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March 2021

When did you last thank your kidneys?

They clean your blood for you, remove harmful toxins, and help you pee. How much do you really know about your kidneys?

Your kidneys are like your very own 24/7 waste disposal system. A vast system of a million tiny filters called nephrons gets rid of all the things you don't need and sends them out of your body as urine.

You may have heard that you only need one kidney, and if one of your kidneys fails, the other one steps up and does the job.

While this is true, there is a point at which your kidneys can completely fail. When your kidneys can no longer do their job, waste and toxins build up in your body and the results can be fatal.

Around 10 per cent of the population worldwide is affected by chronic kidney disease (CKD), which worsens if not treated. Untreated CKD can progress to life-

threatening kidney failure.

While kidney disease can't be reversed, there is plenty you can do to prevent and treat it – if you're aware of it.

No symptoms, no signs

Very few people with early-stage kidney disease know they have it, because there are no obvious symptoms. According to Kidney Health Australia, people can lose up to 90 per cent of kidney function without noticing any signs.

That's why it's so important to get a regular kidney health check, especially if you have diabetes or high blood pressure.

Other risk factors include a Body Mass Index (BMI) of over 30, heart problems, a

family history of kidney problems, or being aged 60 or over.

What you can do about it

Fortunately, there are simple straightforward things you can do to keep your kidneys healthy and reduce your risk of kidney disease.

And, also fortunately, these are the healthy changes that will help reduce your risk of other conditions such as heart disease. Manage your weight, eat lots of vegetables and fruit and less salt, sugar and fats. Drink more water and less alcohol, and exercise regularly.

For more information, talk to your doctor, or your regional body for kidney health, such as Kidney Health Australia at kidney.org.au or Kidney Research UK at kidneyresearchuk.org.



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March 11 is World Kidney Day. Kidney disease currently affects around 850 million people worldwide. People living with kidney disease want to be able to live well, maintain their role and social functioning, whilst keeping some semblance of normality and a sense of control over their health and wellbeing, so this year's WKD theme is Living Well with Kidney Disease. Visit worldkidneyday.org for more information.



Sugar: to quit or not?

Is a teaspoon of sugar in your coffee OK? Or should we heed the warnings that say we should eliminate it entirely? Here's the truth about sugar.

First it was fat, now sugar is in the firing line. Health experts agree that most of us eat too much sugar. But how much is too much? And what about so-called “natural” sugars?

The sugar we're most familiar with is sucrose, which is the chemical name for white table sugar that's made from sugar cane. But sugar also occurs naturally in foods that contain carbohydrates, such as fruit, vegetables, grains and dairy products.

This is where the confusion creeps in. It's important we make a distinction between sugar that's added to food, called extrinsic sugar, and sugar that is naturally present in foods, called intrinsic sugar.

It's the added sugar that is linked with health problems, not the sugar that's found naturally in healthy foods such as fruit.

What are the health concerns?

Sugar has been blamed for many ills, from hyperactivity and depression to hormonal imbalances and lowered immunity. The science isn't strong for many of these claims, but experts believe that sugar in excess contributes to obesity, heart disease, dental decay, and type 2 diabetes.

Most of the concern about high sugar diets has been focused on weight gain. When we eat too much sugar our livers can turn it into fat, and this fat can be deposited around our waist and internal organs. This is known as visceral fat and is especially harmful because it increases the risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes. Excess body weight has also been linked to an increased risk of some forms of cancer and dementia.

How much sugar is safe to eat?

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends limiting 'free' or added sugars to less than 10 per cent of our total energy intake (or five per cent for added health benefits). This equates to around 12 teaspoons a day for an average adult.

Many people exceed this limit, often without knowing. 'Free sugars' don't just come from us adding sugar to tea, coffee and home-cooked treats; they are also added to many foods by manufacturers, including cakes, biscuits and breakfast cereals. Sugar is also added to less obvious foods, such as salad dressings, curry pastes, pasta sauces, deli meats and some breads. Even tomato and barbecue sauces contain sugar – about a teaspoon for every serving.

