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# live well

## 8 Ways to Help Improve Your Heart Health, According to Cardiologists

From what you eat to how you spend your free time, these habits can have a huge impact on your overall well-being.

By [Blythe Copeland](#) and [Nashia Baker](#) | Updated January 03, 2023



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Keeping your heart healthy is critical for living a long and active life, and while some of the steps you can take are obvious—like being active—others might surprise you. Making the right adjustments to your lifestyle and routine habits will help improve your heart health. We talked to two cardiologists to get their best advice.

[Related: Stick to This Daily Schedule to Keep Your Heart Strong and Healthy](#)

### Stop Smoking

Pack-a-day smokers have double the risk of a heart attack compared to nonsmokers, and the changes to your body start almost immediately after you quit, says [Nicholas Ruthmann](#), MD, a cardiologist with the Cleveland Clinic. Eight hours after your last cigarette, your blood oxygen levels are already increasing, and within a few weeks, lung function improves by as much as 30 percent.

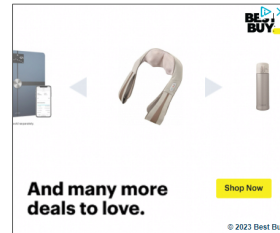
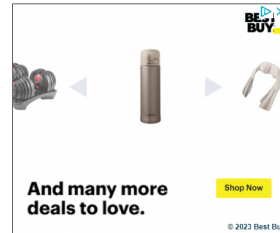
Smoking boosts the body's inflammation, plaque buildup in the heart's blood vessels, and thickens the blood. "[This] can lead to clots inside veins and arteries," says Dr. Ruthmann. "These clots can lead to heart attacks and stroke. If you're a smoker, the single most important thing you can do for your heart and body is to quit."

Mark a stop date on your calendar, and tell your friends, family, and doctor to help keep you accountable to it, recommends Dr. Ruthmann. Even though it's easier said than done, he says "quitting smoking is the best thing a smoker could do to improve not only their heart health, but overall health, as well."

### Limit Your Alcohol Intake

To increase your heart health, consider decreasing the amount of alcohol you drink, suggests [Fahmi Farah](#), MD, the owner of [Bentley Heart Center](#) in Fort Worth, Texas, a heart surgeon at [Baylor Scott & White All Saints Medical Center](#), and the co-founder of the [Global Health Alliance Foundation](#). "Most people don't realize that there's a direct link with alcohol consumption and increased risk of heart disease, such as heart failure," she says.

Consuming alcohol leads to increased risk of heart attack and arrhythmia (when the heart beats erratically or out of sync), according to a [global study](#) published in 2018. This is because drinking alcohol weakens the heart



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muscle, and in turn, it doesn't allow the heart to pump as well. While Dr. Farah notes that any amount of alcohol is "not good" for you, she does want people to be realistic. "I'm not saying that people can't enjoy their life every once in a while," she says. "Moderation is key."

## Lower Your Cholesterol

Often a result of unhealthy diet choices and too-little exercise, [higher levels of LDL cholesterol](#) are commonly connected to [heart disease](#) and heart attacks. "Cholesterol directly leads to an increase in plaque formation in the coronary arteries that directly supply blood to the heart, which, if significantly blocked, can lead to symptoms including chest pain and heart muscle death," says Dr. Ruthmann. "By being mindful about what we eat and being active most days a week, we can minimize risk of developing a heart attack."



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## Stay Active

Experts recommend 150 minutes of moderate exercise each week, which isn't just about building strong quads and biceps. "The heart is a muscle like any other muscle—if you don't work it, it will get weak," says Dr. Ruthmann. "Exercise also helps to control your weight, as obesity is another big risk factor for a heart attack. Thirty minutes of moderate intensity activity increases the body's metabolism for many hours afterwards, which helps to continue to burn calories and more fat."

Try to break a sweat most days, and try to find ways to do activities you really enjoy, which can include walking with a friend or loved one, says Dr. Ruthmann. One of the best forms of exercise for the heart is walking, adds Dr. Farah. Heart rate naturally goes up when walking, which builds endurance and increases oxygenation as you breathe in fresh air.

This regular practice is also good for the *entire* cardiovascular system, not just the heart. "For instance, our vascular system runs all over our body, and just like we can get blockages in our heart, we can also get blockages in our legs," she says. "One of the ways of preventing that is actually walking because you're circulating blood better as you're walking."

Along with getting moving for your heart, you will be able to increase your mental wellness, especially depending on where you take your strolls.

