

You Might Want to Skip that Cup of Coffee

Ninety percent of Americans use caffeine daily, some substituting it for sleep. But if you want to focus on a mental assignment or perform a task requiring motor skills, you're better off skipping the coffee. In a recent study – the first head-to-head daytime comparison of sleep versus caffeine – people trained all morning on verbal memory, motor, and perceptual learning tasks. After lunch, one group napped while 2 other groups listened to a book-on-tape. The people in one non-napping group each received 200 mg caffeine (equivalent of a 10-ounce



cup of coffee). The other non-nappers received a placebo (a sugar pill).

Later in the afternoon, the 3 groups were tested to see how well they had learned the morning tasks. The group that napped performed significantly better than the group that had the caffeine. The group that received the placebo also performed better than the caffeine group, leading researchers to conclude that caffeine decreases a person's performance of mental and motor skills.

Behavioural Brain Research. Nov. 2008.

Live the Mediterranean Way

People in the countries around the Mediterranean Sea live longer and suffer less chronic disease, such as heart disease or cancer, than people living in the United States. No, it's not the air. It's the lifestyle, which differs significantly from that of the majority of Americans.

People living in the Mediterranean region are much more physically active than Americans. They also have a stronger sense of family and community, and gather for relaxed meals and afternoon rests. In the Mediterranean culture, life is meant to be enjoyed, not rushed, and food is meant to be savored.

The Mediterranean diet is exemplified by the native cuisines of North Africa, Italy, Greece, Turkey, and other parts of the Middle East. While these countries differ culturally, there are dietary characteristics shared by all. Traditionally, food is locally grown and prepared with little processing. The bulk of the diet consists of whole plant foods: whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables, potatoes, beans, nuts, and seeds. When meat is eaten, fish and poultry are the primary choice. Olive oil is the main source of fat, and honey is the most common sweetener.

American Heart Association. 2009.

Harvard Women's Health Watch. Jan 2009.

Easy Ways to Eat Mediterranean-Style

- ✓ **Pile on the vegetables** – served raw, baked, steamed, or sautéed. If you're pressed for time, buy pre-packaged salads and pre-cut vegetables.
- ✓ **Eat fruit every day** – fresh, frozen, dried, or cooked. Add pear slices, mandarin wedges, dried cranberries, or apple chunks to garden salads. Mix berries into yogurt. Whirl frozen fruit into a smoothie. Slice bananas onto whole-grain breakfast cereals.
- ✓ **Choose whole grains**, for maximum vitamins, minerals, and protein. Replace white breads (including tortillas) with whole-grain versions. Try brown or long-grain rice, quinoa, or amaranth in place of white rice.
- ✓ **Bring on the beans.** Legumes, including lentils and chickpeas (garbanzos), are a great substitute for meat and an excellent source of protein, vitamins, minerals, and fiber. Add them to soups, salads, stews, and casseroles.
- ✓ **Go a little nuts.** Snack on pistachios or pecans, sprinkle slivered almonds over vegetables, and top salads with walnuts. Although nuts contain a healthy fat, they are calorie-dense, so limit yourself to a handful a day.
- ✓ **Use healthy fats**, such as olive, canola, and soy oils, in place of butter and stick margarines. For omega-3s, eat flaxseed meal, walnuts, or salmon.
- ✓ **Drink to your health.** Drinking a small amount of red wine with meals is part of the Mediterranean diet. Studies have shown that antioxidants in red grape juice are also beneficial to healthy circulation for those preferring non-alcoholic beverages.
- ✓ **Spice up your meals.** In place of salt, season your foods with garlic, onion, thyme, oregano, basil, cayenne, curry, and other herbs.
- ✓ **Eat slowly.** Diet matters, but the leisurely pace of life also matters. Eating on the run and under stress can cause heartburn, poor absorption of nutrients, and obesity.



Does “Core Strength” Matter?

Core muscles – the muscles in the abdomen, lower back, and pelvis – stabilize the spine and hips. You use these muscles when you reach for an item on a high shelf, pick up a child, or stoop down to tie your shoes. When these muscles are weak, you are at increased risk for back problems, poor balance, and physical fatigue.

Core strength training targets both the dominant outer muscles (e.g., abdominals) and the deeper muscle layers (e.g. hip flexors). Exercise guidelines include strength training 2 or 3 days each week. This is an excellent time to fit in a few exercises to work your core muscles, such as plank exercises, push-ups, and crunches.



Plank exercises strengthen core muscles.

See exercises to strengthen your core:

www.mayoclinic.com/health/core-strength/SM00046

and

www.athleticadvisor.com/images/Acrobat/AtAd%2010-09%20core%20strength.pdf

These tips will help you get the most out of your core strength workout:

- Exercise all your core muscles – not just one or two in isolation.
- Work muscles deliberately and slowly. It’s about control, not just the number of repetitions.
- Remember to breathe.
- An exercise ball can help you increase core strength, stability, endurance, balance, and flexibility.

- Take a class, such as Pilates or yoga, that focuses on core strength.
- Make sure you are using the proper technique for each exercise. If possible, work with a personal trainer to get started on a good routine.

American College of Sports Medicine. 2009.

Happiness Is Contagious

Happiness is linked to better work performance, greater job satisfaction, good family relationships, a more satisfying social life, and good health. People who report positive emotions experience lower rates of chronic illness and pain.

Want to be happier? Spend time with happy people. A 20-year study found that happy people increase the happiness of those around them – including a spouse, a friend, or even a next-door neighbor.

Previous studies have shown that laughter and smiles are catching. This study found that one person’s emotion can influence another’s emotion – even in people whom they’ve never met. One person’s happiness triggers a chain reaction that benefits not only their friends, but their friends’ friends, and their friends’ friends’ friends – for up to a year!

“Your emotional state depends on your own choices and actions and experience,” says Nicholas Christakis, a professor at Harvard University. “But it also depends on the choices and actions and experience of people you don’t even know.”

Happiness, it appears, spreads through social networks like an emotional infection. The researchers estimate that a happy next-door neighbor increases the chances you’ll be happy by 34%. A happy friend who lives within a mile of you increases your happiness by 25%. On average, you are 9% more likely to be happy when you have at least one happy friend. Having an unhappy friend reduces your chance of personal happiness by 7%.

Researchers defined happiness as agreeing with: “I felt hopeful about the future,” “I was happy,” “I enjoyed life,” and “I felt that I was just as good as other people.” However, forcing yourself to appear happy at work without a genuine state-of-mind change seems to cause health problems ranging from depression to cardiovascular

conditions. To boost your happiness:

- Surround yourself with people you love
- Spend time doing things you enjoy
- Pursue personal growth opportunities
- Don’t compare yourself to others
- Focus on the positive
- Be grateful for what you have
- Forgive

British Medical Journal. Dec. 4, 2008.

The American Journal of Health Promotion. Sep/Oct 2008.



ASK THE DOCTOR *Wellness*

Q: What’s an easy way to tell a healthy fat from a bad fat?

A: Go to wellsourc.info/wn/ask-healthyfat.pdf to read the answer from Don Hall, DrPH, CHES.

To ask your question, email: well@wellsourc.com, subject line: Ask the Wellness Doctor. Emails with any other subject line will be directed to the spam folder.

Health Challenge™: “Eat Breakfast Daily” available at: wellsourc.info/wn/hc-breakfast.pdf.

Your body and mind need the nutrients and energy a healthy breakfast provides. An example of a well-rounded breakfast is fruit, whole-grain cereal with low- or nonfat milk or calcium-enriched soymilk, and a handful of almonds.