Sugar-sweetened drinks are particularly problematic. A can of soft drink contains up to 10 teaspoons of added sugar, while a 600ml (20 oz) bottle can have 14 teaspoons. These drinks are easy to consume and don't fill you up like food does.

How to calculate how much sugar you're eating

Food labels can tell you how much sugar is in a food, but they don't tell the whole story.

There are two parts to a food label: the list of ingredients and the nutrition information panel (NIP). The NIP is also called the nutrition facts label in some countries.



Which sugar is the healthiest?

Coconut sugar, rapadura, maple syrup, agave, rice malt syrup – they are all sugar, all act in a similar way in the body, and all have the same kilojoules. Some may be slightly less processed and contain trace amounts of nutrients but nothing that's going to make a significant difference to your health – only your wallet.

Ways to be wise around sugar

- **Don't drink your sugar.** Sweetened drinks are the easiest way to over-consume sugar, and these include soft drinks, sports drinks, and fruit juice.
- **Read the labels on the foods you eat most often.** Some will have more added sugar than you suspect. And if any form of sugar is listed in the top three ingredients, that suggests it's a high-sugar food.
- **Want to work out how many teaspoons of added sugar a product has?** One teaspoon holds about four grams of sugar.
- **Enjoy baking?** Cut the sugar by at least one third – you're unlikely to notice the difference.
- **Don't avoid whole fruit and dairy because of their intrinsic sugar** – these are foods that are part of a healthy diet and haven't been linked to any adverse health outcomes.

According to the Australian FoodSwitch database, added sugar is found in 87 per cent of discretionary foods (what we call junk food) as well as 52 per cent of packaged foods considered basic or core foods.

The NIP will list total sugars per serving and per 100g. What it won't tell you is whether that sugar is a natural part of the food or added by the manufacturer. This can be very misleading with a food such as natural Greek yoghurt, says Australian

nutritionist Tara Leong. While the NIP will list sugar, this is the lactose – an intrinsic, natural sugar of dairy foods. If you want to know whether a pot of yoghurt has sugar added, you have to read the list of ingredients, advises Leong.

When sugar is added to a food it must be included in the list of ingredients. You'd think sugar would be easy to spot, but there are over 40 different names for added sugar, including barley malt, evaporated cane juice, fruit juice concentrate, dextrose, molasses, and maltose. Going back to the example of yoghurt, an added sweetener may appear as sucrose, fruit juice concentrate or honey.

Before you make a resolution not to let any sugar pass your lips, Leong points out that even the WHO don't recommend zero intake. "Most of us would benefit from reducing our intake, but we don't need to totally quit," she says. And that's good news for the chocolate lovers among us. ✕



“Make new friends”: why it’s so hard, yet so important

If you’ve been to a doctor recently, they may have asked you about your social connections. That’s because they know how important it is for your mental, emotional and physical health.

Research shows that strong social ties can boost your immune system, decrease the risk of heart disease and high blood pressure, and reduce the impact of stress and chronic pain.

The reality is, it’s hard to make friends and strengthen your social connections when you’re an adult.

COVID-19 has made it even more difficult, especially when so many people relied on coming into work for their social life.

It’s even harder if you’re in the one half of people who are natural introverts (see side box).

The secret to friendship

The key to making friends in adulthood is having a shared experience.

You’ll find it much easier to make friends with people who share the same interests as you, or who are doing something alongside you. Remember how much easier it was to make friends at school? You were literally sharing the same experience, be it in class, on the sports field or in the playground.

