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April 2023

Should I still bother with the **flu shot**?

Flu? What flu? No one gets the flu anymore, right? With the flu numbers down in recent years due to lockdowns and restrictions, it's easy to forget just how serious and even lethal the flu can be.

It's a common question: surely, with all the hand-sanitising, and with more people now working from home when sick, surely I don't still need to worry about the flu?

After all, during COVID lockdowns, very few people got the flu. Plus, we're all a bit sick of talking about vaccinations. Not to mention, we're all a bit sick of worrying so much about getting sick.

Yet getting the flu vaccine this year is more important than ever.

If you are in the Southern Hemisphere, you get a preview of the upcoming flu season by watching what's happening in similar countries in the Northern Hemisphere. And the same is true if you are in the Northern Hemisphere – the Southern Hemisphere flu season gives you an idea of what the next flu season may look like.

Over the Northern Hemisphere winter, the US experienced the worst flu season since the start of the pandemic. According to the Bedford Lab, which studies the spread of viruses, the last season was one of the worst flu seasons of the decade.

People hadn't been exposed to the flu virus in more than two years, and this impacted their natural immunity. The Northern Hemisphere flu season also started earlier than usual, and many people who intended to get the flu vaccine left it too late..

What the flu vaccine does

Similar to the COVID-19 vaccine, the flu vaccine doesn't always prevent the flu, but it does reduce your chances of getting it.

The Australian government health website, Healthdirect, says "Flu vaccination prevents

illness in up to 6 in 10 healthy adults under the age of 65. Because the vaccine is not effective in absolutely every case, some people may still catch the virus after having the flu shot. But the risk of illness is still reduced, and the severity of symptoms if you do catch it."

Can you get covid and flu vaccines together?

It's safe to get your flu vaccination and COVID-19 vaccination or booster on the same day if you want to. Remember, the flu shot won't protect you from COVID-19, and the COVID-19 vaccine won't protect you from the flu.



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28 April is Pay It Forward Day, a global initiative that aims to make a difference by creating a ripple of kindness felt across the world. What can you do? Pay for someone's cup of coffee, help someone out in need, donate blood, or let others know about Pay it Forward. Find more at payitforwardday.com.

Should I always warm up before exercise?



How to warm up

Harvard Health gives this sensible advice:

"A good warm-up should last five to 10 minutes and work all major muscle groups. For best results, start slowly, then pick up the pace. Many warm-up routines focus on cardio and range-of-motion exercises, such as jumping jacks and lunges.

"If you prefer, you can do a simpler warm-up by walking in place while gently swinging your arms, or even dancing to a few songs."

The Australian Heart Research Institute says your warm-up should match your fitness level and the activity you're about to do. For example:

- If warming up for a brisk walk, begin with 5–10 minutes of slow walking.
- If warming up for a run, start with 5–10 minutes of brisk walking.
- For swimming, begin at a slow pace and then slowly pick that up.
- If you're planning on a gym session which includes arm exercises, you may want to start with a slow controlled row or cross trainer warm-up for 5–10 minutes. For older adults or those recovering from surgery or other medical issues, it may even be sufficient to march on the spot and make larger slow controlled circles with your arms for 5–10 minutes.

"Make sure to listen to your body – body awareness is integral to avoiding injuries," advises the Heart Research Institute.

If you've only got a 45-minute chance to exercise today, it's tempting to skip the warm-up. Is that bad?

Yes and no, says the scientific evidence. We need more studies to see if warming up and stretching make a physical difference.

Better Health Channel Victoria says, "Stretching, warming up and cooling down were previously thought to aid injury prevention during exercise. However, there is not a lot of evidence that these activities are effective in reducing exercise injury risk.

"There is some evidence that warming up and cooling down might help to reduce muscle soreness after exercise, even if they don't prevent injuries... Some people also find psychological benefits in stretching and warming up to put them in the right frame of mind for exercise or to help them relax after exercise."

Not everyone agrees that we can safely discard the warm-up. Harvard Health says starting a workout with cold muscles can lead to injury.

"Warming up pumps nutrient-rich, oxygenated blood to your muscles as it speeds up your heart rate and breathing.