"Walking in nature is even better because you get stress management with that," adds Dr. Farah. "We do have [some studies](#), actually, that show that walking in nature is better for your heart health and your overall health because you get that mental relief, as well."

Related: [Everything You Need to Know About Heart Disease If You Have a Family History](#)

## Find Balance in Your Eating Habits

A heart-healthy diet—Dr. Ruthmann recommends the [Mediterranean diet](#)—will be low in fat and sugar, high in vegetables and fruit, and anchored by lean proteins instead of processed meats. If your eating habits need a makeover, Dr. Ruthmann suggests focusing on adding before subtracting. "Instead of restricting food intake, focus instead on what to put in—add one fruit or a vegetable to each meal," he says. "This focuses your mindset about healthy eating. Studies show that 80 to 95 percent of people who try a crash diet gain the weight back."

And don't ignore hunger signals, either—just pay attention to what your body is really trying to tell you. "Often we eat for emotional reasons: We get sad, bored, or feel nervous," says Dr. Ruthmann. "None of these are helpful

sad, bored, or feel nervous," says Dr. Ruthmann. "None of these are helpful for the heart and your overall health. It's a conditioned response in many cases, and being more mindful of the reason to eat can help recondition our brains to not turn to food as often."



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## Don't Skimp on Tooth-Brushing

Remember: Brushing your teeth is important for your heart health, not just for your dental hygiene. "My mom used to tell me when I was a kid to 'Only brush the teeth I want to keep,'" says Dr. Ruthmann. "If she only knew how important oral health is to heart health! Studies have shown that [gum disease](#) is connected to heart disease, so take care of those pearly whites."

## Get Social

[Social connections](#) may seem less obviously related to heart health than diet and exercise, but they're still key, says Dr. Ruthmann. "Research has found that social isolation and loneliness can impact a person's risk of coronary heart disease and stroke—if you and your social circle are focused on a healthy lifestyle, you're much more likely to stick with it," he says. "Connect with others, even if virtually."

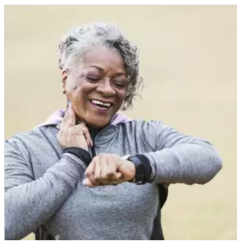
## Get Enough Sleep

The [American Heart Association](#) added sleep to its most recent [health checklist](#), and Dr. Farah says that it's "imperative for cardiac health" to get eight hours so your body can reset and recover. "You're allowing your body to rest and heal, and there's a direct link with inflammation and plaque formation and lack of sleep," says Dr. Farah. Sleep calms down the episodic inflammation process to minimize heart disease risk factors, she adds.

By Blythe Copeland and Nashia Baker

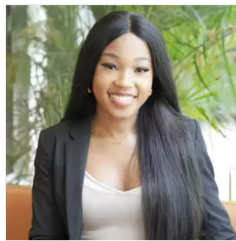
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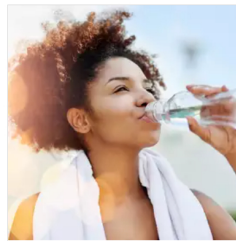
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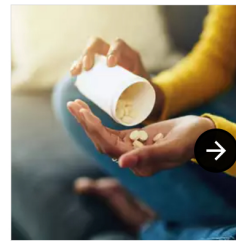
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# Walking 6,000 Steps Daily May Lower Your Risk of Heart Disease, New Study Says

The researchers found that older adults who walked between 6,000 and 9,000 steps per day had a 40 to 50 percent less chance of experiencing a cardiovascular event.



By Madeline Buiano



CREDIT: KALI9 / GETTY IMAGES

For many, walking has become a favorable activity thanks to its many proven health benefits. Studies have shown that the form of exercise may slow down aging, improve brain function, and reduce your risk of cardiovascular disease. But according to a new study published in *Circulation*, how many steps you walk could dictate how much you truly benefit from your daily stroll—especially when it comes to matters of the heart.

Researchers from University of Massachusetts Amherst wanted to find the connection between steps per day and cardiovascular disease. They uncovered that older adults who walked between 6,000 and 9,000 steps per

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day had a 40 to 50 percent less chance of a cardiovascular event, such as a heart attack or stroke, compared to participants who walked just 2,000 steps per day.

The study authors found no link between steps per day and cardiovascular risk in younger adults. This is likely because cardiovascular disease comes with age and usually doesn't occur until you get older.