- **Like to be active?** Join a local fitness group, or an amateur local sports team. Even if you feel you’re unfit or ‘no good at sport’, you’ll be surprised how welcoming and supportive people are of newbies.
- **Prefer inside activities?** Find out about a nearby book club (yes, men have book clubs too!), or even a local drama group. Use an app such as Meetup to find groups who share your hobby. No matter how obscure your interests, there are others out there who share your passion!
- Another great way to feel more connected and purposeful is to **volunteer for a cause that’s important to you**. This could be online volunteering in the evening, or in real life on weekends.
- And of course, **if you have a dog**, make the most of having your very own friend-finding machine. Take your dog to the local dog park or café at a regular time, and you’ll soon find yourself bumping into and getting to know other dog owners. Dogs have the ability to break down barriers and get even the shyest people talking.

Remember, almost everyone else feels the same as you. We all need and crave social connections; that’s what makes us human. Yet we often feel too busy, or too shy, to start the process. If you make it easy for people, they will welcome your friendship. ✕

A quick social guide for introverts

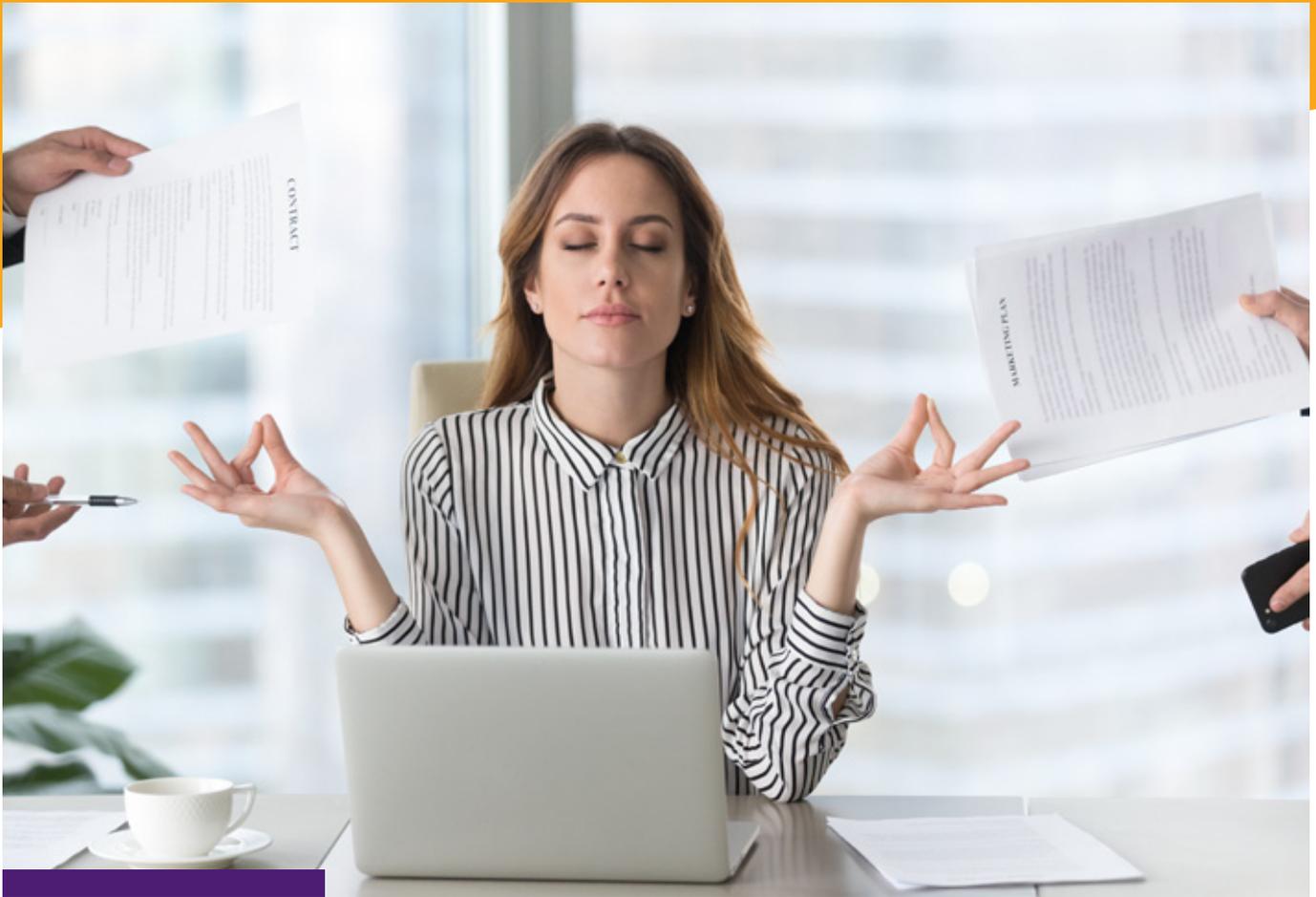
Let’s clear something up: introverts still want and need social connections, they just want and need them in different ways to extroverts.

