

# health REPORT CARD

Forgetting to floss. Sleeping with your contacts in. When it comes to healthy living, nobody's perfect. But just how harmful are those not-so-great habits? Find out how they measure up.

BY BARBARA BRODY



## **A-** WALKING IS MY ONLY EXERCISE.

You can feel pretty good about this one—as long as you do it enough. Walking at least 30 minutes, five days a week, might reduce your risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis, and breast cancer. The reason for the minus? You're missing out on the benefits of other forms of exercise, says Panteleimon Ekkekakis, Ph.D., associate professor of kinesiology at Iowa State University. For a truly comprehensive fitness program, you'll need resistance training to build muscle mass, and flexibility work (stretching, yoga, pilates).

For an A+, Ekkekakis suggests varying your pace (add bursts of speed walking to a moderate stroll), stretching as you warm up and cool down, and working with free weights or resistance bands for 15 minutes.

## **B** I DON'T GET A CHECKUP EVERY YEAR.

You're probably OK, especially if you're under 50 and healthy—no smoking, lots of fruits and vegetables, daily exercise. “The majority of our long-term health depends on our everyday habits,” says Henry Lodge, M.D., professor of medicine at Columbia University Medical Center in New York. His advice: Aim for a checkup every five years in your 20s, every three in your 30s, and every two in your 40s. Once you hit 50, go annually. “That’s when you can discuss how your diet, stress, and exercise habits may be impacting your risk of heart disease, diabetes, and other conditions,” Lodge says. Also go yearly if you have a family history of any of those conditions, regardless of age.

## **C+** I WEAR FLATS EVERYWHERE.

Look, we get you—they're easy to walk in, easy to pack. But they're not easy on your body. Especially if you're doing a lot of walking, flats shouldn't be your everyday shoes, says Megan Leahy, D.P.M., a podiatrist and spokesperson for the American Podiatric Medical Association. “They typically don't give you support or cushioning,” she says. In flats, your feet are subjected to excess stress and pressure, which can lead to pain in your feet, knees, hips, and back.

We're not saying stilettos are the answer, but you should look for a heel height of at least 1 inch. And when you do wear flats, choose shoes with somewhat rigid soles, which means they provide some support. How to tell? Use the “twist and bend” test: If they twist or bend easily, pick another pair.



PHOTOS: SHUTTERSTOCK



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**I ONLY FLOSS ONCE A WEEK.**

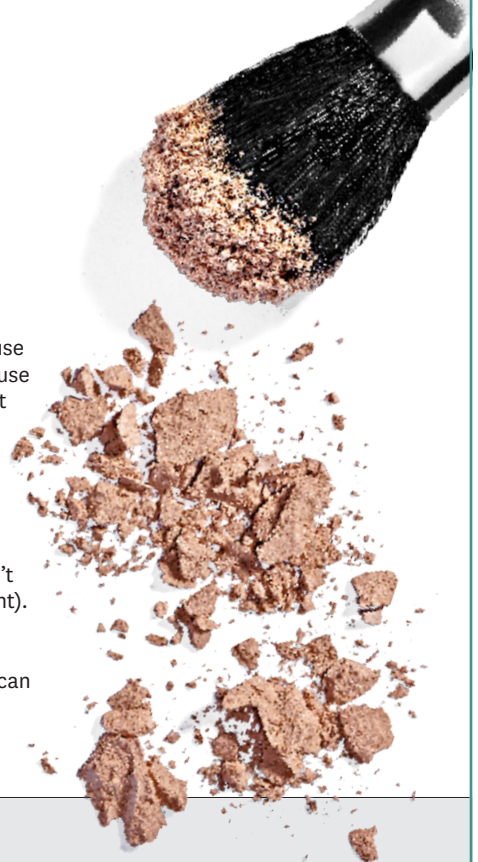
Something's better than nothing, but once a day should be your goal. "A toothbrush alone can't effectively clean the tight spaces between your teeth," says San Antonio dentist Ana Paula Ferraz-Dougherty, a spokesperson for the American Dental Association. And there's more at stake than a lecture from your dentist: Not flossing can lead to gum disease or tooth decay and might increase your risk of heart disease and diabetes. With so many different kinds of floss—waxed, unwaxed, thick, as well as prethreaded flossers—there's got to be one that works for you.

(B+)

**I'M TOO TIRED TO WASH MY FACE BEFORE BED.**

It's not a life-and-death situation, but it's not good for your skin, either. Leaving makeup on overnight can cause breakouts or irritate your skin and cause red, itchy eczema, says dermatologist Joshua Zeichner, M.D., director of cosmetic and clinical research at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York.

