

Making Up for Bad Health Habits

Your mother told you to drink your milk (you didn't). Your doctor encouraged you to take calcium supplements (you didn't). Now what? "Your body will lay down bone mass until your early 30s, so if you are in your teens or 20s, you have time to reverse the years of inadequate calcium intake and start building stronger bones," says Nikki Tierney, a registered dietician in private practice in Quincy, Massachusetts. "If you've passed this age, all is not lost. You may have missed the opportunity to build bone mass, but it is never too late to prevent more bone loss."

Women who are 19 to 50 years old need 1,000 mg of calcium per day; those 51 or older need 1,200 mg per day. "You absorb calcium best from food sources, so be sure to include these in your diet," she says. "The easiest way to get your calcium is to get three servings of milk or yogurt each day. If you are looking to add in a supplement, get something with 500 to 1,000 mg, such as calcium chews." In addition to dairy, you can get your calcium from the following sources: ½ cup firm tofu (204 mg), 3 oz canned salmon (181 mg), 1 cup pinto beans (103 mg) or 1 cup cooked kale (94 mg).

Bad Habit #2: Poor Posture

Misaligned posture can lead to back, knee, hip and neck issues as well as collapsed arches and a host of other problems, says Dana Davis, MA, CYT, a senior certified balance teacher in Petaluma, California. If you've had poor posture most of your life, you probably think there's nothing you can do to improve it. Not true, says New York City-based fitness expert Story von Holzhausen. "You can make changes instantly, transform yourself and don't have to wait to see results," says von Holzhausen.

She suggests this easy exercise to turn back years of bad posture habits: "Stand with your heels almost touching a wall. Roll your shoulder blades back and drop them down until they touch the wall. Slightly lower your chin and pull the base of your head against the wall, lengthening the back of your neck. Hold this position for 15 seconds, breathe, rest and repeat. If you cannot touch the wall, then your goal is to work up to it slowly." Photo by Shutterstock.

Bad Habit #3: Smoking Cigarettes

So you smoked in college—OK, and grad school, and maybe occasionally when you're socializing. You already feel guilty about it, but what can you do now? "The quickest

way to improve your health if you're a smoker is to quit now rather than later," says Shelena C. Lalji, MD, founder of the Dr. Shel Wellness and Medical Spa in Houston. "Research shows that people who quit smoking when they're in their 30s and 40s have a much lower risk of emphysema, stroke, [hypertension](#) and cardiac disease. Medical-grade supplements can help smokers reduce their cravings to increase their success."

According to the [American Cancer Society](#), after three months of not smoking, your lung function improves dramatically and your circulation is revitalized. After one year of being cigarette-free, your risk of coronary [heart disease](#) is 50 percent less than when you were a smoker. One of the best ways to reclaim your smoke-ravaged lungs is to make a new commitment to fitness, says Dr. Lalji. "Increasing exercise both during the transition from smoker to nonsmoker and afterward will help you keep the commitment to yourself while improving circulation, gaining lung capacity and reducing cardiac-related problems."

Bad Habit #4: Too Much Booze

Do you regret years of excess drinking? While alcohol-related damage to the body can be harmful, and experts say there's no way to completely reverse it, there are certain things you can do to improve your liver function and overall health. "Drinking can cause fat buildup in the liver, which causes the liver to work harder to metabolize the fat," says Carlos Tirado, MD, MPH, chief medical officer of Enterhealth, an addiction disease management provider in Dallas.

Help your liver recover by starting a weight-loss regimen and eating a lowfat diet. "In general, eating a diet rich in fruits and vegetables and reducing fat—especially trans fat and saturated fat—can enhance recovery from alcohol-related liver injury," he says. If you haven't completely cut alcohol from your life, health experts recommend one drink per day, max, for women, and two for men—though it's best not to drink daily, so to pick a few days a week that you don't drink at all.

Bad Habit #5: Being Overweight

One of the leading causes of heart disease—and the number-one cause of death in women in the U.S.—is being overweight. But once you're diagnosed with cardiovascular issues, it doesn't mean it's a life sentence. "Losing weight will significantly reduce this risk," says Sohah Iqbal, MD, a cardiologist practicing at New York University Hospital. "Weight loss, through a diet and exercise program, can

significantly reduce multiple cardiac risk factors that significantly increase the risk of **coronary artery disease** and heart attacks.”

Weight loss is not only associated with lower blood pressure, but it has also been shown in studies to improve your lipid profile—decreasing LDL (bad cholesterol) and increasing HDL (good cholesterol)—and reduce triglycerides. “Cholesterol buildup in arteries starts at a young age, but if you improve your cholesterol profile later in life, it stabilizes the cholesterol plaque and decreases the risk of it enlarging and occluding the artery or rupturing and causing a heart attack,” says Dr. Iqbal. The American Heart Association says you can reduce your risk of death from cardiovascular disease by 20 percent and ensure your ticker is in optimal health by following their 7-Point Checklist. Visit MyLifeCheck.Heart.org to learn more.

