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NEWSLETTER

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May 2023

## Women have heart attacks too

**If you're a woman concerned about your health, the last thing on your mind might be your heart. Yet it should be one of the first, as cardiovascular disease is responsible for 35% of deaths in women each year.**

Heart disease in women continues to be seriously understudied, under-recognised, under-diagnosed and under-treated, says the World Heart Federation. It urges all women to become more aware of their risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD) – which includes heart disease and stroke – and the different heart attack warning signs that affect women.

### Different risk factors for women

Many of the traditional risk factors for CVD are the same for women and men: high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, obesity, an unhealthy diet, physical inactivity, and smoking.

Yet there are also risk factors specific to women, says Dr Monique Watts, a cardiologist and specialist in women's heart disease at the Epworth and Alfred Hospitals in Victoria. She spoke with Heart Research Australia about the risks of CVD for women.

"Women have their own female-specific risk factors, such as obstetric complications like pre-term delivery, preeclampsia, and gestational diabetes, which all put women at much higher risk of heart disease."

Natural oestrogen is very protective of your heart, so menopause, particularly early menopause, increases the risk too, explains Dr Watts.

"It's important for women to know this, as this is new information we're getting," says Dr Watts. "So even if you don't have high blood pressure and other traditional risk factors, you may still be at risk."

Dr Watts also says she sees a lot of shame in her female patients, having a disease that's traditionally considered a 'men's disease'.

"We need to change this, as heart disease is one of the biggest killers of women."

There is so much more to cardiac risk than how you look, and a lot of it is genetically determined."

### Signs of a heart attack in women

Women tend to present differently to men when they have a heart attack. While chest pain is still the most common heart attack symptom in both women and men, says the Heart Foundation of Australia, women are more likely than men to experience non-chest pain symptoms. These include jaw, shoulder or back pain, nausea or vomiting, dizziness, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, indigestion or tiredness.

If you are experiencing unusual symptoms and think you might be having a heart attack, don't delay seeking help. Call Emergency Services right away.



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**19 May is World IBD Day.** This day aims to raise awareness about Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis, known as Inflammatory Bowel Disease, and to show support to the ten million people worldwide who live with IBD. For more information, visit [worldibdday.org](http://worldibdday.org)

# How to look after your gut

Gut health is a hot topic. We're told looking after our gut will improve our immune system, help us lose weight, and even boost our mental health. What can we do to support it?

Ten years ago we rarely gave our gut a second thought, unless it caused us pain or discomfort.

Now as scientists discover more about the gut microbiota and its potential to affect our health in far-reaching ways, our gut health is used as click-bait and to sell supplements and food products.

## First up, what is the gut microbiota?

Your gut microbiota is like an ecosystem – not unlike a rainforest – of 100 trillion microorganisms made up of bacteria, fungi and viruses, living mainly in your large intestine. You'll also hear it called the gut microbiome, which technically refers to the genes inside the microbial cells.

Your gut bug community has diverse roles to play, from vitamin production, digestion, and immune support to gut-brain communication and neurotransmitter production. Studies suggest it could play a role in weight management and mental health too, with recent research even

indicating a thriving gut microbiota can help improve the outcome for cancer patients on immunotherapy.

Given how critical it is to our health, it makes sense that we want to look after our gut. Where do we start? Despite the hype and headlines, we still don't know what a healthy gut microbiota really looks like and describing certain bacteria as 'good' or 'bad' is misleading. Microbiome communities are as individual as our fingerprints, and identical bacteria can act differently in different people's guts.

It's also quite difficult to find out the state of your gut health. Commercial gut health tests have their limitations, Australian dietitian Dr Megan Rossi, gut health researcher at Kings College London, and author of *Eat More, Live Well* told the UK's *Telegraph*. "Save your money," she advises, as "at the moment commercial tests don't provide us with much clinical insight."

What the science does tell us is that diversity – having many different types of gut microbes – is probably more important

than the specific species. And fortunately, we have a good idea how to encourage bacterial diversity.

## Eat for your gut's sake

After you've eaten your dinner, food travels into your stomach and from there into your small intestine, a six-metre long tube that's actually the longest part of your digestive system. This is where you absorb the bulk of your nutrients into your blood. Any food that can't be digested then moves into your large intestine, home to the majority of your gut microbiota.