For occasional slip-ups, do a little damage control the next morning by changing your pillowcase (so you don't sleep on a dirty one the following night). If you frequently forget to wash up, try stashing some makeup remover towelettes in your nightstand so you can just reach over from bed and wipe.



(C+)

**I CHANGE MY SHEETS EVERY OTHER WEEK.**

OK, get ready for the gross: Wake up with a stuffy nose or headache? Could be the multitudes of dust mites and dead skin cells that have collected on your bedding, says Philip Tierno, Jr., Ph.D., professor of microbiology and pathology at the NYU School of Medicine. "Washing sheets once a week in hot water is a must, especially for allergy sufferers," Tierno says. "Even people who don't think they have allergies react to the allergens on bedding."

(C)

**I HAVE A GLASS OF WINE EVERY NIGHT—A BIG ONE.**

A little vino is good for your heart, but the key word here is *little*. For women, that means no more than 5 oz. a day. If you're pouring to the rim, that's closer to 9 oz. "If you end up having two or more glasses a day, it crosses over to harmful," says Henry Lodge, M.D., co-author of *Younger Next Year*. "At that amount, your risk of stroke, dementia, and some forms of cancer all go up." Protect yourself by being a bit more stingy with your pours. When in doubt, fill your glass halfway.

(C)

**I DON'T ALWAYS WASH FRUITS AND VEGETABLES.**

Chances are you'll be fine, but all produce should get a thorough wash under running water and be dried with a clean cloth or paper towel, says Sonya Angelone,

R.D.N., a California-based nutritionist and spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. This removes any dirt, pesticides, and bacteria. While your body can handle many types of bacteria, certain ones (like listeria and E. coli) can make you seriously ill. The FDA also advises scrubbing firm-skinned produce (like cucumbers and melons) with a clean produce brush. Even produce where you don't eat the skin should be washed: Bacteria can be transferred from peel to fruit via hands or knives.



No need to use soap or special sprays; a thorough wash under running water works.



Fermented dairy products—like yogurt and kefir—can have an anti-inflammatory effect.

**(A-) I EAT FULL-FAT CHEESE AND YOGURT.**

Real cheese, please! Enjoying a reasonable amount of the full-fat version is just fine for most people, nutritionist Sonya Angelone says. In fact, research has shown that eating full-fat dairy might help lower your risk of diabetes and even obesity, in part because some people find full-fat dairy more satisfying than reduced-fat, so they can eat less.

The catch: You've got to keep portions in check, or calories and saturated fat can quickly add up, which is not great for people with high cholesterol or other heart disease risk factors. Limit yourself to 1 cup regular yogurt and 1–2 oz. cheese per day; if that's not realistic, switch to the light versions.



**I SLEEP WITH MY CONTACTS IN.**

When you close your eyes at night, you basically create a little incubator for bacteria, says Theodore Leng, M.D., clinical assistant professor of ophthalmology at Stanford University School of Medicine. Leaving contacts in could lead to an infection or even damage your cornea.

Yes, certain contacts are “extended wear,” which technically includes overnight, but Leng says he wouldn't risk it; he removes his every night before bed.



**I CUT MY CUTICLES.**



Unless you have a hangnail, step away from the clippers. “Trimming can leave the base of your nail unprotected and increases your risk of irritation and infection,” dermatologist Joshua Zeichner says. If that area gets infected, your nail could grow abnormally. Consider pushing your cuticles back instead.

**I ONLY GET FIVE HOURS OF SLEEP EACH NIGHT.**



Chronic sleep deprivation really does a number on your body: It dampens your immune system and your brain power, and even expands your waistline.

The sweet spot for adults: seven to nine hours nightly. If that's not you, start heading to bed 10 minutes earlier each night until you've reached the right amount. It's better to be consistent than to sleep 11 hours one night and five hours the next.



**I WATCH TV IN BED BEFORE I GO TO SLEEP.**



Compared to a smartphone or laptop, the light coming from the TV is pretty far from your eyes, so it's less likely to mess with your circadian rhythms, says Joseph Ojile, M.D., medical director of the Clayton Sleep Institute in St. Louis. Just be smart about your choice of programming. Don't get revved up by watching an action-packed or gruesome show.

As for that sleep timer on the TV, Ojile says skip it. “People who get used to drifting off with the TV on have trouble going back to sleep if they wake in the middle of the night,” he says. “You shouldn't need the TV to fall sleep.” ■