

Four Habits, Backed by Science: A Plain-Language Guide to Taking Care of Your Health at Home

Key Suggestions

- Healthy adults can protect their own health at home by hitting four research-backed targets: move at least 150 minutes a week plus strength-train twice, eat mostly whole foods with plenty of fruits and vegetables, sleep 7 or more hours a night, and manage stress with simple daily habits like deep breathing and staying socially connected.
- The biggest 2023–2026 updates are a brand-new *Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2025–2030* (released January 7, 2026) that says to "eat real food," a March 2026 ACSM strength-training update finding that any strength training beats none, and the May 2023 Surgeon General's advisory warning that loneliness can be as deadly as smoking.
- None of these require a doctor, a gym membership, or money — but you should see a professional if symptoms like low mood or sleep trouble last two weeks or more.

Key Findings

- **Exercise:** Adults need at least 150 minutes of moderate activity (or 75 minutes of vigorous) per week, plus muscle-strengthening on 2 or more days. Sitting less matters on its own.
- **Nutrition:** Fill your plate with vegetables, fruits, and whole grains; keep added sugar and sodium low; drink water. Most Americans eat far too much salt and not enough produce.
- **Sleep:** 7 or more hours a night is a health necessity, not a luxury. Consistent timing and a cool, dark, screen-free bedroom help.
- **Mental health:** Brief daily practices — breathing, mindfulness, exercise, gratitude, and connecting with others — have real evidence behind them. Know the signs that mean it's time to call a professional.

Details

1. Exercise and Physical Activity

The U.S. and global standards line up closely. The CDC and the *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans* (2nd edition) say adults need **at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity each week** — about 30 minutes a day, 5 days a week — or **75 minutes of vigorous activity**, or an equivalent mix. The World Health Organization's 2020 guidelines say the same and add an upper "sweet spot" of **150–300 minutes** of moderate activity for even more benefit. Moderate means you can talk but not sing (like brisk walking); vigorous means you can only say a few words at a time (like jogging).

On top of aerobic activity, adults should do **muscle-strengthening activities on 2 or more days a week** that work all the major muscle groups (legs, hips, back, abdomen, chest, shoulders, arms). In a major March 16, 2026 update — its first in 17 years — the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) reviewed 137 systematic reviews covering more than 30,000 people and concluded that the simplest rule wins: train each major muscle group at least twice a week, and **bodyweight exercises, resistance bands, or free weights all work**. You

don't need a gym, you don't need to lift to total exhaustion (stopping 2–3 reps short is just as effective), and any strength training beats none. This matters because most adults skip it: according to CDC National Health Interview Survey data, only **31.0% of U.S. adults met the muscle-strengthening guideline** — meaning roughly 69% do none — and just 24.2% met both the aerobic and muscle-strengthening targets.

A newer message is to **sit less**. The WHO's 2020 guidelines, for the first time, formally recommend limiting sedentary (sitting) time and replacing it with physical activity of any intensity — even light activity like standing or strolling counts.

2. Nutrition and Diet

The newest U.S. guidance is the **Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2025–2030, released January 7, 2026** by USDA and HHS (Secretaries Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and Brooke Rollins) with the tagline "eat real food." For a 2,000-calorie day, it recommends **3 servings of vegetables and 2 servings of fruit per day, 2–4 servings of whole grains, and 3 servings of dairy**, plus a protein target of **1.2–1.6 grams per kilogram of body weight per day**. It keeps the long-standing limits of **less than 2,300 mg of sodium per day** (for everyone ages 14 and above) and **saturated fat under 10% of daily calories**, and states that **one meal should contain no more than 10 grams of added sugars**.

This edition is notably different from the 2020–2025 version: it explicitly endorses **full-fat dairy** ("include full-fat dairy with no added sugars"), prioritizes **animal protein** ("a variety of protein foods from animal sources, including eggs, poultry, seafood, and red meat"), brings back a **food-pyramid graphic** (which had been replaced by MyPlate since 2011), and replaces the old "drink in moderation" advice with a qualitative **"consume less alcohol for better overall health"** — with no specific number of drinks. Some nutrition experts, including faculty at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health who served on the advisory committee, have criticized the new emphasis on animal protein and full-fat dairy as being at odds with evidence favoring plant proteins, and have questioned the transparency of how this edition was finalized.

The World Health Organization's recommendations are similar and widely used: eat **at least 400 grams (about 5 portions) of fruits and vegetables a day**, keep **free sugars under 10% of calories (ideally under 5%)**, limit **total fat to under 30% of calories** with saturated fat under 10% and trans fats under 1%, and hold **salt under 5 grams (about 2,000 mg of sodium) a day**. Most Americans fall short: federal officials cited a typical intake of about **3,400 mg of sodium a day** — roughly 50% over the limit — and CDC/NHANES analysis found that **89% of adults exceed the sodium recommendation**. About 71% of dietary sodium comes from packaged and restaurant foods, not the salt shaker, and most Americans also don't eat enough vegetables.