"It's important to start each workout with a warm-up and end with a cool-down – and

that goes for true beginners, seasoned pros, and everyone in between."

On balance then, it's clear that a warm-up poses no risk, and if anything, is going to help you.

What about stretching?


Again, there's a surprising lack of studies to show whether stretching before exercise is essential.

A research review from 2008 concluded there was "moderate-to-strong evidence that routine application of static stretching will not reduce overall injury rates on the basis of the work that has been undertaken".

Yet another study over 2008 to 2009 involving 2377 people found that: "Stretching did not produce clinically important or statistically significant reductions in all-injury risk but did reduce the risk of experiencing bothersome soreness." However, this study included stretching before AND after exercise.

If your muscles feel sore or tight, some gentle stretching before exercise will feel good, and certainly won't hurt.

Note: Make sure you don't bounce while stretching. It doesn't help you stretch further, but actually causes your muscles to contract even tighter in an attempt to prevent injury and can cause the muscles to tear.



When is it GORD and when is it not?

Heartburn vs heart attack

Reflux is also called heartburn for good reason – the pain in your chest can feel like it's coming from your heart and you may wonder if you're having a heart attack.

If you have any doubt about whether your symptoms are heartburn or a heart attack, such as any chest pain that lasts for more than a few minutes, or any heart attack warning signs such as shortness of breath or pain in your jaw or arm, you must seek immediate medical attention by calling emergency services. Remember — it's always OK to call emergency services, even if it's a false alarm.

You notice it first as a horrible burning feeling in your throat, neck or chest. Perhaps there's a sour or bitter taste in your mouth too. These are all symptoms of acid reflux, sometimes called indigestion or heartburn.

Acid reflux happens when acid is pushed up from your stomach back into your oesophagus, the tube that runs from your mouth down to your stomach. Most of us will experience reflux or heartburn from time to time – it's common if you lie down too soon after a big meal, and during the later stages of pregnancy. Occasional reflux is nothing to worry about and you can get quick relief with over-the-counter (OTC) antacids from the pharmacy or supermarket.

What's GORD?

If you start getting reflux frequently (more than twice a week) it's time to see your doctor. You might have a condition called gastro-oesophageal reflux disease, or GORD (known as GERD for those that use American spelling), which is when stomach acid repeatedly flows back into the oesophagus. If not treated properly, GORD may eventually lead to more serious health problems, due to damage to the oesophagus from acidic gastric juices.

As well as the usual symptoms of acid reflux, with GORD you may also notice nausea, difficulty or pain when swallowing, bloating or belching, a chronic cough, hoarse voice or bad breath.

DIY treatment

There are some lifestyle changes that may help relieve symptoms of GORD, such as:

- Avoiding or cutting back on foods and drinks that trigger symptoms – fatty foods, alcohol, chocolate, fizzy drinks, citrus juices, raw onion, peppermint, spicy foods and coffee are common culprits.
- Losing weight, if you're overweight
- Quitting smoking
- Avoiding heavy meals in the evening
- Waiting two to three hours after eating to lie down
- Elevating the head of your bed during sleep
- Sleeping on your left side – studies have found this may decrease acid exposure in the oesophagus by up to 71 per cent.
- Avoiding medications that can exacerbate symptoms – ask your pharmacist or doctor for more information on alternatives

Can medications help?

If lifestyle changes don't control your symptoms there are both OTC and prescription medicines that can help. These include simple antacids and other stronger medications.

If you're struggling to control the symptoms, your doctor may prescribe a course of proton pump inhibitors (PPIs) which work more strongly to reduce the acid in your stomach.

GP Dr Justine Tuffley explains that while PPIs are considered safe medications with only minor side effects, that doesn't mean you should continue to take them indefinitely without a doctor's review.

"Many people who start on a PPI for reflux will continue to take them for many years without a reduction in dosage, despite symptoms being well controlled," she says.

"As with all medications, it's important for you to have a regular review with your doctor to determine the need for continued use."

Is it burnout? Or are you just fed up? (and is there a difference?)

“I no longer have enough in the tank.” When former New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, announced her resignation earlier this year, her explanation resonated with many, many people – and not just women.