Your gut bugs then get busy digesting what you can't, explains Rossi, and in the process, they produce lots of beneficial compounds with wide-ranging functions, including regulating appetite and communicating with your brain. But without the right kind of food they can't thrive. Worse still, animal studies show gut microbes that don't get enough nourishment can start eating away on the protective mucus lining of your gut, says Rossi.



To nourish your gut bug community, you need plenty of fibre from plant foods. Diversity is key here, says Rossi. She explains that we need to eat as many different types of plant foods as we can – vegetables, fruit, grains, legumes, nuts, seeds, herbs and spices – and she urges us to try the 30 plant foods a week challenge (see 'Move over, five-a-day').

Remember, says Rossi, a plant-based diet doesn't necessarily mean vegan or vegetarian. "There is a spectrum of plant-based eating, with veganism at one end and flexitarian at the other." If you're flexitarian, you eat mainly plants but include eggs, meat and fish in your diet too.

### Do current trends help or harm our gut?

Any overly restrictive diet, particularly one that cuts out most grains, may compromise your gut health by limiting the amount of fibre you eat, warns Rossi.

What about sugar? Surely it's a good idea to cut that out?

Sugar gets digested very high up in the digestive tract and it doesn't reach the bulk of gut bacteria, says Rossi, so it's unlikely to affect your microbiota. But she says it's still not a good idea to fill up on sugar and processed foods as you won't be getting the fibre you need.

Fermented foods are hugely popular, but for now the claims of some are a little ahead

of the science. Just because a food contains live microorganisms, doesn't mean it has health benefits. A 2021 review found strong evidence for the benefits of eating yoghurt and kefir, some evidence to support eating sauerkraut, natto and sourdough, and little evidence to support the health benefits claimed from drinking kombucha.

## Move over, five-a-day

Researchers at the American Gut Project found that people who ate more than 30 different plant foods each week had a more diverse gut microbiome compared with those who ate 10 or fewer.

Making this your goal sounds like a huge ask until you break it down.

A breakfast of muesli topped with two different fruits can equal seven plant points when you count the different nuts and seeds, a salad with four bean mix can add up to six, dinner with some stir-fry vegetables and rice equals at least five. Count any plant-based snacks too, such as nuts or hummus.

Aim to shop for different types of fruit and vegetables each week. If you want added convenience, shop for mixed packs of salad, coleslaw and stir-fry vegetables. Include frozen and canned food too, as these can be cheaper while having similar health benefits to fresh.





# “My life is over!”

# How to stop catastrophising

**Catastrophic thinking is a distorted way of thinking that pushes us down and then gives us a kick: we don't just imagine the worst will happen. We also believe that when the worst does inevitably happen, the results will ruin us.**

Say you've misplaced your credit card. Immediately you think someone has picked it up. They're using it. They're going to drain your bank account. What's more, you decide, they're going to steal your identity and your entire life is ruined.

Or you notice a pain in your side. It must be cancer, you decide. You're going to die, you tell yourself. Even worse, the treatment will be too expensive and your family will be plunged into poverty and they'll end up homeless and the kids' futures will be ruined. (Hint: it's probably just indigestion.)

It's not real. It's not rational. You're catastrophising.

## What is catastrophising?

Catastrophising is sometimes called “worst case scenario thinking”. David Robson, author of *The Expectation Effect: How Your Mindset Can Transform Your Life*, calls catastrophising “a mental habit in which you overestimate the chances of something bad happening, and exaggerate the potential negative consequences of that scenario.”

As French philosopher, Michel De Montaigne, once described, “My life has been full of terrible misfortunes most of which never happened.”

## Why is it so damaging?

This kind of negative thinking can have intense psychological and physical consequences.

Not to catastrophise, but this kind of negative thinking can make you more vulnerable

to other mental conditions, and can even increase your feelings of physical pain.

One of the reasons is that your body and nervous system can't tell the difference between real danger or imagined danger. When you think catastrophic thoughts, your system has a stress response, which reduces your ability to think clearly.

“The catastrophic misinterpretation of the bodily signals fuels anxiety and fear, which then makes it more likely that you'll interpret the situation catastrophically,” says Barnabas Ohst, a psychotherapist in Freiburg, Germany, and a co-author of a recent meta-analysis examining the role of catastrophic thinking in panic disorder.

Secondly, catastrophising can make you more vulnerable to other mental illnesses including phobias and obsessive-compulsive disorder. It can also make other anxiety conditions worse: you can imagine the impact of perfectionism mixed with catastrophising: every tiny mistake you make would mean your life is ruined.