If you’re an introvert, you probably find you prefer one-on-one conversations rather than group activities. You’re more likely to have a small group of close friends rather than big collection of acquaintances.

The good news is that research indicates it’s the quality not quantity of your friendships that matters in adulthood.

Research in the journal *Psychology and Aging* shows that the important thing is how you feel about your social interactions. You might be happier having a good in-depth chat with one person, and your extrovert colleague might be happier going out with a big group. Neither interaction is right or wrong, better or worse.

By understanding what you need from friendships, you can start to create the kinds of connections that make you feel good.



How **waiting** can make you **happier**

These days we can get many things with the click of a button – instant TV shows, online shopping and more. Are we getting more impatient?

Our ability to endure discomfort may be getting worse, but it doesn't have to be that way. Patience is a skill we can develop – and it might just make us happier.

You notice immediately when people are impatient. Drivers honking at traffic lights, customers loudly complaining about the service in a restaurant, workmates frustrated when you're a little slower with a task.

The patient among us don't get the same attention. But patience – the ability to keep calm in the face of disappointment, distress, or suffering – is worth cultivating, says Sarah Schnitker, Associate Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at Baylor University. Her work has linked patience with life satisfaction, self-esteem, self-

control and even being better able to pursue and accomplish goals.

"When you're patient, you're calmer, so you're able to keep persisting when it's difficult," she says. "You're also able to know when to act and when to conserve energy."

Schnitker's research has also found impatience to be linked with loneliness, a higher incidence of depressive symptoms and negative emotions. Other research links impatience with a higher risk of heart problems and even to shorter telomeres, the part of our DNA that influences how cells age.

Patience is a skill

If you recognise that you lose your temper pretty quickly, can you learn to be more patient? Schnitker believes you can.

Don't rely on sheer will. If you're serious about cultivating patience, says Schnitker, you need to think of it as another skill that takes practice. Any time you feel frustration or adversity, you can practise patience. Whether you're at home with the kids, at work with colleagues, or at the supermarket check-out, taking some deep breaths and

practising patience can make the difference between getting annoyed and staying calm.

Remind yourself you're only uncomfortable. When minutes feel like hours – such as when you're stuck in traffic or being put on hold forever – it can feel uncomfortable because you have little or no control over the situation. Try to remember that you are simply uncomfortable. When you recognise and accept discomfort you'll find it much easier to cope.

Put yourself in the other person's shoes. If the reason for your impatience is another person, flick the switch in your head to empathy. Maybe your co-worker has a lot on his plate, or the person in the supermarket queue is elderly and struggling to find her cash. Reminding yourself that they are only human can help you become more patient in the moment.

And take heart. Even the most zen of us can't be patient all the time and patience can quickly evaporate when we're overtired, sick, in pain, hungry, stressed or even overheated. Be patient with yourself when you're learning patience. ✕

Why you must protect your hearing

Hearing loss can be so gradual that you may not notice that you can't hear as well as you used to. But if you start to have difficulty hearing what people are saying or need to turn up the volume on the TV, you may be affected by noise-induced hearing loss.

The World Health Organization estimates that 466 million people in the world with disabling hearing loss, and the number is rising.