It turned out that a large percentage knew exactly what she meant when she said she no longer had enough in the tank. Even if they personally weren't trying to lead a country through years of crisis with a toddler in tow, they recognised that feeling in their bodies and their minds.

The Prime Minister's resignation came on the back of the Great Resignation – a wave of people across the world who started walking away from jobs which they felt demanded too much of them. At the same time, we had the “work your wage” movement, which encouraged people to stop doing extra work for no reward. It all came from a shared feeling that people had nothing extra to give.

In a word: burnout.

Why is there so much burnout in 2023?

It makes sense that many of us feel a bit empty.

COVID lockdowns were hard. While many social media feeds sang the praises of having time to bake sourdough and spend meaningful moments with the kids, the reality for most people was very different.

Working parents had to somehow juggle full-time work with hours of at-home schooling. People working from home found their work life bleeding into their home life. People running their own business found everything they'd counted on had changed: customers weren't coming, employees were off sick or isolating.

We didn't know when it was going to end. Or how bad it was going to get. Or if our loved ones would die. The uncertainty filled us with stress.

2022 was supposed to be “back to normal”, but it didn't feel normal. Things had changed and were still changing. And people were still getting COVID.

Now in 2023, we're faced with all of that at high speed, along with huge economic pressures and a rising cost of living. It's a recipe for burnout.

What is burnout?

All these people saying they're burnt out – are they really?

In 2019, the World Health Organization changed its definition of burnout. It had previously been defined simply as ‘a state of vital exhaustion’. Now the definition in the

International Classification of Diseases is: “A syndrome conceptualised as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.”

Burnout specifically relates to work and is not classified as a medical condition.

Under the WHO definition, burnout has three dimensions:

1. feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;
2. increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and
3. reduced professional efficacy.

Burnout rates are higher than ever before

The *State of Workplace Burnout 2023* is an Australian report by non-profit think tank, Infinite Potential.

It found 38 per cent of participants in a 2022 study were experiencing all three dimensions of burnout.

These rates are reflected by similar research in the US and the UK.

Deloitte's *Women at Work 2022: A Global Outlook Report* surveyed 5,000 women



across ten countries. They found burnout for most women has reached alarmingly high levels.

“There was a notable gender gap between women and men on the issue of burnout with female workers showing 32 per cent more burnout than their male counterparts,” said the report.

“Overall, 53 per cent of women surveyed said their stress levels are higher than they were a year ago, and almost half feel burned out.

“Almost half of all participants rate their mental health as poor or very poor.”

Signs you're on the edge of burnout

Dr Mark Setch, an Australian leadership coach, says the signs to watch out for include:

- feeling exhausted all the time, and not being able to bounce back from it.
- feeling cynical about everything, with constantly negative thoughts – even if you're not usually a pessimistic person.
- You might also find yourself wanting to detach from people you previously enjoyed being with.

What to do about it

Burnout is NOT an inevitable part of working. It can be avoided, even when you don't feel you have much control over your work situation.

Dr Setch says the causes and symptoms of burnout often lead to a sense of disempowerment. To dig your way out of that, you need to focus your attention on things you can do.

He advises three steps:

1. Focus on what you can change

“When we focus on what we cannot control, our feelings of being out of control will increase, as will our stress and anxiety. However, if we choose to focus on what we can control, our sense of empowerment will increase, we start to feel empowered again, and we refill our tanks.”

Look at your work situation and find ways you can make it work for you. Can you change the number of days you work from home versus in the workplace? Are there ways to get more support? Can you have any say over the amount of work you take on?

2. Change your self-talk

When you're heading towards burnout, your self-talk is likely to be quite negative. Notice how you talk to yourself, and work to change the conversation. Dr Setch advises that at least once each week, you ask yourself these questions:

- What can I acknowledge myself for today?
- What do I value about myself?
- What amazing attributes do I possess?
- What can I accomplish with these strengths?

3. Take small steps

You might want to transform your life or walk away from everything, but when you're exhausted, big changes can feel impossible and can set you up for failure.

Instead, set some small, achievable steps towards things that make you feel good, such as drinking more water, phoning a friend or family member, or practising deep breathing twice a day.