[Related: Taking a Brisk 7-Minute Walk Every Day Can Decrease Your Risk of Heart Disease, New Study Says](#)

To obtain their findings, the researchers conducted a meta-analysis of eight studies, involving more than 20,000 people. "We found for adults over 60, there was a strikingly lower risk of a cardiovascular event or disease over an average follow-up of six years," said Amanda Paluch, assistant professor of kinesiology in the School of Public Health and Health Sciences in a university [release](#). "When accumulating more steps per day, there was a progressively lower risk."

Paluch's team encourages older adults who are walking less than 6,000 steps daily to try to [get that number up going forward](#). "The people who are the least active have the most to gain," she says. "For those who are at 2,000 or 3,000 steps a day, doing a little bit more can mean a lot for their heart health," she says. "If you're at 6,000 steps, getting to 7,000 and then to 8,000 also is beneficial. It's just a smaller, incremental improvement."

These results are a follow up to a previous study conducted by Paluch and her team earlier this year. The researchers challenged the pre-conceived notion that walking 10,000 steps per day was necessary for longevity. The meta-analysis, which involved nearly 50,000 participants, found that walking between 6,000 and 8,000 steps per day was linked with a lower risk of death from all causes among older adults.

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SELF MADE

## Nya Jones' Journal Brand Will Help You Express Yourself—and Boost Your Mental Health

The CEO and founder of Inside Then Out aims to destigmatize mental health with her guided journals, which are also minimalistic and chic.



By [Nashia Baker](#)



CREDIT: COURTESY OF INSIDE THEN OUT

*Have you ever wondered how to turn your dreams of owning your own business into a reality? We can help. Each week, as part of our Self Made series, we showcase female entrepreneurs—as well as their quality, handmade goods—and share their best advice related to starting, maintaining, and growing your own business.*

Full-circle moments—when our dreams become reality through hard work—are rare, so when we reach one, we remember it clearly. For Nya Jones, the CEO and founder of [Inside Then Out](#), a journal brand rooted in supporting mental wellness, that milestone came about two years ago, when she launched her business.

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Jones has been journaling since she was seven years old—and she's kept those diaries and this [wellness activity](#) close to her heart to this day. "I wanted journaling to become more of a practice where I could consistently ask myself important questions, challenge my thoughts, and get closer to myself and what I wanted out of life," says Jones.

Jones founded her brand with the launch of her [Better Every Day Journal](#) in August 2020—and in that defining moment, her favorite self-care technique became her vocation. Dreaming up her first Inside Then Out product proved to be a personal and professional feat, and allowed her to better navigate a transitional period of her life. "I had just graduated college and was about to start my first full-time job at Facebook," she says.

During this period, which fell during the COVID-19 pandemic, Jones took more time to herself. "I realized I wanted to be more intentional in my life, so I started reading and journaling a lot," she says. What started out as jotting down questions for herself to answer turned into a journal filled with prompts that she could share with others, so they could do the same.

[Related: Journaling Is a Self-Care Practice That Requires Just 15 Minutes of Your Day—Here's How to Start](#)



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## First Drafts

Contrary to popular belief, you don't need an abundance of experience to start a [new business](#). Jones, for example, used the tools readily available to her to build her brand. "I heavily relied on YouTube and Google to teach me everything I know today, from marketing to branding to finding suppliers," she says. "I eventually found a supplier that could bring my vision for the journal to life and decided that selling online was going to be my primary sales channel."

Jones' main source of marketing is [social media](#). "I remember creating ad videos with only my phone (and a really small ad budget) and then things continued to pick up from there," she says. "People who bought the journal would tell their friends or come back and buy more as gifts."

During her second year in business, she made her first [TikTok](#). "It was a very simple video about the journal and why I created it, and that video ended up going viral," she says. "I remember being so full of joy because other people were resonating with something that I created." Thanks to the help of the loved ones in her corner, she quickly managed the spikes in orders to keep her business booming.

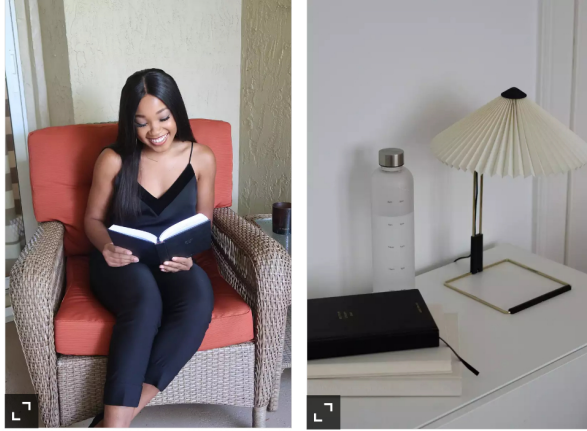
” One of my goals for this brand is destigmatizing mental health and framing the practices that benefit your health in a way that is appealing, easy, and beautiful.

