

Women's Health



Getting Enough Sleep

Women are more likely than men to have sleep problems, the U.S. Office on Women's Health says, and it can be a drag on your mental and physical health.

Most women need between seven and nine hours of sleep a night to feel refreshed, but pregnant women may need more and older women less.

SLEEP AND HORMONES

Women may be more likely to experience sleep problems like insomnia, sleep apnea and restless leg syndrome, the OWH says. Hormonal changes women experience during their menstrual cycles, pregnancy and menopause can disturb sleep. You should talk to your doctor if you have any of the following symptoms:

- You often have difficulty sleeping.
- You awaken during the night gasping for breath.
- Your partner says your breathing stops when you are sleeping.
- Your partner says your legs move rapidly during sleep.
- You snore loudly.
- You have to get up more than twice during the night to visit the restroom.
- You wake up feeling exhausted.
- You fall asleep often during the day.



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SLEEPING TIPS

You've likely heard a lot of advice about improving your sleep. Here's some tried-and-true advice from the OWH.

- Try to go to sleep when you feel sleepy and wake up at the same time every morning.
- Don't nap after 3 p.m. if you normally sleep at night.
- Don't drink caffeine or alcohol or smoke late in the

day or at night.

- Exercise on most days, but be aware that exercise too close to bedtime can make it harder to fall asleep.
- Don't eat or drink within three hours of bedtime.
- Keep your bedroom dark, quiet and cool.
- Follow a routine to help relax and wind down before sleep.

• If you can't fall asleep within 20 minutes, get out of bed. Read or do a quiet activity until you feel sleepy, then go back to bed.

- Don't do anything in your bed that could make you more awake, such as using a mobile phone, watching TV or eating in bed.
- Don't look at lighted screens.

SLEEP AND MENTAL HEALTH

Having a mental health issue may affect your sleep and vice-versa. The Office of Women's Health says that insomnia is more common in people with depression and anxiety. Depression can also cause restless leg syndrome, and sleep apnea and anxiety are linked.



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Nutrient Deficiencies

We don't often think of vitamin deficiencies as a modern problem. After all, many of our foods are fortified with vitamins and many of us take multivitamins and supplements.

American women, however, tend to be missing specific but common vitamins, Healthline says. Some of the most common deficiencies are iodine, vitamin D, calcium, iron, vitamin B-12 and folate.

IODINE

We need about 150 micrograms of iodine in our diets every day. It can be found in yogurt, milk, enriched bread and eggs. Symptoms of iron deficiency include a goiter, a swelling of the thyroid, and hypothyroidism. Other symptoms are weight gain, fatigue, feeling cold all the time and thinning hair.

VITAMIN D

This vitamin is most commonly associated with getting some time in the sun, but it's also available in sockeye salmon, fortified orange juice or milk, and eggs.

A vitamin D deficiency leaves you with an increased risk for poor bone health, depression, rickets, obesity and type 2 diabetes.

CALCIUM

Calcium, along with vitamin D, helps build strong bones. It's most commonly associated with dairy products, but it can also be found in fortified orange

juice and kale.

Women who lack calcium are at risk for bone loss, breakages and osteoporosis.

IRON

Menstruation leaves women's bodies at risk for iron deficiencies. You can get iron in fortified breakfast cereals, beans and spinach. Symptoms of an iron deficiency are extreme fatigue, shortness of breath, dizziness, brittle nails and a swollen tongue.

VITAMIN B-12

This vitamin B (there are a lot) is

responsible for red blood cells, healthy digestion and neurological function. You can find it in meats, sockeye salmon, milk and fortified breakfast cereals. Symptoms of a vitamin B-12 deficiency include anemia, a swollen tongue, brain fog, fatigue, muscle weakness, and tingling and numbness in your hand, feet or legs.

FOLATE, OR VITAMIN B-9

Folate, or folic acid, is critical for DNA production, the development of red blood cells and preventing anemia. Folate is found in spinach, beef liver, black-eyed peas and orange juice.

Symptoms of a folate deficiency include gray hair, fatigue, mouth sores, tongue swelling and growth problems, along with anemia.

Skin and Health

Your health might really be written all over your face.

As you age, your skin can change. It can become more thin and tend to bruise easier. It can take longer to heal. It can become more prone to wrinkles, age spots, cancer and other consequences of spending too much time in the sun.

But some skin conditions, like dry skin or acne, can be indicative of deeper health problems. Don't ignore them.

