

Expert tips for a healthier lifestyle

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February is national Healthy Lifestyles Awareness Month, with Healthy Lifestyles Awareness Day being celebrated on 22 February. The National Department of Health encourages all South Africans to live healthier lifestyles, through promoting healthy eating, regular physical activity, avoiding tobacco products, and drinking alcohol in moderation, if at all. But can improving our lifestyles have much of an impact on our health? According to the World Health Organization, the good news is that leading a healthy lifestyle can help to prevent 80% of premature deaths from heart disease and strokes and 60% of premature deaths due to cancer *.



A panel of health and wellness professionals give us their top tips on healthy eating, aiming to achieve balance, improving sleep and learning to relax, for making our lifestyles healthier:

How to get healthy eating right

To transform poor eating habits into healthy ones, Raesa Seedat, Registered Dietitian and ADSA spokesperson, says:

- 1. Start your day well: Eat breakfast!** - Breakfast is linked to improved nutrient intakes, as well as improved concentration and alertness. Studies show that skipping breakfast is associated with increased stress, anxiety, depression, fatigue and tiredness.
- 2. Avoid temptation** - The sight and smell of food is often enough to tempt us. Avoid keeping tempting but unhealthy foods around the house and avoid the treat aisles in the supermarket.
- 3. Shop smart** – To avoid impulsive buying, plan your shopping with a budget and a list of what you need to buy and stick to it! If you don't buy unhealthy foods, you won't eat them.
- 4. Motivate yourself** - Research shows that habits that don't serve us can be overcome with good intentions. For example, having a conscious intention to eat healthier snacks helps to override a habit of making poor food choices.
- 5. Do not starve yourself** - One of the most common triggers for unhealthy snacking is hunger. Eat smaller, more

frequent meals. Do not get to the point where you are so hungry you could wolf down anything you get your hands on. Carry healthy snacks such as fruit, plain unsalted nuts or a tub of low fat yoghurt to work or school to snack on.

What small changes can we make to our daily eating that will help us move towards a healthier lifestyle? Kezia Kent, Registered Dietitian and ADSA spokesperson says:

- 1. Hydrate: Increase your daily water intake** - being well-hydrated is important for overall health. Herbs such as mint, chopped fruit and lemon slices can all be used to make water more interesting. Remember that store-bought flavoured waters often have added sugar and should therefore be avoided.
- 2. Eat regularly through the day by trying to eat every two-three hours** – Eating healthy snacks between main meals helps to maintain a healthy metabolism and can help to control portions at main meals. Your first meal or snack of the day should be within 90 minutes after waking up. Never skip meals.
- 3. Only eat until you feel satisfied** - If you begin to feel uncomfortable or too full, then you've already eaten too much. If you still feel hungry after a meal, have some fresh vegetables with fat-free salad dressing.
- 4. Avoid eating while doing something else** - eating while driving, watching TV, being on an electronic device or working prevents most people from actually realising what and how much they are putting into their bodies. Focusing on your food enables you to be aware of what your body wants and needs. Many also find they enjoy their food more and are more satisfied with what they have eaten.
- 5. Be active every day** – it can be a considerable boost to your overall health to prioritise daily physical activity. Even a short walk is better than nothing.

How to practice balance in your life

Raydene Naidoo, Psychologist from the South African College of Applied Psychology (SACAP) recommends:

- Focus on yourself from time to time and pamper yourself. You can't expect others to nurture you if you can't nurture yourself.
- Learn to say no without feeling guilty. Having reasonable boundaries is healthy, and it helps you to regulate how much you take on.
- Take time to nurture your relationships, especially with your loved ones.
- You are only human and you're not always going to get the balance right. Rome was not built in a day. Allow yourself a cheat day but within moderation.
- Get a good night's rest as often as you can, naps count too.
- Set SMART goals for yourself. Specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time specific.

How to improve our sleep

Sleep is central to all body functions. By the time you are 30 years old, you have already slept for about 10 years. The basis of good sleep is to maintain good sleep hygiene. Dr Kevin Rosman from the Morningside Sleep Centre has this advice:

The sleep environment - the bed must be comfortable enough, the room quiet enough, dark enough, cool enough, and secure enough. Complete absence of sound would be the best, but is generally not possible. Second-best is a continuous quiet hum. Television is generally a bad idea. Sometimes double lining of the curtains may be necessary to keep the room dark enough. We sleep better at night when the environment is cool. If you have an air conditioner, for example, set the temperature to that which is comfortable for the "cooler" partner, and let the other simply add a blanket.

Winding down the brain - before going to sleep, one needs to give the brain a chance to wind down. Allocate between 30 and 60 minutes for this. Going to bed directly after working or after exercise can cause difficulty getting to sleep. Caffeine and alcohol can affect sleep, and sufficient time should be allowed after the consumption of these before getting into bed.

Regular sleep habits - because the body works on a number of different cycles, we sleep best at our usual bedtime. Getting up at the same time every day is also helpful.

How to relax more

An important part of a healthy lifestyle is stress reduction and stress management. Lexi Ryman, Co-Founder of Wild Thing Yoga & Body Conditioning, says "Taking time to switch off and quiet your mind is so important for so many reasons; for example, having your nose to the grindstone all the time limits our perspective, meaning we might not achieve our full potential."

The practice of mindfulness underpins activities such as yoga and meditation. "Yoga is a form of moving meditation where your movement is guided by your own breath," Lexi says "It is a complete and total mind-body-spirit overhaul and the benefits of practicing yoga range from the physical benefits of increased flexibility and strength right through to mental and emotional wellbeing."

To practice mindfulness, start small. "Set your alarm clock for 10 minutes earlier in the mornings. Find somewhere quiet, with a comfortable seat. Close your eyes, and focus on your breath - allowing it to move freely in and out of your nose. Start with 5 minutes and see how you go from there. If you really aren't a morning person, try it in the evenings. Tonight, instead of your usual routine of flicking on the TV when you get home, take a few moments, find a quiet space, no technology on or around you and just breathe. Find a way of moving your body that feels good in your body. Try out different exercise or yoga classes, until you find an environment that's comfortable to you."

Healthy Lifestyle Awareness Day is on 22 February.

To find a registered dietitian in your area who can assist you with a healthy lifestyle plan, visit www.adsa.org.za.

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Association for Dietetics in South Africa



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