', now known as health anxiety. It's obsessional worrying about health, online."

Cyberchondria isn't just for those who have underlying health anxiety. We can all be susceptible to excessive worry after keying in our symptoms, according to study published in the *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*. ✕

Take a stand

You may have heard sitting is bad for your health, but does that mean we should stand all day instead?

If you're an average office worker, then you're probably spending over six hours a day sitting at work. Studies tell us that prolonged sitting may increase the risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and stroke, even if you're an keen exerciser. Sitting without breaks can also lead to a sore and stiff neck, shoulders and back.

But standing all day can be hard on your body too, and a combination of sitting and standing seems to bring the most benefits. In 2015, the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* published a review of the scientific evidence on how to best address sedentary behaviour in the office. They recommended 'accumulating at least two hours per day of standing and light activity (such as light walking) during working hours.'

The sit-stand desk

One popular solution to the increasing sedentary nature of our jobs is the sit-stand desk, which allows you to move between sitting and standing while at work. But how do you use these to ensure you get the recommended two hours of standing or light activity?

The answer, according to Alan Hedge, Cornell University ergonomist, is the Sit-Stand-Stretch or 20-8-2 regimen. This involves, for every 30 minutes of your workday:

- 20 minutes of sitting (in good posture)
- 8 minutes of standing, and
- 2 minutes standing and moving.

For an average workday of seven and half hours, this means you'll be sitting for five hours, standing for two hours and moving for 30 minutes.

Tomato time

Even if you don't have access to a standing desk you can still take regular breaks from sitting. One way to do this is to work in 25-minute bursts, after which you stand

up and take a five-minute break. This is also known as the Pomodoro Technique, so named because the bursts of time can be measured using little tomato-shaped kitchen timers – Pomodoro is Italian for tomato.

Use your five-minute break to move your body – perhaps walking to the kitchen to refill your water glass or grab a tea or coffee, or doing some simple neck, shoulder and back stretches.

If you don't have a tomato timer, there are plenty of apps online that can keep track of your sessions. ✕



Ask an expert about ...

ASIC's MoneySmart replies:

If your personal information falls into the wrong hands, it can be used to steal your identity. Someone who has your identity may be able to access your bank account and use your credit cards.

You may not realise your identity has been stolen for some time. The first signs may be: unusual bills or charges that you don't recognise on your bank statement; mail that you're expecting doesn't arrive; you get calls following up about products

Q I hear a lot about identity theft. What is this and how can I keep my identity safe?

and services that you've never used; and strange emails appear in your inbox.

There are some simple steps you can take to avoid identity theft. Look after your personal details by shredding documents such as letters from your bank, super fund and employer. Make sure you put a lock on your street mailbox so people can't steal your mail, and use public computers with caution, ensuring you clear your internet history and log out of all accounts before you finish. Be cautious when using free public wi-fi and avoid logging into banking or other personal accounts.

Scammers can find you where you live, work and visit through your posts on social media, so be aware of what you post, particularly if your profile is public.

Strong passwords make it harder for people to hack into your accounts, so ensure your passwords are long, and contain a mix of numbers, symbols, and uppercase and lowercase letters. Add to your security by using virus protection software which can help stop hackers from accessing your information.

Visit moneysmart.gov.au for more information. ✕

**App
of the
month****The Check-in app.**

This app from Beyond Blue helps you start a conversation with a friend who may not be acting the way they usually do. It guides you through things

to consider, such as what if my friend denies there's a problem, or what if I say the wrong thing. The app also helps you think about where you might check in, what you might say, and how you might support your friend. There are also links to where you can get support and tips.

Free from the App Store and Google Play.

Keep up to date on the coronavirus

With the coronavirus causing anxiety for many people, it's hard to know what information to trust. National news? Local news? Facebook? And with information changing hour by hour, something you read yesterday may have become incorrect by today.

You should pay attention to your national and local news for information that affects your location.

For accurate and up to date information on the coronavirus itself, visit the World Health Organization's website at www.who.int ✕

Fast food can lower testosterone

Eating a high-fat, fast food meal can reduce testosterone levels by 25 per cent within an hour in overweight and obese men, Australian research shows. The effect can last up to four hours, say the South Australian study authors in a recent issue of *Andrologia*.