For **hydration**, the National Academies (Institute of Medicine, 2004 Dietary Reference Intakes) set adequate total water intake (from drinks and food) at about **3.7 liters / 125 ounces (15.5 cups) a day for men and 2.7 liters / 91 ounces (11.5 cups) for women**, with roughly 20% coming from food. For most healthy people, thirst is a reliable guide, and pale-yellow urine is a sign you're well hydrated.

3. Sleep

The recommendation is consistent and strong: the **American Academy of Sleep Medicine and Sleep Research Society recommend 7 or more hours of sleep per night** for adults to promote optimal health (the National Sleep Foundation frames the ideal range as 7–9 hours). The CDC echoes "7 or more hours." Regularly sleeping fewer than 7 hours is linked to higher risk of obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, anxiety, depression, and impaired thinking and reaction times. Sleep is widely under-met: CDC National Health Interview Survey data show about **30.5% of adults sleep less than seven hours on average**, and only about half wake up feeling well-rested.

Good **sleep hygiene** habits, per the CDC, include: going to bed and waking up at the same time every day (even weekends); keeping the bedroom quiet, dark, relaxing, and cool; turning off electronic devices at least 30 minutes before bed; and avoiding large meals, alcohol, and afternoon or evening caffeine. Daytime exercise — even a 10-minute walk — also improves sleep.

4. Mental Health and Stress

Federal and professional sources agree on a set of free, do-it-yourself practices. The CDC's stress-management advice includes: **take breaks from news and social media**, make time to unwind with deep breaths, stretching, or meditation, keep a journal, spend time outdoors, **practice gratitude daily**, and **connect with people you trust**. The American Psychological Association recommends trying to eliminate or reduce stressors, relaxing your muscles, protecting your sleep, exercising, eating well, and reframing unhelpful thoughts.

Mindfulness and breathing have solid evidence. A landmark systematic review and meta-analysis (Goyal et al., *JAMA Internal Medicine* 2014; 47 trials, 3,515 participants) found that mindfulness meditation programs had moderate evidence of improved anxiety (effect size 0.38 at 8 weeks) and depression (0.30 at 8 weeks), with benefits persisting at 3–6 months; more recent reviews report similar reductions in stress and anxiety. Simple breathing techniques (such as slow belly breathing or 4-7-8 breathing) can calm the body's stress response in just a few minutes and are free and accessible to nearly everyone.

Social connection got major national attention on May 2, 2023, when U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy issued the advisory *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*. It reported that lacking social connection can increase the risk of premature death as much as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, and that poor social relationships are associated with a **29% higher risk of heart disease and a 32% higher risk of stroke** (and roughly 50% higher dementia risk in older adults).

When to get professional help: The National Institute of Mental Health advises seeking help if you have severe or distressing symptoms — like trouble sleeping, loss of interest, hopelessness, or difficulty functioning — that **last 2 weeks or more**. A primary care provider is a good starting point and can refer you to a psychologist, psychiatrist, or clinical social worker. In crisis, anyone in the U.S. can call or text the **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline**, which is free, confidential, and available 24/7.

Recommendations

1. **Start with movement.** If you do nothing else, aim for a 30-minute brisk walk five days a week and two short strength sessions (bodyweight squats, push-ups, or resistance

bands at home). Threshold to change your plan: if 150 minutes feels easy, push toward 300 minutes a week for added benefit.

2. **Make one diet swap at a time.** Add a serving of vegetables to two meals a day and replace sugary drinks with water. If you eat a lot of packaged or restaurant food (the source of about 71% of dietary sodium), cutting back there is your highest-impact move.
3. **Protect 7+ hours of sleep** by setting a fixed wake time and a screen cutoff 30 minutes before bed. If you still feel tired after 7–8 hours for several weeks, or snore heavily, talk to a doctor.
4. **Build a 5-minute daily stress habit** — breathing, gratitude journaling, or a walk outside — and schedule real social contact each week.
5. **Set a two-week tripwire.** If low mood, anxiety, or sleep problems persist for two weeks or more, contact a primary care provider or a mental health professional. Save 988 in your phone.

Caveats

- These recommendations are for **generally healthy adults**. Anyone with a chronic condition (heart disease, diabetes, arthritis), who is pregnant, or who has been inactive should check with a doctor before starting vigorous exercise.
- The 2025–2030 Dietary Guidelines are new and **contested**: independent experts have flagged the emphasis on full-fat dairy and animal protein as inconsistent with much of the nutrition evidence and have questioned the transparency of how this edition was written. Long-standing groups like the American Heart Association still recommend an optimal sodium goal of 1,500 mg/day and emphasize plant-forward eating. Where the new guidelines and WHO/AHA differ, the differences are noted above so you can decide with your own clinician.
- **Individual needs vary.** Sleep, calorie, water, and protein needs depend on age, sex, body size, activity level, and climate — the numbers here are population baselines, not personal prescriptions.
- Self-care practices support mental health but are **not a substitute for professional treatment** of diagnosed conditions.