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Healthy Habits That Can Backfire

See eight things you don't want to overdo

By Barbara Brody



Photo by: Getty Images

Special Offer

Sometimes too much of a good thing is actually pretty bad—especially when it comes to your health. While you certainly don't want to skimp on healthy habits like exercising, sleeping and eating plenty of vitamin-rich food, overdoing any of these can be dangerous. Here's why.

Sleeping Too Much

Of course you want to be well rested, and most of us aren't. But oversleeping has its downsides, too. If you tend to get only six hours during the work week, but sleep nine to 10 hours on Saturday morning, don't be surprised if you wake up with a headache, says Margaret Lewin, MD, clinical assistant professor of medicine at Weill Medical College of Cornell University in New York City and medical director of Cinergy Health. "When you're asleep, you breathe in and out more slowly, so you get rid of less carbon dioxide," she says. When you sleep in on the weekends, carbon dioxide can build up a bit and lead to headaches. You may also wake up with a pounding head if you sleep past the time when you normally have a cup of coffee.

While a headache might be the biggest downside to sleeping in periodically, if you always feel like you need a ton of sleep—or if you feel like you need a lot more than you used to—talk to your doctor. People who get excessive amounts of sleep are more prone to depression, heart disease and even early death, says Dr. Lewin.

Taking Too Many Vitamins

Vitamins—whether they're from food or pills—are essential ingredients your body needs for so many functions. But did you know you can actually "overdose" on them? According to nutritionist Lyssie Lakatos, RD, women need to be cautious about fat-soluble vitamins like A, because they can build up in the body's fat stores. (Extra water-soluble vitamins, like C, are easily excreted in the urine after your body uses what it needs.)

You'll find vitamin A—which is important for vision, reproduction and a strong immune system—in many types of fruits and vegetables, as well as in eggs and milk. The problem is that many foods are also fortified with large amounts of vitamin A, plus it's commonly found in multivitamins. "If you have a serving of vitamin A-fortified cereal with milk, take a multivitamin and eat an egg, you will probably

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exceed the recommended level for the day," says Lakatos. Do this once in a while and it's not a big deal, but over time the results aren't pretty: Lakatos has seen clients who've had hair and eyebrows falling out, rough skin and cracked lips as a result of an A overdose. One major culprit: energy bars. "Many contain a lot of vitamin A, and some people eat several of them daily." Whenever possible, get your vitamins from whole foods instead of "bars" and consider whether you really need a multivitamin (ask your doc if you're not sure).

Exercising Too Much

True, most Americans are so sedentary that they aren't in any danger of moving too much. But what happens when couch potatoes get inspired to step up their exercise big time? Ouch. "People who are new to exercise are more prone to injuries since they are often excited to start or just want to get it over with," says Carly Cummings, a personal trainer and founder of Hyp-Yoga Inc. "The biggest tip I can give to beginner exercisers is to remember that this is a journey that you will continue for the rest of your life, so pick something you really enjoy. If you're forcing yourself to do something and pushing through pain, then injury is more likely to happen."

If you're new to exercise, start slow and always warm up first. Before you try intense activities like running or kickboxing, make sure you're comfortable just walking, then jogging a little, etc. "Building up to a group exercise class is also a good idea. Don't be afraid to go into a class and only stay for the first half," says Cummings.

Using Too Much Hand Sanitizer

Experts say that alcohol-based hand sanitizer can help you stop the spread of germs and avoid getting sick. That's especially important this time of year, when colds and flu are going around. But don't think you can skip the soap and water. "Sanitizer is good if you need to cleanse your hands after getting off the subway or before lunch and you don't have access to a sink," says Dr. Lewin. "But if you use it several times in a row without washing [with soap and water], some of the gel can build up and bacteria will start to stick to it." A good rule: If you've already used sanitizer three times in a row on a given day, get yourself to a sink.

Eating Too Much Fiber

Fiber is great for keeping your digestive system healthy and your blood sugar levels on an even keel. It's also a friend to dieters, since it helps you stay full. But if you're not getting very much right now, you need to *slowly* work your way up to those recommended 25 grams per day. Otherwise you may find your tummy aching. "Some of our clients have reported flatulence, diarrhea and stomach cramps from eating too much fiber," says nutritionist Tammy Lakatos Shames, RD, who is the coauthor (with twin sister Lyssie) of *The Secret to Skinny*.

Be especially careful about all those products that have extra fiber added to them. "Companies have been adding isolated fibers like inulin and polydextrose to foods such as Stonyfield Farm yogurt, Weight Watchers cereals and Fibersure fiber supplement, claiming that they are as good as the fiber that's naturally found in whole grains, fruits and vegetables," says Lakatos Shames. "Although there isn't good evidence to support or deny this, insulin may cause gas or other stomach distress, and polydextrose may result in 'a laxative effect from excessive consumption,' as the packages warn."

Brushing Your Teeth Too Much

We all want to keep those pearly whites sparkly. Good oral health has been linked to a lower incidence of heart disease, stroke and diabetes. But don't scrub too hard or too often, warns Dr. Lewin. "All toothpastes contain small amounts of abrasives [to get rid of stains], and if you use too much you can start wearing away the enamel." And, brushing too vigorously can damage your gums and cause them to recede. She recommends brushing two to three times a day using a pea-sized amount of toothpaste and a toothbrush with soft-medium bristles.

Washing Your Face Too Often

If your skin is oily or acne-prone, you may be tempted to scrub it several times a day. But over-washing can irritate sensitive skin and aggravate conditions like acne. "The goal of washing is to eliminate dirt and bacteria, not to strip the protective layers off your skin," says dermatologist and *Woman's Day* advisory board member Debra Wattenberg, MD. "For most people, washing your face twice a day with a gentle cleanser is sufficient."

Getting Too Many Medical Tests

You've probably seen ads for heart scans and even full-body CT scans that claim to catch diseases early on. But unless your doctor has recommended a particular test for you, think twice. While most traditional X-rays—like the kind you get at your dentist's office—expose you to minimal amounts of radiation, CT scans are more detailed and therefore expose you to higher levels, which could increase your cancer risk over a lifetime.

"A lot of procedures are done because patients are curious, not because they're medically necessary," says Dr. Lewin. Even if your doctor is the one to suggest a test, there's nothing wrong with asking if you really need it, how much radiation it will expose you to and if there's a lower- (or no-) radiation option worth considering. For example, a regular colonoscopy doesn't expose you to any radiation, but a virtual one does because it uses CT scans (and the prep, which is the worst part, is the same for both types of colonoscopy).

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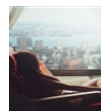
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