It is known that testosterone levels fall after eating a meal but this, admittedly small, study shows that it is actually a high-fat meal that has the biggest effect.

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**Why waking in the night is normal**

Do you get anxious if you don't get eight hours of uninterrupted slumber a night?

The truth is that waking up two to four times a night as we move in and out of sleep cycles is perfectly normal, and not a sign of something going wrong. Unfortunately, anxiety about waking can cause us to struggle to fall back asleep.

"Sleep is more like a rollercoaster; we go through several sleep cycles each night, and each one is between 90 and 120 minutes, depending on the person," says Dr Gorica Micic, a research associate at Flinders University's College of Medicine and Public Health.

Brain scans of many insomniacs show they have had a totally normal sleep, but their perception of not sleeping significantly impacts how they feel during the day.

"Sleep is really quite flexible, and having a relaxed attitude towards it is important," says Professor Dorothy Bruck of the Sleep Health Foundation.

"You can't force yourself to sleep; you can only create the right conditions to allow sleep to happen, such as setting up sleep routines." ✕

Confirmed by research ...

Pedestrians who text while walking are twice as likely to have an accident or near miss with a car as those talking on the phone, found a Canadian study.

1 THING YOU CAN DO TODAY



Wash your hands

You eat well, get your eight hours' sleep a night, and never miss your daily run. Your immune system should be in tip-top condition, right?

It may be, but that doesn't mean you won't pick up an infection. Because no matter how healthy you are, the single most important thing you can do to protect yourself from viruses is also one of the simplest – wash your hands. It's a message we've been hearing again and again in light of the coronavirus threat.

The US Centre for Disease Control describes handwashing as a 'do-it-yourself' vaccine for a range of illnesses. Research shows that compared to non-handwashers, those who wash four times a day have fewer days off due to respiratory infections or tummy problems.

When people who are sick sneeze or cough, their germs are expelled into the air in tiny droplets. If these get onto your hands and you then touch your mouth, eyes or nose without washing away the germs, the infection can enter your body. You can also pick up germs left by others on shared objects like doorknobs, lift buttons and keyboards and from handles and rails on public transport.

Regularly washing your hands can wash away these germs – and lower your risk of getting sick.

The dos and don'ts of handwashing

- Use soap and hot or cold running water.
- Don't rush. Rub your hands together for about 20 seconds – don't forget the backs of your hands, wrists, between your fingers and under your fingernails.
- Don't use antibacterial soaps – there's no evidence these are better than regular soap.
- Rinse well under running water.
- Dry your hands with a clean towel, paper towel, or hot air dryer.

5 May is World Hand Hygiene Day ✕

EAT SMARTER

Top your toast with sardines

We know we need to eat more fish – ideally two to three times a week. Fish is chock full of omega-3 fats, essential for the health of our heart, brain and eyes, and most of us just don't get enough.

But fresh fish doesn't keep for long and can be expensive. That's where canned sardines come into their own – they're handy, affordable and good for you, too.

5 reasons to eat more sardines

1. **Top up your omega 3s.** When compared to canned tuna and salmon, sardines contain more of the vital omega 3 fats. Sardines contain between 1000-1500mg per serving, up to three times what you'll find in canned tuna.
2. **Save your cash.** Gram for gram, canned sardines are the best value of all the canned fish varieties.
3. **Boost your vitamin D.** As the days get shorter some of us may not be able to make enough vitamin D from the sun, so dietary sources like oily fish become more important.
4. **Strengthen your bones.** The soft, edible bones of canned sardines (and canned salmon) are a rich source of bone-building calcium, providing nearly 30 per cent of your recommended daily intake.
5. **Limit your mercury.** Small fish like sardines are naturally low in mercury. This highly toxic metal can affect brain development in children and unborn babies, even at very low levels. It can accumulate in mature fish at the top of the food chain, such as swordfish, marlin, shark (flake) and some species of tuna. Pregnant women should limit eating larger fish species to once a fortnight. ✕



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