



Bergen County

Employee Wellness Program

April 2024

It's Playtime!

Play isn't just for kids. It's good for grown-ups, too. Sports, bike riding, hide-and-seek and a host of other games and activities in childhood were fun and let your imagination soar. You could enjoy time alone, too, with crayons, puzzles or building blocks.

But in adulthood, work and family commitments can make playtime for adults seem impossible and silly. However, research shows grown-up playtime can boost mental and physical health.



Benefits of adult play:

- Play triggers the release of endorphins. These natural, feel-good chemicals boost your mood.
- The social interaction of playing games with family and friends can relieve stress and depression.
- Play stimulates imagination and that can improve problem-solving abilities.
- Playing any type of sports as an adult can benefit physical and mental health.
- Research shows taking time for adult play can promote a sense of humor and a positive outlook on life.
- Play can boost social skills, improving relationships.

Ready to play? Stuart Brown, MD, psychiatrist, researcher and founder of the non-profit National Institute for Play, defines play as a “state of mind that one has when absorbed in an activity that provides enjoyment and a suspension of sense of time.”

Be open to exploring different ways to play. Ask neighbors if they'd like to shoot some baskets at a local park, or play an impromptu ball game just for the fun of it. Enjoy painting or playing with clay as a kid? Devote time to making art just for the fun of it; join a local art group. Loved playing make-believe once upon a time? Visit local theatre productions and act out make-believe scenes with your children or grandchildren.

BEST bits

■ **Should you wear a mask in your health care provider's office?** Although no longer required, masks still make sense in medical settings. COVID-19 is not an urgent threat in the U.S., thanks to widespread vaccination, and masks are not required in stores and other public places. But it's still a good idea to wear a surgical or N95 mask when you visit your health care provider's office or other health care settings. According to a study by George Washington University researchers, while viruses, including COVID-19, can be transmitted from staff to patients and vice versa when everyone is masked, it's rare. What's more, wearing a mask in medical settings can help prevent the spread of many other common viruses, including flu and colds.

■ **If you're allergic to pollen,** you know you can't completely avoid it, but these strategies can reduce exposure and symptoms:

- **Keep** home and car windows closed. Use air conditioning, if available.
- **Stay** inside in the morning when pollen levels are higher.
- **Wear** a face mask outside on high-pollen days; shower and put on clean clothes when you go back inside.
- **Use** a saline nasal wash to help clear pollen from your nose.
- **Still** sneezing? Talk to your health care provider or pharmacist about treatment options.
- **Change** your furnace's air filter as recommended by the manufacturer to avoid buildup of dust, dirt and debris.
- **Wipe** pets with a damp paper towel when they come inside to remove pollen.

If you believe you have pollen allergies but haven't been diagnosed, contact your provider about getting tested. You may be referred to an allergist/immunologist.

The Smart Moves Toolkit, including this issue's printable download, **3 Exercise Claims You Can Ignore**, is at personalbest.com/extras/24V4tools.

ALCOHOL: What You Need to Know

By Cara Rosenbloom, RD

From the occasional sip to binge drinking, recognizing the risks and understanding when alcohol may be interfering with your life is pivotal for maintaining optimal health.

There are no essential nutrients in drinking alcohol, meaning it's not a required component in the diet. If you don't drink alcohol, don't start. If you do drink, the CDC says that **moderate drinking** is defined as:

- ➔ One standard drink or less in a day for women.
- ➔ Two standard drinks or fewer in a day for men.
- ➔ A standard drink is 14 grams of pure alcohol, roughly equivalent to 5 ounces of wine, 12 ounces of beer or 1.5 ounces of distilled spirits.

Heavy drinking means you regularly exceed moderate alcohol consumption. Heavy drinking is:

- ➔ Consuming 8 or more drinks per week for women.
- ➔ Consuming 15 or more drinks per week for men.

The most common form of excessive drinking is binge drinking. It involves drinking large amounts of alcohol in a short period, typically bringing blood alcohol concentration to 0.08 grams percent or higher (above the legal limit). Binge drinking is defined as:

- ➔ For women, consuming 4 or more drinks during a single occasion.
- ➔ For men, consuming 5 or more drinks during a single occasion.

Both short- and long-term risks can result from heavy or binge drinking. Short-term risks include car accidents, violence, risky sexual behavior, alcohol poisoning or hangovers.

Long-term health risks:

Drinking too much alcohol can raise triglycerides (a type of fat in the blood), which is associated with fatty buildup in the artery walls and an increased risk of a heart attack or stroke. Alcohol abuse can also contribute to high blood pressure levels.

Alcohol intake raises the risk of several types of cancer, including breast, esophageal, liver and colon cancer. The risk starts increasing with less than one drink per day, and the more you drink, the greater the cancer risk.