It's more than an inconvenience. Hearing loss can lead to depression and low self-esteem, headaches, tense muscles and high blood pressure, isolation and communication problems. It can also be a safety risk, especially if you miss verbal instructions or warning signals at work.

We live in a noisy world

While one of the major causes of hearing loss is ageing, another common cause is exposure to noise.

This can come from voluntary exposure such as noisy cars or motorbikes, loud concerts or night clubs, or listening to loud music through headphones.

You can also be exposed to too much noise when you're at work. Many people work in an environment where they are exposed to loud noise. If you're in manufacturing and construction, you're more likely to be affected.

According to SafeWork NSW, excessive noise at work can lead to temporary or permanent hearing loss, or tinnitus (ringing in the ears). If you work in a noisy environment the damage to your hearing can be cumulative, even taking a number of years.

The degree of hearing damage will depend on:

- the level/s of noise you're exposed to;
- how often and how long you have been exposed to the noise, e.g. workers who are exposed to hazardous noise on a daily basis at work are at a far greater risk of developing noise-induced hearing loss; and
- your susceptibility to noise.

What you can do

The most effective way to control noise is to eliminate it completely or reduce it. But when this isn't possible, it's important to always wear personal hearing protectors, such as ear-muffs or ear-plugs, and make sure you wear them correctly.

If you do suspect you have some degree of hearing loss, see your doctor, who can organise for you to have a hearing test.

Quick noise level check

It's not always obvious when noise levels are hazardous. A quick test you can do is the 'one metre rule'. If you need to raise your voice to talk to someone about one metre away, you can assume the sound level is likely to be hazardous to hearing.

World Hearing Day is on 3rd March.



Ask an expert about ...



Q What is coeliac disease and how would I know if I had it?

Coeliac Australia replies:

When someone has coeliac disease, their immune system reacts abnormally to gluten, a protein found in wheat, barley, rye and oats. This reaction causes the tiny, finger-like projections lining the small bowel to become inflamed and flattened, reducing the surface area available for nutrient absorption.

The symptoms of coeliac disease can be wide ranging, and while some people might experience severe symptoms, others have no obvious symptoms at all.

Possible signs of coeliac disease include the abdominal or 'gut' symptoms you might expect — diarrhoea, bloating, cramps, excess flatulence, and nausea. In addition you can also experience persistent mouth

ulcers, prolonged fatigue, unexplained weight loss, iron deficiency, unexplained fertility issues and low bone density.

If you suspect you may have coeliac disease, it's important to see your doctor, who can organise for the necessary tests. The only effective treatment is a strict gluten-free diet, but this should only be followed after the diagnosis of coeliac disease has been made.

For more information, including an online self-assessment of your risk, visit Coeliac Australia at coeliac.org.au.

You can view a list of international Coeliac organisations here: www.aoecs.org/international-coeliac-organisations ✕

App of the month

Grateful

Here's an app that helps you literally count your blessings. Recent scientific research has demonstrated that gratitude is an effective tool for

improving mental health, and this clever little app helps harness that positive power. The Grateful app is a simple gratitude journal that uses prompts to help you reflect on your day. The app asks easy questions to help spark memories, like, 'What made you smile today?' It also allows you to add photos to your diary entries, offering visual gratitude triggers. The whole Grateful package makes looking back on past entries a guaranteed mood booster.

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

Why sleep deprivation gives you the munchies

We know getting insufficient sleep is associated with overeating. It seems to disrupt our circadian rhythms and alter hunger and satiety hormones. Now a new study has shown that sleep deprivation also produces higher peaks of a lipid in our bloodstream known as an endocannabinoid.

An endocannabinoid acts on the same parts of the brain as marijuana does. Higher levels of one known as 2-AG make eating more pleasurable, explains neuroscientist and study author Erin Hanlon of the University of Chicago Medical Centre.

"We found that sleep restriction boosts a signal that may increase the hedonic aspect of food intake," says Hanlon. In other words, too little sleep means you'll experience a stronger desire to eat.