Protect your feet at work

Blisters, swelling, aching feet, shin splints, heel spurs – ouch! If you work on your feet all day these problems might be familiar to you. Fortunately, there are ways we can all protect our feet at work.

It's common to develop foot problems at work. Some are caused by slipping or falling, or from injuries such as sprains and cuts. Then there are those caused by long periods of standing, and from poorly fitted or inappropriate footwear..

What's the problem with standing?

Our feet are designed for mobility, which is why standing for long periods can be so tiring. Standing for hours, day after day, not only tires you out but can lead to aching and swollen feet, varicose veins, swelling of legs, general muscular fatigue, plantar fasciitis (causing pain on the bottom of your feet) and even damaged joints.

The surface you're standing on makes a difference, too. Hard or uneven surfaces such as concrete can lead to significantly more wear and tear on your feet, ankles and lower legs.

If you can, change your body posture regularly, and sit down if you have the chance. Swapping your posture increases the number of muscles you use, putting less strain on individual muscles and joints used to maintain a standing position.

The right shoes for the job

Shoes play a vital role in supporting your feet, as well as in protecting them from external dangers, says the Australian Podiatry Association. Some occupations need specific footwear for safety reasons, such as steel caps or chemical resistant material, but as a general guideline, the Australian Podiatry Association recommends you look for shoes with the following::

- A well-padded sole – to absorb and reduce pressure on the feet.
- A heel less than 2.5cm high – high heels increase the pressure on the ball of the foot.
- Material that breathes – fungal infections like tinea thrive in warm, moist environments. Leather is preferred for shoe uppers, with synthetic or rubber best for the sole as they are often more durable, shock absorbent and provide better grip.
- Laces, straps or buckles to secure shoes to your feet, so you're not 'clawing' your toes to keep them on.
- Plenty of room. Your toes shouldn't touch the end of your shoes or you can damage your nails and toes. For this reason, it's best to shop for shoes in the afternoon as most feet tend to swell during the day.



Ask an expert about ...

Q Am I at high risk of cancer if I have close relatives who've had the disease?

Cancer is a leading cause of death worldwide, accounting for nearly 10 million deaths in 2020 says the World Health Organization, and it's not uncommon for members of the same family to develop the disease.

Worried you might have a faulty cancer gene? Only about five per cent of certain cancers are due to an inherited faulty gene, says Cancer Council Australia. And while the gene may increase your risk of cancer, it doesn't mean every family member will develop the cancer.

There are certain clues that cancers in your family could be due to a faulty gene. The more blood relatives who have had cancer (in particular breast, ovarian and/or bowel cancer), and the younger they were when they developed it, the more likely it's due to inherited factors. However, it's important to know that some people who inherit a faulty cancer gene never go on to develop cancer.

If you're concerned about your risk you can seek genetic counselling. Your counsellor can give you more information about your

chance of developing cancer based on your family history and suggest ways of reducing your chance of cancer developing, including ways of picking it up early. Genetic testing may be possible too, however it's only offered after you've had the chance to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of testing for yourself and your family.

For more information about family cancer and genetic counselling, contact your doctor.

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**Boiling peanuts** may help cure allergies

For children with severe peanut allergy, eating even the tiniest peanut fragment can be life threatening. Now a breakthrough study by Australian researchers shows promise of a cure.

In a year-long experiment, South Australian researchers found that boiling peanuts for up to 12 hours may be an effective cure for most young people with peanut allergy. The clinical trial at Flinders University and South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute found up to 80 per cent of children with a peanut allergy became desensitised to eating peanuts.

Senior author Professor Tim Chataway said that heat affects the protein structure and allergic properties of peanuts, meaning they are less likely to cause a severe allergic reaction. He explained that the children were given small and increasing doses of the boiled nuts to partially desensitise them, and when they showed no signs of an allergic reaction, received increasing doses of roasted peanuts to increase their tolerance in the next stage of treatment.

Researchers urge people not to adopt this boiled peanut strategy at home, as the new findings need to be replicated in a larger trial.