DRY SKIN

Itchy, dry skin can be a consequence of dry air or sun exposure, but it may also be caused by stress, problems with your sweat and oil glands, dehydration, or more serious problems like diabetes or kidney disease.

BRUISES

As we age, we tend to bruise more easily. But some illnesses, such as kidney disease and leukemia, can cause you to bruise more easily than you did before. You can also bruise more easily if you have some common vitamin deficiencies, like B12 or folic acid.

AGE SPOTS AND SKIN TAGS

These are harmless, usually, and tend to show up more as we age. Age spots are flat, brown spots often caused by spending time in the sun. Skin tags are small, raised growths found on the eyelids, neck and



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in body folds like the armpit and groin.

What you need to watch out for are moles or spots that don't heal or bleed, are asymmetrical, have irregular borders, change color or are more than one color, are bigger than a

pencil eraser, and that change over time. These are signs of skin cancer. If you have any of these symptoms, talk to your doctor as soon as possible.

KEEPING SKIN HEALTHY

The National Institutes on

Aging offer the following tips for keeping your skin healthy:

- Limit your time in the sun.
- Use sunscreen of SPF 15 or higher. Put it on before you go outside, then reapply at least every two hours or more

often if you are swimming or sweating.

- Wear protective clothing, such as a hat with a wide brim, sunglasses and loose, lightweight clothing.
- Don't use tanning beds or sunlamps.

Fighting Thinning Hair

It's not unusual for women to lose some hair a day — 50 to 100 hairs is normal — and shedding that hair is natural. But when you start losing more hair than you grow, you have a problem.

More than 50% of women will experience noticeable hair loss, the Cleveland Clinic says, and female-pattern hair loss affects 30 million women in the U.S.

WHO IS AT RISK?

Any woman can experience thinning hair. It's more likely to affect women older than 40, women who have just had a baby, women on certain medications, and women who wear hairstyles that pull on the hair or use harsh chemicals on their hair. Women who have a family history of hair loss are also more likely to have thinning hair themselves. Stress or a shock can also cause temporary hair loss.

HAIR LOSS AND MENOPAUSE

Rising and falling hormone levels during menopause do strange things to our hair. The hair on your head may thin, and you may sprout hair where you never had it before. During menopause, hair follicles shrink, causing hair to grow more slowly and fall out



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more easily. You can take hormone therapy to lessen thinning hair and other symptoms of menopause. Talk to your doctor about your options.

HAIR LOSS AND DEFICIENCIES

Hair loss can also be caused

by a deficiency in iron or a malfunctioning thyroid. Your doctor may change your medications or add new ones to your regimen to treat this kind of loss. Hair loss can also be caused by alopecia areata, an autoimmune disease that causes patchy hair loss. If

you're losing a lot of hair, it's a good idea to talk to your doctor. He or she may order some tests to diagnose the problem.

PREVENTING HAIR LOSS

Some causes of hair loss are just bad luck, like disease or aging. But if your hair loss is

caused by chemicals or tight hairstyles, you have control over that. You can also prevent hair loss by eating a healthy diet that provides you all the necessary vitamins and minerals. Practice other healthy habits, like stopping smoking.

Managing Stress

Modern lives are stressful lives. Many women are juggling jobs and families and feel like they're losing the race.

Long-term stress can lead to serious health problems, and the U.S. Office on Women's Health says women are more likely than men to report symptoms of stress and have mental health conditions, such as anxiety, that are made worse by stress.

WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress, basically, is how your body reacts to certain situations. During a stressful event, your body releases chemicals such as adrenaline, that can help you cope. Stress is divided into short-term stress, such as getting stuck in traffic or missing a deadline at work. Long-term stress is more complicated. Long-term stressors include things like:

- **Poverty and financial worries:** Depression is more common in families below the poverty line, the Office of Women's Health says. Women in poverty who care for children or other family members may experience more severe stress.

- **Discrimination:** All women experience gender discrimination, but they may also experience discrimination based on their race, ethnicity or sexual orientation. Discrimination puts women



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at a higher risk for depression or anxiety.

- **Traumatic events:** This includes things such as being in an accident or a natural disaster, but also includes the fallout from emotional, physical or sexual assault or abuse. Women are more likely to experience some types of violence, such as sexual violence, and that may also cause post-traumatic stress disorder

and other mental illness.

STRESS AND MEDICAL CONDITIONS

Stress can cause problems sleeping and weaken immune systems. Women who experience stress also report other medical conditions. These include:

- Headache and migraines.
- Heart problems.
- Upset stomach and bowel

issues.