Excessive alcohol consumption is a leading cause of liver diseases, including fatty liver, alcoholic hepatitis and cirrhosis. The liver's ability to metabolize alcohol can be overwhelmed, resulting in inflammation and scarring.

Depression and anxiety can be both a reason to drink alcohol, and a symptom of overuse.

Alcohol is a natural depressant that affects the central nervous system, and it can exacerbate anxiety and depression.

Alcohol interferes with nutrient absorption and can lead to malnutrition. Chronic alcohol abuse can result in deficiencies in essential vitamins and minerals, affecting overall health.



Are You at Risk?

More than 14 million American adults have alcohol use disorder. Knowing whether alcohol is interfering with your life requires self-reflection and awareness. Signs of a potential problem include:

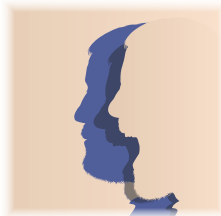
- An increasing tolerance to alcohol.
- Cravings to drink.
- Inability to cut down or quit.
- Neglecting responsibilities at home or work due to drinking.
- Continued alcohol use despite knowing its negative effects.
- Using alcohol to manage stress.
- Continuing to drink even though it causes depression or anxiety.
- Health problems caused by alcohol.

Therapy, behavioral treatment, support groups and medications can help treat alcohol use disorder. Learn more at alcoholtreatment.niaaa.nih.gov.

Trauma Dumping

By Eric Endlich, PhD

Trauma dumping occurs when someone shares details of a distressing story with others who haven't asked about it or are not emotionally prepared for the conversation. It can also happen through sharing disturbing images or information via social media or other online means. While this may happen unintentionally, it can be harmful to the recipient.



Those who have trauma dumped on them often feel drained or overwhelmed. Trauma dumping is a one-way street, with one person sharing and the other person listening. Listeners often feel helpless and unsure how to respond.

Here are some ways to avoid trauma dumping:

- ➔ Consider your audience. Is the person you are talking to ready to hear about your situation?
- ➔ Start by sharing a brief overview. If the person wants to hear more, they will ask.
- ➔ Avoid sharing graphic or disturbing details.
- ➔ Monitor your tone and body language, especially around intense emotions.
- ➔ If the other person seems overwhelmed or uncomfortable, change the topic.

If someone is trauma dumping on you, there are a few things you can do to help:

- ➔ If it is too much for you, respectfully ask them to stop.
- ➔ Listen without judgment.
- ➔ Let them know you support them.
- ➔ Encourage them to seek professional help if needed.

TOP 10 Eating Habits

By Cara Rosenbloom, RD

Ultra-processed foods can be as addictive as smoking. They are manufactured with preservatives, hydrogenated fats, starches, sugars, and other additives to give them a long shelf life and extra flavor. According to research from an international team of scientists, eating these foods regularly can cause brain changes associated with addiction, which can explain why many people keep eating these foods despite health problems, including obesity. The findings are another reason to focus on diets rich in fresh fruits, vegetables, whole grains and minimally processed foods.



TIP of the MONTH

Aspartame

The International Agency for Research on Cancer found limited evidence that the artificial sweetener aspartame causes cancer. Limited evidence means that there was not enough evidence to strongly link aspartame to cancer, and experts say it's acceptable to consume 0 milligrams to 40 milligrams per kilogram of body weight of aspartame per day. That's the equivalent of between nine and 14 cans of diet soda per day, assuming no other intake from other sources. Of course, that's not a suggestion to consume that much diet soda. It's still best to make water your beverage of choice.

Eating well is an important part of a healthy lifestyle. A balanced diet provides the nutrients you need for optimal health and disease prevention. Here are ten tips for healthy eating:

- 1 **Balance your plate:** Half of your meal should be vegetables and fruits, and a quarter should be whole grains. The remaining quarter should be protein-rich foods, such as fish, poultry or legumes.
- 2 **Incorporate healthy fats:** Choose avocados, fatty fish, nuts, seeds and olive oil. These fats support brain health and aid in nutrient absorption.
- 3 **Hydration matters:** Choose water most often and cut back on sugar-sweetened beverages, such as soda.
- 4 **Listen to your body:** Pay attention to hunger and fullness cues. Eat when you're hungry and stop when you're satisfied, not stuffed.
- 5 **Portion control:** Practice mindful eating by paying attention to portion sizes. Eat snacks in a single-serve bowl rather than from a family-size box or bag.
- 6 **Colorful choices:** Opt for a vibrant array of fruits and vegetables. Different colors represent various nutrients, providing a broad spectrum of health benefits.
- 7 **Limit ultra-processed foods:** Minimize your intake of foods with lots of added sugars, salt, additives and preservatives, such as baked goods, candy and chips.
- 8 **Add some indulgence:** Completely avoiding ultra-processed food is unnecessary. Deprivation never works. Choose occasional treats and enjoy every bite.
- 9 **Consider timing:** Maintain a consistent eating schedule with regular meals and snacks. This helps stabilize blood sugar levels and prevents overindulging at mealtimes.
- 10 **Cook at home:** Homemade meals are a great option over take-out.