Bad Habit #6: Exercise Procrastination

You know that old saying: If you don’t use it, you lose it? Well, it’s only partly true, says Sarah Clachar, a New England-based health educator, fitness expert and the cofounder of Fit Family Together. “The opposite is true as well. When you start to use your muscles, you can regain them—at any age. So even if you’ve never worked out or had muscles to show off, you can certainly acquire them through a good fitness strategy.”

Where to start? Avoid an intense jog or hike, and think weights first. “If you haven’t been active for years, your muscles aren’t up for the activity,” she says. To avoid injury, focus on strength-training first. “Start by building up your muscles so you have the capacity to do exercise,” she recommends. Also, consider short bursts of intense exercise known as interval training. “Not only is research showing that this has more impact on your health with less wear and tear, but it works faster and it’s easier [to do].” Here’s how: “Whatever you start to do, do it in shorter, intensive spurts,” says Clachar. “Walk briskly for 1 minute, then stop and rest. Walk briskly again for 1 minute and repeat. Or bike hard for 4 minutes and then rest.” With this method, you can pack 30 minutes of regular exercise into just 15 minutes, with less injury risk.

Bad Habit #7: Not Eating Right for Years

The antidote for years of burgers, fries and ice cream binges? Eating right, of course. Here’s an easy way to jump-start your health and get the vital nutrients you need without going on a restrictive diet: Eat one salad every day, suggests Brian Zehetner,

MS, a registered dietician with Anytime Fitness in Hastings, Minnesota. “The primary reason to have a salad is because it helps to reduce the energy density of the diet,” he says. “You can eat a very large salad for very few calories.”

Plus, you’ll load up on vegetables that can give your body the nutrients it’s crying out for: [vitamins C](#) and E, selenium, beta-carotene and lots of fiber. Add 3 ounces of lean chicken, and you have a filling meal. If you eat a salad once a day for a year, you could lose up to 30 pounds without making any other major dietary changes. By just having one salad per day—for lunch or dinner—Zehetner says, your body will feel the difference.

Bad Habit #8: Staying Too Long in an Unhealthy Relationship

According to Howard Rankin, PhD, a clinical psychologist and founder of The Rankin Center for Neuroscience and Integrative Health, a bad marriage or relationship can be as hard on you as any other damaging health choice. “The impact of a negative relationship goes beyond self-esteem, into the very body itself,” Dr. Rankin explains. “Under chronic stress, the immune system breaks down, leading to a whole host of diseases. A recent study of breast cancer patients showed that many women believed that their cancer was caused by stress. Technically, no one gets cancer because of stress. But what does happen is that the suppression of the immune system by prolonged stress makes it more likely that the body can't fight off the cancer and creates an environment where cancer cells can grow.”

How can you get healthy and happy after years of being in a negative relationship? “It’s important to look at all the main relationships in your life and reevaluate which work for you and which don't,” he says. If a decades-long friendship is the culprit, cut the ties. If it’s a boyfriend who treats you poorly, move on. “Recognize that detachment is always difficult but sometimes necessary, and stay focused on the realities of the situation.” One of the best ways to give yourself a boost of happiness—and health—when doing so is to remember that there are infinite possibilities for you out there.

Bad Habit #9: Negative Self-Talk and Poor Body Image

After years of negative self-talk (“Look at how fat I am,” or “No one likes me at work because I’m not talented”), a funny thing happens, says Dr. Rankin: People tend to withdraw from social situations and intimacy. A poor or destructive self-image is also

linked with depression and anxiety.

So how do you break the cycle of negativity toward yourself? “The variables that drive behavior are brain biochemistry, innate drives, habits and addictions, and relationships,” says Dr. Rankin. “Note that logic isn't in there. So you need to do things that will optimize brain function—exercise, good-quality sleep, stress management and proper diet all are critical for proper brain function.” And, because our self-image is so often affected by the people in our lives, he suggests you “hang around positive friends and ditch the people who are not on the same page as you.”

Bad Habit #10: Too Much Tanning

Did you once have a love affair with the tanning salon? There may be a ray of hope for sun-damaged skin, say experts. “There is not much one can do to undo serious sun exposure, but it is never too late to protect your skin,” says Pamela Jakubowicz, MD, a board-certified dermatologist at Montefiore Medical Center in New York. She stresses the importance of annual skin checks with your dermatologist or primary care physician.

But you can also take matters into your own hands: “Products containing retinols, soy and some antioxidants have been shown to provide some reversal of sun damage,” she explains. “Retinol is a milder form of Retin-A that makes collagen stronger and can bring about changes in the skin. Researchers believe soy makes the skin lighter when there is pigmentation from sun damage.” Fortunately, you don't have to spend a lot of money to get products that work. Dr. Jakubowicz recommends Aveeno's Positively Radiant SPF 30 lotion, a product that contains soy, and Neutrogena Healthy Skin lotion, which is made with retinols. Also, consider your diet and activity level, says Marina Peredo, MD, an assistant clinical professor at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York. “Adding a diet rich in omega-3s and vitamin E is a must, as is a daily exercise regimen to get the blood circulating to the face and other parts of the body.”