- Obesity.
- Difficulty getting pregnant and other menstrual cycle problems.
- A decreased sex drive.

COPING WITH STRESS

Here are some positive ways to handle stress.

- Take deep breaths, forcing you to breathe slower and relax.

- Stretch to relax your muscles and release tension.

- Get between seven and nine hours of sleep per night.
- Eat foods high in B vitamins and take a vitamin B supplement if cleared by your doctor.

- Get help from a professional if you need it. There's no shame; many people get help from medications and therapists.

Routine Labwork for Every Age

You can feel just fine and still have hidden problems such as vitamin deficiencies and other problems.

Here are some regular lab tests you should have at every age, courtesy of the U.S. National Library of Medicine.

20-39

- **Blood pressure:** Your blood pressure should be less than 120/80. Elevated blood pressure means the top number, or systolic blood pressure, is between 120-129. The diastolic pressure, or lower number, is higher than 80. Hypertension starts at 130-139 and 80-119. Any number higher than 180/120, and you are in a hypertensive crisis. Seek emergency care.

- **Cholesterol:** If you've had normal cholesterol readings, have your cholesterol checked every five years. A normal total cholesterol level is less than 200 mg/dL. High-density lipoprotein, or good cholesterol levels, should be above 60 mg/dL. Non-HDL cholesterol levels should be less than 130 mg/dL, and your triglyceride levels should be less than 150 mg/dL.

- **Dental and eye exams:** You should visit your dentist and eye doctor annually, especially if you have diabetes.

- **Breast self-exam and**



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- **mammogram:** You should be doing a monthly breast exam, but you shouldn't be getting mammograms at this point unless recommended by your doctor.

- **Pelvic exam and Pap smear:** Starting at age 21, you should have a pelvic exam and Pap smear every three years to check for cervical cancer. Also get screened for sexually trans-

mitted infections. If you're over 30 and your Pap smears and HPV tests are normal, you can scale back your Pap smears to every five years.

40-60

Have all of the screenings above, but you should now be getting a professional breast exam every year.

- **Mammogram:** Women

between 50 and 74 should get a mammogram every other year.

- **Colon cancer screenings:** Once you turn 50, you should start being screened for colon cancer. This may include a yearly stool test, a flexible sigmoidoscopy, colonoscopy, a double-contrast barium enema or a computed tomographic colonoscopy.

AFTER 65

All of the above, but now we need to worry about bone density.

- **Bone density test:** If you've had a bone fracture, you should have a bone density test once you go through menopause or have other high fracture risks.

- **Hearing tests:** Have an audiogram at least once a year.

Getting a Mammogram

Mammograms can find breast cancer up to three years before it can be felt. Starting at age 40, some women should start getting mammograms annually, the Mayo Clinic says.

Talk to your medical professional about the best care plan for you based on your health and family history.

HOW IS A MAMMOGRAM DONE?

A mammogram is a X-ray of the breast tissue and it's done by an X-ray machine. The breast is flattened between two plates and scanned. The technologists who takes your mammogram cannot tell you the results; they need to be read by a radiologist.

Because the machine will put pressure on your breast, try not to schedule your scan the week before or the week of your period, when your breasts may be tender or swollen. Skip the perfume, deodorant or powder because they can show up as white spots on your X-ray. Remember that you'll need to undress from your waist, so you might prefer to wear a top with a skirt or pants.

WHEN SHOULD I GET MY RESULTS?

You'll usually get your results in a few weeks, depending on your facility. If you don't hear back in about 30 days, give your provider a call. If your mammogram is normal, continue to get mammograms at the recommended time intervals. If your mammogram is

not normal, you may need to have additional tests or exams.

IF YOU'RE CONCERNED

If you're worried about your breast cancer risk, work with your doctor to make an informed decision about when and how often you should get a mammogram. You should continue to perform regular breast self-exams and report any changes to your doctor.

DRAWBACKS

Your breasts may have abnormalities that aren't cancer or that aren't even dangerous. Getting an abnormal mammogram doesn't automatically mean you have cancer. Another drawback to a mammogram is that you are exposed to radiation. Talk with your doctor and, together, weight the benefits of increased or more frequent screenings with the benefits.

LOW-COST OR FREE MAMMOGRAMS

Your state or local health programs may provide mammograms at a low-cost or even for free. You can find more information on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website or by calling 800-CDC-INFO. You can also call the Cancer Information Service at 800-422-6237.