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Published by: Healthworks®

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News Bites



A smile is a smile wherever you are

New research has revealed remarkable similarities in how people from different cultures use facial expressions.

Researchers found we share around 70 per cent of the same facial expressions in response to different social and emotional situations.

They used algorithms to analyse six million video clips of interactions worldwide, such as watching fireworks, dancing joyously or consoling a sobbing child, and tracked instances of 16 facial expressions to do with amusement, anger, awe, concentration, surprise and triumph and more.

Co-lead author and psychology professor, Dacher Keltner, says, "Expressing emotion in our faces is universal among humans. The physical display of our emotions may define who we are as a species, enhancing our communication and cooperation skills and ensuring our survival." ✕

Hope in a post-COVID world

Our shared sense of hope has been tested rigorously over the past year, as we have faced the uncertainty of the new future defined by COVID-19, climate change and other global shifts.

Hope theory says we need three elements to have real hope: a vision of a desired future state; the ability to find ways towards that future state, and the belief we can achieve it.

The problem with the last few months has been that instead of dreaming of a desired future state, we've been focusing on avoiding an undesirable state (ie the spread of COVID, the impact of climate change).

According to psychologists Andrew Elliot and Ken Sheldon, when we set goals to avoid undesirable outcomes, it can lead to negative feelings and decreased satisfaction with life. However, if we set goals for a desired outcome, it can lead to increased engagement and greater energy.

So as you look forward to the future, focus on what you do want, and what you can do to make changes, not what you don't want.

1 THING YOU CAN DO TODAY



Take a cold shower

When you next have a shower, try something different. For the last 30 seconds, turn the tap to its coldest setting and immerse your whole body under the cold water.

Sounds a crazy idea? Don't knock it until you've tried it. The benefits of icy cold plunges have been known for centuries, even practised by the Romans in their famous bath houses. Science is now catching up, with evidence that regular cold showers can lift your mood, increase alertness, and improve your immune system.

A recent study from the Netherlands found cold showers could reduce the number of sick days people took.

The 3000 participants in the study were asked to finish their morning showers with a 30-, 60- or 90-second blast of icy cold water, or to shower as they usually did, for 30 consecutive days.

They found the cold shower groups were absent 29 per cent fewer days than people in the control groups.

"This is the first high-level evidence showing that cold showers can benefit your health," says lead researcher Dr Geert Buijze.

Even though many of the participants initially hated the cold shower experience, they stuck it out. By the end of the study two-thirds of the people decided to continue with them, said Dr Buijze.

Want to give it a try? Ease yourself in with 10 seconds, then build up gradually. If you have a medical condition and are not sure you should have icy cold showers, talk to your doctor. People with weaker immune systems and serious heart conditions, for instance, should get their doctor's approval first. ✕

EAT SMARTER

Grab a can of beans

'Clean eating' has become a popular way to eat. We're urged to stick to the fresh produce, and avoid the nasty processed foods.

Fortunately for those of us who don't have a lot of time and money to spend on our diet, it's not that simple. We need to make a distinction between processed and ultra-processed food (sweet and savoury snacks, for example, which tend to be higher in fat, salt and saturated fats). There are many perfectly healthy processed foods to be found on the supermarket shelves that can boost your nutrition and save your food dollars. Canned vegetables and beans are among the best.

Bean benefits

Most of us don't eat enough legumes – foods like lentils, chickpeas, black beans, baked beans and kidney beans. They are high in fibre and protein, loaded with important nutrients such as magnesium and iron, and cost very little.

While it might be cheaper to soak and cook them up yourself, nothing beats the convenience of opening a can to add to your chilli, curry, soup or salad. Rinse them well to get rid of any excess salt.

For a crunchy, spicy snack, drain and thoroughly dry a can of chickpeas, then toss in one tablespoon of olive oil and a teaspoon each of ground cumin, coriander and chilli powder, plus a pinch of salt. Roast on a tray at 200°C for 30-40 minutes, moving around halfway through. Allow to cool and use as a snack or a salad topper.



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