Adopting these eating habits contributes to overall well-being. Consistency is key, and small, sustainable changes can lead to a lifetime of healthy habits.

Turkey Tacos

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil | ¼ tsp salt |
| 1 lb lean ground turkey | 8 small tortilla shells |
| 2 tsp cumin | 4 cups romaine lettuce |
| 2 tsp chili powder | 1 tomato, diced |
| ½ tsp oregano flakes | 1 red pepper, seeded and sliced |
| ½ tsp garlic powder | 2 tbsp sour cream |
| 4 tbsp salsa, <i>divided</i> | |



EASY recipe

Heat olive oil in a skillet over medium heat. **Add** turkey and cook until browned, breaking it up with a spatula and stirring for 5-7 minutes. **Add** cumin, chili powder, oregano, garlic, 2 tbsp salsa and salt. **Stir** to combine. **Thin** with 2-3 tablespoons of water and cook 3-5 minutes. **Divide** turkey mixture onto tortillas and serve topped with lettuce, tomato, red pepper, sour cream and remaining salsa.

Makes 4 servings. Per serving: 519 calories | 32 protein | 20 total fat | 5g saturated fat | 8g mono fat | 6g poly fat | 55g carbohydrate | 5g sugar (0g added sugar) | 4g fiber | 516mg sodium

Stay in Touch

Keep those questions and suggestions coming!

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EXPERT advice — Eric Endlich, PhD

Q: Signs of stress in children?

A: We all experience stress at times, but children face different challenges and usually have fewer coping strategies.

Stress in children may be a result of feeling overwhelmed by school demands, bullied by peers or anxious about situations at home.

Common signs of stress in children include:

- ✓ Return of old habits (e.g., bedwetting, thumb sucking).
- ✓ Difficulty sleeping.
- ✓ Nightmares.
- ✓ Withdrawal or clinginess.
- ✓ Appetite changes.
- ✓ Head or stomach pain.
- ✓ Worsening school performance.
- ✓ Aggression or outbursts.

Here are some ways to help your children manage their stress:

- ✓ Maintain or resume routines.
- ✓ Laugh and play together.
- ✓ Give them space to talk — and listen without judging.
- ✓ Remain calm, even if they're acting out.
- ✓ Give them opportunities to make their own choices.
- ✓ Check in with their teachers.
- ✓ Consult with their health care provider, who can provide referrals to mental health professionals.
- ✓ Check their online activities and for any sign of cyberbullying.

Dog Walking Hazards

Walking your dog daily can provide health benefits for canine and human, a routine that is increasing in popularity. But take some practical safety steps on your walks. A study reported online in April 2023 by *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise* ties walking to a sharp rise in injuries among people holding the leash of a frisky, fun-loving pup.

Researchers analyzed input from a national health database from 2001 to 2020 that suggests nearly 423,000 people, average age 53, who visited emergency units after being pulled or tripped by their dogs' leashes.

As dog walking for exercise has continued to grow in popularity, the annual number of injuries has increased by more than four times during the study period from about 7,200 in 2001 to about 32,000 in 2020. Common injuries included broken fingers, shoulder sprains and traumatic brain injuries.

Take Precautions:

Talk to your pet's vet. Not all dogs are up for long walks. Ask your vet when it's time to start walking your puppy; whether your senior dog can still keep up with a workout; or if there are health conditions that might make regular walking risky for your pooch or you.

Consider a dog harness. It may be a smart option for walking dogs that tend to pull as it can help reduce pressure on their throats. Find the right fit for your dog.

Consider weather. Winter safeguards can include booties for pet paws. On warm summer days dogs can overheat and feel heat exhaustion or heat stroke, so be watchful.

Be aware of nearby surroundings, especially in busy areas that might inspire your leashed pooch to take off running. Stay in control. And enjoy.

Adaptive Sports

Adaptive sports — games with special rules, equipment and assistance — make it possible for many people with disabilities to play a variety of sports. They include wheelchair basketball,

tennis, volleyball, archery, biking, golf, fly-fishing and other sports. Participating in an adaptive sport builds teamwork, confidence, boosts social contact and increases quality of life. Research shows adaptive sport participation can strengthen the body, improve endurance and flexibility, reduce body fat and increase bone density. Talk to your health care provider and your local parks and recreation department to find programs for your disability. Special equipment is often needed, such as three-wheeler bikes, which rely on upper body movement, and wheelchairs adapted for sports with larger wheels and other features, such as anti-roll wheels in the back.