## So why do we do it?

As humans, we have a cognitive bias towards the negative. We are conditioned to search for and hone in on potential threats. This served us well in the distant past when we had to avoid predators. In our current society, this can go haywire.

While some people only catastrophise about certain aspects of life, such as their health, or the kids' safety, or their career, for many people, it's a mental habit.

It can be triggered by prolonged stress (such as an ongoing global pandemic and economic crisis), but it's often built-in from an early age.

**Note:** While catastrophising can simply be a bad habit, it can also be a sign that you may be experiencing burnout, or that your mental health is suffering in another way.

Reach out for professional help if you're struggling. If you or someone you know is in crisis, call Emergency Services. For further information and support, ask your doctor for guidance or visit [befrienders.org](https://befrienders.org).

## How to stop catastrophising

The most proven and effective way to break the cycle of catastrophic thinking is become aware of it. “Awareness is essential,” says David Robson, “so the first step should be to pause your thinking and recognise when your mind is going down a psychological black hole.”

The keywords to watch out for are “always” and “never”, the key feelings are dread and doom. Then, challenge your automatic thoughts and question whether they are rational or realistic.

A good trick here is to imagine you are advising a friend. If your friend had a presentation due at work, and they believe they're going to mess it up and embarrass themselves, get fired and never find a good job again, what would you tell them?

Chances are you'd remind them of times when they've done well, and you'd encourage them to rationally problem-solve by spending more time preparing and practising. Remember, you don't have to believe everything you think!



# 4 expert tips for making friends

## How to keep new friends

After you've established a friendship, one great way to strengthen it is to tell your friend how much you value them.

If that idea fills you with awkwardness, don't worry. There are ways to do it without it sounding cheesy. Here are two easy ways recommended by Dr Marisa Franco:

### 1. Tell them in passing

As you go about your day, if you think of your friend, tell them. The classic "I saw this meme and thought of you," is a classic for a reason. Franco says these small notes show your friend you genuinely care for them and lets them know it's safe to invest in your friendship.

### 2. Share your little vulnerabilities

Let them in on the little things: the trashy reality program you love, your irritation over leaf blowers on Saturday mornings. Sharing vulnerabilities, even small ones, creates connection and trust. It allows your friend to open up about their own world in turn.

### 3. Ask questions

If you can't think of anything to say, ask a question. It doesn't have to be deeply personal, it could be based on the current situation, such as "what did you think of the presentation?" A 2012 study from Harvard University found that self-disclosure activates brain regions associated with reward. That is, people love talking about themselves.

### 4. End with an opening

So you've had a great conversation with a new person and you're getting on well. How do you progress it to friendship?

Dr Franco suggests inviting them to an exclusive activity. "Once you find a person you like, think about generating exclusivity, which means having an experience with that person that you don't have with everyone else in the group."

Meaningful social connections, AKA good friendships, are essential to our wellbeing – and our physical health.

Research shows people who are lonely have a higher risk of dementia, heart disease and stroke, along with higher rates of depression and anxiety.

But making friends as an adult isn't as easy as it was in preschool where all you had to do was share some crayons. So how do we make new friends – and keep them – while doing everything else we need to do?

#### 1. Move past the fear

"What if they don't like me?"

One of the core obstacles holding people back from making new friends is the fear they won't be liked.

Yet research into "the liking" gap shows that most people underestimate how much they are liked. A 2018 study published in *Psychological Science* studied interactions between strangers in a laboratory; first-year college students in a dorm; and as formerly unacquainted members of the general public in a personal development workshop. "Our studies suggest that after people have conversations, they are liked more than they know," concluded the study authors.

Plus, when you assume that someone likes you, you tend to become warmer, friendlier and more open, which in turn makes you likable. It's called the "acceptance prophecy".

Dr Marisa Franco is a psychologist and author of *Platonic: How the Science of Attachment Can Help You Make – and Keep – Friends*.

She travelled overseas and made new friends along the way, in part fuelled by an assumption that she would be liked. She writes, "People like to be liked, and we tend to like people who we believe like us."

#### 2. Join an ongoing group

Dr Franco advises joining a group that meets regularly over time to make friends. "So instead of going to a networking event, look for a professional development group, for example. Don't go to a book lecture; look for a book club.

"When other people are pursuing a hobby in a group, they're likely also doing it for social reasons, because they're choosing not to do it alone.

"That capitalises on something called the 'mere exposure effect', or our tendency to like people more when they are familiar to us," says Franco.