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**How music helped us during the pandemic**

Music helped people manage their stress during the most severe part of the pandemic, according to an international survey. Researchers from the University of Vienna followed the music listening habits of hundreds of people in Europe in mid 2020, who self-reported how much music they were listening to and how stressed they felt over the period of a week.

The researchers say listening to music was associated with less stress at the time of listening and improved overall mood, and those suffering from chronic stress were able to improve their mood by listening to music. The researchers say we can learn from this and use music, especially 'happy music', to help us through other stressful periods of our lives. .

Even short bursts of activity count

Climbing stairs, playing with the dog, or doing the housework – just a few minutes of vigorous activity every day can dramatically reduce your chance of early death, says a study of 25,000 participants led by researchers from the University of Sydney.

They found that middle aged adults who don't do leisure exercise such as going to the gym but who manage to rack up three very short bouts of vigorous activity have about a 39 per cent lower risk of death than those who do no vigorous activity.

The findings highlight the importance of incidental exercise, says co-author Mark Hamer from University College London.

"It could be [that] you see your bus just about to leave so you have to walk extremely quickly to get the bus. It may be that you live in a block of apartments and you have to carry that shopping up a flight of stairs," he said. "It's those sorts of little bursts that would happen in everyday life."

Adults are currently recommended to be active on most days, and to accumulate 2.5 to 5 hours of moderate to brisk exercise – or 1.25 to 2.5 hours of intense exercise – every week. However, this study shows that even very short bursts of exertion count.

1

THING YOU CAN DO TODAY



Eat your lunch outdoors

We get it – you're up to your ears in deadlines or you have urgent emails to reply to. Grabbing lunch at your desk seems a no-brainer. But taking your sandwich or salad into a local park, even for just 15-20 minutes, delivers some surprising health benefits that may even boost your productivity.

Here's how spending time in sunlight and fresh air can help you feel better physically and mentally:

- 1. You can rewind and recharge.** Being outdoors offers a mental and emotional refuge from the overstimulation of flashing screens and vibrating phones. Research suggests spending time in nature and green spaces can help you feel more relaxed and focused, and boost your energy by nearly 40 per cent, which can only benefit you as you head back to work after your break.
- 2. You'll improve your sleep.** Your body's internal clock generally follows the sun, so you're more awake during the day and sleep better at night. Sunlight affects your circadian rhythm more than electric light, which means that exposing yourself to sunlight can improve your sleep. How? Stepping out into sunlight can help you feel more tired at night, shorten the time it takes to fall asleep, and improve the quality of your rest.
- 3. Your mood may benefit.** Getting outside into sunlight can often help ease the symptoms of depression such as low mood and fatigue. Experts aren't really sure why, but sunlight is believed to increase the body's level of serotonin, a brain chemical strongly linked to mood.

EAT SMARTER

Switch to watercress

Looking for some leafy greens to have with dinner? Skip the lettuce, spinach and rocket, even the kale, and opt instead for watercress. Astonishingly nutrient dense, watercress is one of the best kept nutritional secrets.

Watercress is naturally:

- high in vitamins A, K, B6, folate and C (the vitamin C helps you absorb the iron in watercress)
- high in calcium, potassium, manganese and iron
- rich in dietary nitrates, linked to improved athletic performance
- packed full of antioxidants – watercress has 40 unique flavonoids such as isothiocyanates, which give it its peppery flavour. Studies have linked antioxidants with a lower risk of cancer, diabetes and heart disease.

Better for your brain

Another reason to eat watercress? Your brain health. Psychiatrist Dr Drew Ramsay is a world leader in nutritional psychiatry – the use of food and nutrition to optimise brain health. He and his team devised the Antidepressant Food Score to determine the most nutrient-dense foods to help prevent and promote recovery from depression. Top of their list was watercress, with a score of 127 per cent.

Don't confuse watercress with the much smaller and delicate garden cress or mustard cress. Watercress packs more punch flavour wise and has bigger leaves, and as its name suggests, grows in water rather than soil.

Naturally peppery, watercress is a delicious addition to salads, can be made into soup, into sauces such as pesto, added to curries, and mixed into rice with chopped herbs. For inspiration visit [watercress.co.uk/recipes](https://www.watercress.co.uk/recipes).

