

21 shortcuts of healthy people

Don't think healthy always means hard work. Helen Foster has the easiest tips to help you on the way to super wellbeing

If you think healthy folk spend hours every day exercising, chopping endless vegetables and scouring the stores for exotic superfoods, think again. Once you know the secret health shortcuts out there that help boost your health, fitness and nutrient levels while saving time or effort, staying well is easy. Here are 21 secrets for you to try...

1 Wash your hands

"The ultimate shortcut to good health is avoiding getting sick in the first place, and hand washing is the number one way to do that," says health advisor Dr Sarah Burnett. Five times a day is the minimum washes you should aim for, and studies show this simple act cuts sickness by 50 per cent.

2 Protect eyes from winter as well as summer sun

Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is the biggest cause of blindness in the UK. Eating dark-green leafy veg or taking lutein supplements lower the risk, but as AMD is linked to UV exposure, wearing sunglasses is the best option. "If the UV index is over moderate [check local news or www.metoffice.gov.uk], wear sunglasses, especially if you have blue eyes, which are high risk," says Dr Susan Blakeney from the College of Optometrists.



3 Eat a salad a day

Five portions of fruit and veg might be the gold standard, but when you're on the go it's not always so easy to achieve. Studies at Louisiana State University in the US have found consuming even just one salad a day adds two years to your life. "To get a good mix of nutrients you should vary your salad ingredients daily," says nutritional therapist Charlotte Watts. "But regularly include beetroot, watercress, avocado, spinach and onions, which are all packed with antioxidants."

4 Take some deep breaths

While factors like cutting salt and reducing stress can lower blood pressure, you can do both with deep breathing. Spending just seven minutes a day breathing steadily (so each breath takes ten seconds) lowers blood pressure, according to researchers at Rush University Medical Centre in Chicago. One reason is that it's super calming, but some experts say added oxygen in the blood makes you excrete higher levels of sodium.

5 Have one to two tablespoons of linseed

Not only will this provide you with roughly 7g of the 18g of fibre you need each day, linseed has also been linked to fighting hot flushes, spotting during the perimenopause and reducing breast cancer risk. Sprinkle it over cereals and salads.

6 Wash painkillers down with coffee

In trials at the Diamond Headache Clinic in Chicago, this was found to cut pain faster and for twice as long as painkillers alone. "Headaches

occur when blood vessels expand, and we think this stops pain by shrinking those blood vessels," explains Dr Fred Freitag, who worked on the trial.



7 Use a stability ball - correctly

It's an odd fact that the stronger your abdominal muscles are, the stronger your bones are. However, you'll get a better toning effect if you do your sit-ups using a stability ball, positioned under the middle of your back, rather than on the floor - your muscles work up to 38 per cent harder. Also called Swiss Balls, they're available from most sports shops or you can pick one up at www.dietandfitnessresources.co.uk for £12.50.

8 Pour water into a small, wide glass

Drinking plenty of water has been linked to a lowered risk of heart attack and bladder cancer but many of us find it hard to down the recommended two litres a day. However, according to Dr Brian Wansink, author of *Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think* (Bantam, £5.69), because we think they look less full, we actually pour 76 per cent more liquid into a short, wide glass than a tall, thin one, immediately boosting intake.

12 Lift just one set of weights

Weight training is vital for women as it builds bone and replaces the muscle mass we naturally lose as we age. But you gain as much strength if you do one set of eight to 12 lifts as you would doing two or more sets. The key is to lift the right weight, though. How to tell? "Pick a weight you can lift eight to 12 times (with good form) but where you really struggle on the last rep," advise fitness expert Jane Wake. (www.body-a-wake.com)

13 Eat something healthy at 3pm

If we swapped a fatty or sugary snack when we hit that mid-afternoon slump for something healthy, 7,000 less of us in the UK would die of heart attack or stroke each year, say experts from Imperial College London and University of Liverpool. "The ideal snack is a handful of dried fruit, which satisfies your sugar cravings, and seeds or nuts, which provide protein that balances blood sugar and energy," says nutritionist Naomi Beinart. (www.beinart-nutrition.co.uk)

14 Be kind to your joints

Invest in those little gel pads that you can put in your heels and, according to osteopath Laurence Kirk from Oxford Brookes University, you'll reduce your risk of back pain, knee ache – and possibly even your risk of problems like osteoarthritis.

"The pads act as a shock absorber, minimising the impact on the joints that occurs when you wear heels," says Laurence. Try Scholl Party Feet Invisible Gel Heel Cushions, £4.49, from Boots.



15 Spice up your cooking

Herbs are packed with antioxidants – a quarter of an ounce of rosemary contains the same amount as 28oz of broccoli. So every half a teaspoon of things like rosemary, oregano, sage or mint you add to a dish doubles your normal antioxidant intake, says Rune Blumhoff of Norway's University of Oslo. Chillies are also power packed – ounce for ounce, they contain over 300 times more vitamin C than oranges.

18 Eat rye toast for breakfast

The average person eats 75g of sugar a day – 53 per cent more than we actually need. That's not good as high sugar levels decrease immunity, boost levels of aging free radicals in the body and may increase diabetes risk. Cutting down is therefore important, but what's the easier way to do it? Most of us eat sugar to rev up falling blood sugar levels but new research from Lund University in Sweden found that starting your day with a rye-based breakfast kept blood sugar stable for ten hours, preventing your need for that 3pm sugar fix.

16 Eat an apple a day

Apples and pears have just been named as the most important fruits for reducing risk of death from heart disease among post-menopausal women – probably because they're packed with antioxidants and cholesterol-lowering fibre. Compounds in apples are also linked to lowered risk of Alzheimer's disease and improved lung health.



17 Don't put fruit in the fridge

The antioxidant lycopene is linked to a lower risk of lung cancer and age-related macular degeneration. You'll find it in red fruits such as tomatoes, watermelon and pink grapefruit, but to maximise your intake, keep these foods stored at room temperature. Enzymes that produce lycopene in fruit keep working if fruit is kept warm, increasing its levels by 20 per cent, according to US Department of Agriculture researcher Penelope Perkins-Weazie. Levels of beta carotene – another potent antioxidant – also rise twofold.

19 Add oil to your veggies

You'll absorb up to four times more of nutrients called carotenoids from them if you do, as these vital antioxidants need to bind to fat to be absorbed, says Dr Steven Schwartz from Ohio State University. Just one teaspoon of oil will get results and you can cook with the oil or add it as part of a dressing. All oils get the result but choose one that's best for health, such as olive, avocado, sesame, walnut or flaxseed.

20 Don't make your bed

The average bed contains over 1.5 million dust mites – tiny bugs that are related to symptoms like sneezing, wheezing and fatigue. However, researchers at Kingston University have discovered that while mites thrive in hot, moist areas (like a made bed) they die if beds are left to air with the duvet left pulled back. If you can't bear the untidy look of crumpled sheets, at least pop on an anti-allergy mattress protector (Boots does one for a double bed at £44), which cuts mite levels by around 60 per cent. Washing sheets at 60 C also kills 100 per cent of dust mites (a 40 C wash cuts them by only 6.5 per cent), but make sure you read your linen labels first.

21 Forget the floss

"Mouthwash can remove more plaque, as it travels to parts of the mouth that may be missed by brushing and flossing," says top dentist Andrea Ubhi. Seaweed pills are pretty effective too. "Seaweed seems to interfere with the way bacteria talk to each other, which stops them establishing colonies," says pharmacist Mike Price. Try algae-based Plaque Off, £15.99 (call 0845-2260660). **w&h**