# Ways to manage mould

**They're such tiny little black spots, yet they can cause health problems and be a real challenge to remove.**

Mould is actually a type of fungus that produce microscopic seeds called spores.

Breathing in those spores can cause health problems for some people. Worksafe Queensland in Australia says that while most people are unlikely to be affected by mould, the risks are higher for people who have conditions such as asthma or lung disease, chronic disease such as diabetes, or low immunity.

Health problems can include:

- respiratory infections
- irritation to the nose, eyes and throat
- skin rashes
- hypersensitivity pneumonitis.

## How to manage mould

If you come across mould at work, treat it as a safety hazard. Identify the risk, assess the risk, control the risk and then review. Remember to always wear Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) when dealing with mould.

If you have mould at home, try to remove it as soon as it appears. Remember, unless you remove the cause of the problem (see below), it will keep coming back.

Health NSW Australia recommends the following process:

- For routine clean-up of mouldy surfaces, use mild detergent or vinegar diluted in water solution (4 parts vinegar to 1 part water).



- If the mould is not readily removed and the item cannot be discarded, use diluted bleach solution (250mls of bleach in 4 litres of water or half a pint of bleach in 1 gallon of water) to clean the surface. When using bleach, protective equipment is recommended: PVC or nitrile rubber gloves; safety glasses; and safety shoes. Make sure the area is well-ventilated while you are cleaning with bleach.
- Ensure the surface is dried completely once cleaned.
- Absorbent materials, such as carpet may need to be professionally cleaned or replaced if they are contaminated with mould.

## How to reduce the risk of mould

Mould loves moisture, so the best way to reduce mould is to keep your rooms

ventilated and dry as much as possible. Here are some tips from Health NSW:

### 1. Maintain proper ventilation

- Turn on exhaust fans, particularly when bathing, showering, cooking, doing laundry and drying clothes.
- Open windows when weather permits, to improve cross ventilation.

### 2. Reduce humidity

- Limit the use of humidifiers.
- Limit the number of fish tanks and indoor plants.
- Limit use of unflued gas heaters

### 3. Control moisture and dampness

- Repair all water leaks and plumbing problems, for example, burst water pipes, leaking roof or blocked rain gutters.



## Ask an expert about ...

## Q How much should I exercise if I have high blood pressure?

The evidence for the benefits of exercise for people with high blood pressure (hypertension) is overwhelmingly positive. Absolutely, you should exercise. But how much?

We went to the Australian Association for Exercise and Sports Science to find out. In their position statement on Exercise and Hypertension, the Association says:

"The minimum amount of exercise that is recommended in patients with hypertension comprises a mix of moderate to vigorous aerobic (endurance)

activity (up to 5 days/week) in addition to resistance (strength) training (on 2 or more non-consecutive days/week)."

Plus, they said, even more exercise is "expected to confer additional health benefits".

Exercise can help protect against high blood pressure, and help manage it.

The Australian Association for Exercise and Sports Science says vigorous exercise is good for most people, but if you are an older person with coronary artery disease, you should get medical supervision. And if

you're starting a new exercise program, you should speak to your doctor about any risks associated with your planned fitness strategy.

Also, if your blood pressure is not yet controlled, you should hold off on a new training program until you have it sorted.

Keep in mind that some beta blockers (medication for blood pressure) can lower your heart rate, so the Association says that if you're on a beta blocker, don't use your heart rate to decide whether to push harder. Instead, rely on how you feel, or "perceived exertion".



## App of the month

### Debt Payoff Planner & Tracker

Debt Payoff Planner is a personal finance tool that helps create a debt repayment plan. The debt tracker shows

you the amount that should be paid each month for each debt, so you never go off track. Not only does the app provide a summary of your debt picture (like the total amount owed by you and your total monthly payments), but it also shows the expected month you'll become debt-free, so you never lose sight of the end goal. Depending on your needs, you can choose either the highest interest or lowest balance as your payoff order.

Available free with in-app purchases from the [App store](#) and [Google Play](#).

# News Bites



## The habits that can protect your memory

Want to slow your memory decline and ward off dementia? A new 10-year study of more than 29,000 older adults has confirmed there's a link between how we live and our cognitive function as we age.

The researchers identified six habits linked with a lower risk of dementia and a slower rate of memory decline.