— NYA JONES

## Looking Inside. Then Out

Both the interior and exterior of each Inside Then Out product [serves a purpose](#). The guided journals, such as the [Dig Deeper Journal](#), and the blank iterations, like the [Redefine Lined Journal](#), offer a minimal, chic space to jot down your thoughts. "One of my goals for this brand is destigmatizing mental health and framing the practices that benefit your health in a way that is appealing, easy, and beautiful," says Jones.

Filling this void for Black and Brown communities is a particular priority: "I come from a Jamaican-American household, and I don't see many Black and Brown women in the center of the wellness industry or people even designing wellness products with them in mind," Jones says.



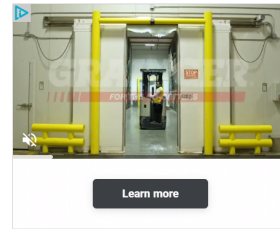
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Since journaling has benefited Jones' mental health, she hopes that her products will help other people on their own healing journeys. "Ultimately, creating a business will force you to grow; you will be learning new skills, developing your leadership, and putting in a lot of hours, but it is also extremely rewarding when you are able to create something that can solve a real problem or meet someone's needs," she says.

## Turning the Page

Over the last two-plus years, Inside Then Out has grown exponentially in sales, but Jones hopes to grow two key parts of the business: She wants to expand her team and increase brand awareness. "I was running so many aspects of my business by myself for the longest time, so it is so amazing to have the opportunity to work with other people that are also super passionate about the brand mission and can bring new, fresh ideas," she says. "I also want to continue to expand my product offerings to create more tools that can really help and empower people in their daily lives and expand to retail partners that are in alignment with the brand."



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# Staying Properly Hydrated Can Actually Extend Your Life, According to New Research

Are you consuming the right amount of water? A new study shows that hydration is linked to your risk of developing chronic diseases.

 By [Nashia Baker](#)



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It may seem like a no-brainer, but a key way to [boost your hydration](#) starts with drinking water. As it turns out, having your daily dose of H2O does more than just quench your thirst. According to a new study published in the journal [eBioMedicine](#), consuming enough water each day can decrease your chance of developing chronic diseases, dying early, and being biologically older than your chronological age.

To reach these findings, the research team gathered 30 years of data from 11,255 Black and White adult participants in the [Atherosclerosis Risk in Communities](#) study. From there, they discovered that the adults with serum sodium levels up to 146 milliequivalents per liter (high on the end of the spectrum), were more likely to have declining health than those who had lower sodium levels.

[Related: The Surprising Benefits of Drinking Lemon Water](#)

The team also found that the people who had over 142 milliequivalents per liter of sodium in their systems had 10 to 15 percent more chance of being biologically older than their chronological age, as opposed to those who rested between the 138 and 140 milliequivalents per liter sodium range (they had the lowest chance of developing a chronic disease). People with above 144 milliequivalents per liter of sodium had a 50 percent higher likelihood of being biologically older and a 21 percent increased risk of dying early. Those who aged the fastest also posed a higher risk of experiencing a chronic disease, such as dementia, diabetes, and heart failure.

As for what this means in connection to [drinking water](#)? The results illustrate how adequate hydration can help slow down the aging process and allow for a disease-free life, says Natalia Dmitrieva, study author and a researcher in the Laboratory of Cardiovascular Regenerative Medicine at the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, a division of NIH, in a [news release](#). "Decreased body water content is the most common factor that increases serum sodium, which is why the results suggest that staying well hydrated may slow down the aging process and prevent or delay chronic disease," says Dmitrieva.

Women should aim to drink about 91 ounces of water each day, and men should have about 125 ounces, which comes out to about 9 and 12.5 cups respectively, according to the [National Academy of Medicine](#). You can consult with a doctor for further assessment on your hydration regimen, says Manfred Boehm, MD, study coauthor and director of the Laboratory of Cardiovascular Regenerative Medicine, in the news release. "The goal is to ensure patients are taking in enough fluids, while assessing factors, like medications, that may lead to fluid loss," says Dr. Boehm. "Doctors may also need to defer to a patient's current treatment plan, such as limiting fluid intake for heart failure."

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