

health

# GOOD Health Habits MADE BETTER

*You walk, you nap, you brush your teeth. Now get more out of all these smart everyday choices with these ingenious tweaks*

■ BY SHERYL KRAFT ■ PHOTOGRAPHS BY THAYER GOWDY

THERE'S MORE PROOF that bigger isn't always better: Several recent studies show that sometimes the smallest changes can have a huge pay-off when it comes to improving your health. Whether it's timing, technique or the type of food you eat, here's how to fine-tune your behaviour to get the best results.

**BRIGHT IDEA**

## Walk to boost brainpower

**BOOST IT!**

### Walk backward

People performed difficult tasks faster after walking backward than they did after walking forward or even sideways in a recent study. Scientists believe that the 'avoidance' mode of walking backward, similar to how you might retreat from a dangerous situation, helps focus your thinking.

**TIP** Practise backward walking on a treadmill, where the rails can be used for support, advises Janet S. Dufek, PhD,



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an associate professor at the University of Nevada Las Vegas. Try walking forward for 5 minutes and backward for 2 minutes, then repeat the pattern throughout your workout. Caution: walking in reverse is much harder, so slow your pace by at least 50%.

## BRIGHT IDEA

**Nap to fight fatigue**

## BOOST IT!

**Take a “caffeine nap”**

Having a cup of coffee before closing your eyes is the most effective way to combat daytime drowsiness, according to research. That may sound counter-intuitive, but it takes 20 minutes for the caffeine to get into your bloodstream. So if you take the recommended 20-minute nap (any longer and you can wake up groggy), caffeine's stimulating effects will be kicking in when your nap is ending. “You'll wake up feeling alert from the coffee and refreshed from the nap,” says Jim Maas, PhD, a professor of psychology at Cornell University, New York.

**TIP** To help yourself fall asleep, try to simulate bedtime, even if that just means putting your head down on the desk or reclining in your chair at work. If a nap isn't possible, closing your eyes and meditating is better than nothing to refresh your mind and body, says Maas.

## BRIGHT IDEA

**Eat energising carbohydrates before a workout**

## BOOST IT!

**Switch to low-glycaemic carbs**  
High-fibre cereals and breads and most veggies metabolise slowly, helping you

burn more fat—as much as 55%—while you work out, find British researchers. So go for wholegrains and produce (an apple or a banana is good) and avoid refined foods and sweetened drinks, which spike blood sugar and produce higher concentrations of circulating glucose and insulin, in turn inhibiting fat burning. Low GI foods also produce hormones that suppress hunger. Just make sure you have them an hour before your workout.

**TIP** After exercise, opt for foods loaded with protein which help to rebuild muscles and pair them with a part of carb-rich foods. “This is because carbs are needed to release insulin that helps the cells to absorb amino acids (necessary for muscle rebuilding),” explains Neesha Maria Bukht, *Prevention* columnist and ISSA certified fitness trainer with



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Talwalkars Gym, Mumbai. A few good options: a paneer wrap, a chicken sandwich, an egg white omelette, milk, etc.

## BRIGHT IDEA

**Brush your teeth after each meal to remove plaque**

## BOOST IT!

**Wait an hour**

Acids in foods and drinks can soften tooth enamel, making teeth more sensitive and vulnerable to damage from brushing. Since you don't always know if a meal contains highly acidic foods, stick with the 1-hour rule anyway. Bonus: waiting also gives your saliva a chance to wash away acids and for the enamel to reharden.

**TIP** Rinse thoroughly with water or unsweetened tea to dilute acid while you wait the hour to brush. Both green and black tea kill germs that cause tooth decay and bad breath, and they're natural sources of protective fluoride. "Running your tongue over your teeth and brushing them with your finger will also help remove plaque," adds Dr Nandita Grover, consultant endodontist and implantologist, Max Healthcare, New Delhi.

## BRIGHT IDEA

**Have a colonoscopy to detect precancerous polyps**

## BOOST IT!

**Get it in the AM**

The rate of polyp detection is significantly higher when tests are done earlier in the day, possibly because physicians aren't fatigued. The quality of bowel preparation is also better during morning screenings.

**TIP** The US Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) recommends regular

colonoscopy beginning at age 50. In the absence of Indian guidelines, it may not be a bad idea to go for it, especially if you have a family history of colon cancer.

"Be aware though that it is not an easy test—it causes discomfort and is expensive," says Dr Ajay Kumar, senior consultant, gastroenterology and hepatology, Indraprastha Apollo Hospital, New Delhi. Your doc will possibly prescribe electrolyte solution or polyethylene glycol the night before to eliminate the fecal matter to get a clear view of the colon, he adds. You can also request a 'split-dose' regimen. Research shows that taking a dose both the night before and a few hours prior to the procedure results in a cleaner colon too—so polyps are more likely to be detected.

## BRIGHT IDEA

**Drink tea to fight disease**

## BOOST IT!

**Brew it for up to 5 minutes**

The longer the steep time, the greater the quantity of health-boosting flavonoids, explains Jeffrey Blumberg, PhD, professor of nutrition at Tufts University, Massachusetts. Drink tea with a squeeze of lemon juice and you'll increase anti-oxidant levels by up to 80%.

**TIP** If you like tea with milk, go easy as milk may reduce the absorption of tea's beneficial components, says Blumberg. This may explain why the consumption of black tea, associated with the reduction of heart disease, provides greater benefits to folks in the Netherlands and the US—but not in the UK or India, where adding milk to tea is more common. ■

—With inputs from Kathakoli Dasgupta