- 1. Physical exercise:** at least 150 minutes of moderate or 75 minutes of vigorous activity per week.
- 2. Diet:** eating appropriate daily amounts of at least seven to 12 food items (including fruits, vegetables, fish, meat, oil, eggs, cereals, legumes, nuts and tea)
- 3. Alcohol:** not drinking or only occasionally.
- 4. Smoking:** not smoking or a former smoker.
- 5. Cognitive activity:** exercising the brain at least twice a week (such as reading, playing cards).
- 6. Social contact:** engaging with others at least twice a week.

Those people who had four to six healthy factors, and those in the average group of two to three had a slower rate of memory decline over time than people with less healthy lifestyles. Notably, this held true even for people who carried the APOE gene associated with a higher risk of Alzheimer's disease.

## The best brain foods

Feel like a pick-me-up? Choose one of the following to boost your brain function.

**Chocolate:** a powerful antioxidant as well as a vasodilator, which means more blood gets pumped to your brain. But make it dark, not milk.

**Caffeine:** your daily cuppa can help your concentration and focus, and will add to your bank of antioxidants.

**Beans and legumes:** an excellent source of folate, an important brain nutrient. People on antidepressants respond better to medication when they have an adequate supply of folate.

**Nuts and seeds:** a great source of vitamin E, associated with lower cognitive decline as you age. Walnuts and linseeds also contain Omega-3 fatty acids, known to enhance brain function.

**Berries:** great source of antioxidants.

**Beetroot:** high in natural nitrates that boost blood flow to the brain.

**Eggs:** a leading source of choline, a precursor to acetylcholine, which is a neurotransmitter involved in helping your memory.

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## Meditation decreases anxiety

Are you experiencing anxiety but would like to try other approaches before medication? A recent study published in *JAMA Psychiatry* found that people who received eight weeks of mindfulness-based interventions experienced a decrease in anxiety that matched those who were prescribed a common anti-anxiety medication.

Mindfulness practices such as breathing exercises have been used to treat anxiety for a long time, but this study shows how effective they can be compared to standard treatments, said the study's lead author, Elizabeth Hoge, psychiatrist and director of the Anxiety Disorders Research Program at Georgetown University.

Note: While daily meditation can support your mental health, you should also seek professional help if you're struggling. If you or someone you know is in crisis, call Emergency Services. For further information and support, ask your doctor for guidance or visit [befrienders.org](http://befrienders.org).

# 1

## THING YOU CAN DO TODAY



### Try Tai Chi

Tai Chi is an ancient Chinese practice, often described as meditation in motion. And while the movements are slow, recent research has found it can help you lose belly fat – especially if you're an older adult with extra weight around the middle.

Dr Parco M. Siu of the University of Hong Kong ran a study comparing tai chi to conventional exercise for middle-aged people with 'central obesity', (belly fat). The study showed tai chi had the same impact on waist circumference as exercise such as a mix of brisk walking and weights.

And don't forget tai chi brings numerous mental health benefits. A meta-analysis of 40 studies on tai chi found it could help reduce stress, anxiety, depression and mood disturbance, and increase self-esteem.

While joining a group class is ideal, you can also do tai chi at home. Go to YouTube and type in 'Tai Chi online classes'. You might then want to specify particular requirements such as "tai chi for beginners" or "short tai chi practices". Some respected names to look out for are Dr Paul Lam and Master Moy Lim Shin.

## EAT SMARTER

### Edamame

Pronounced 'eh-duh-maa-may', these glistening green jewels are whole, immature soybeans and are a powerhouse of protein, fibre, and antioxidants.

They're usually sold in their soft fuzzy shell (which you don't eat), in cans, or frozen in bags like peas.

Edamame come with a few additional bonuses: they're surprisingly high in copper, which can help your immune system. They also contain good fats, especially omega-3 fatty acids, which can improve brain health and lower the risk of heart disease.

They even have particular plant compounds called isoflavones which, along with the high magnesium and calcium may alleviate premenstrual syndrome and migraines.

A half a cup of edamame gives you nine grams of fibre, about the same as four slices of wholemeal bread or four cups of steamed zucchini.

A note of caution though: you should not eat edamame raw, and because they are a bean, if you eat too many they can cause bloating or gas. Keep in mind also they are a soybean, so if you have a soy allergy you should stay away.

#### How to eat edamame

You can cook edamame in their shell by boiling, microwaving or steaming. Then just squeeze each bean out, as though you're shelling peas, and eat as a snack.

You can also add them to a whole range of other meals for a nutritional boost: pop some in your next casserole, soup, salad or salsa.

