

health

Check Yourself

CERTAIN HEALTH HABITS CAN'T FALL BY THE WAYSIDE FOREVER, EXPERTS AGREE. TAKE THIS QUICKIE WELLNESS AUDIT TO HIT RESET.

By Jacqueline Andriakos



\ / You've probably put off your annual physical, considering, you
 ▶ know, the times. Maybe you were Ms. Sleep Hygiene pre-COVID, and now you're on a kids-climbing-in-bed grind. But could a missed consult or bedtime become a missed diagnosis? "It's a concern in the medical community that people are falling behind with positive health behaviors and preventive care, and delaying care when they really need it," says Jane Zhu, MD, a primary care physician and assistant professor at Oregon Health and Science University.

Not being dramatic here: The rates of women heading in for mammograms and Pap smears dropped 87 and 83 percent, respectively, between February and April 2020, per a report from the IQVIA Institute for

Human Data Science. And there were an estimated 80,000 missed cancer diagnoses between March and June 2020. It makes sense, given that medical offices shuttered. "But you shouldn't have to choose between taking care of your health and getting through this pandemic," Dr. Zhu says.

You don't have to be perfect with (or freaked out by!) your status right now. "The goal is to take stock of your health and use resources that are available to you," notes Dr. Zhu. When in doubt about what's a health nonnegotiable, know that you can phone your provider's office. But you can also ask yourself the following questions to gauge where you have room for improvement, and make a few tweaks to get back in good wellness standing. (Nice to see you again, strongest self ever.)

Q: When was my last doc appointment?

If you're a healthy (and symptom-free) adult who had a checkup within the past year or so, it may not be critical that you go in for another full-fledged exam right away, says Crystal Clark, MD, assistant professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences and obstetrics and gynecology at the Feinberg School of Medicine at Northwestern University. (The same goes for a routine teeth cleaning.) Keep in mind, though, it's a "slippery slope," she says. "We don't know how long we're going to be in this crisis, and letting an issue develop for months or years has long-term consequences."

X HIT THE MARK

Schedule a 5- to 10-minute telemedicine chat with your doc if you're approaching (or overdue for) a routine checkup or scan, even if you feel solid. "Your doctor might ask you a few questions about how you're doing, review your healthy chart, and tell you, 'Hey, now's not a crucial time for you to come in,' and give you instructions on when to call and reassess," Dr. Clark says. "Or you might mention the annoying back pain nagging you for a month that you thought was no big deal, and they do end up wanting to examine further, virtually or in the flesh." That call takes minimal time and offers peace of mind or key next steps.

When it comes to routine mammograms and cervical cancer screenings in particular, keep those appointments if you have any risk factors. "So if you have a strong family history of breast cancer, for example, or you had a lesion on your cervix that was taken care of a year ago, you absolutely should still follow up and go through with your screening if you can," Dr. Zhu explains.

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 A body prob?
 Don't let time
 pass you by—
 get checked.
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Q: Is my sleep all over the place?

Blissful slumber is more of a white whale than ever. But the more you fixate on it, the worse your sleep issues often become, says Megha Shankar, MD, a health services research fellow at the Stanford School of Medicine.

Your sleep habits are also part of your “social rhythm,” adds Dr. Clark, or the day-to-day rituals you engage in (think: brushing teeth, showering) that help keep your circadian rhythm in check. “Irregularity in that social rhythm has been tied to stress, depression, and anxiety.”

“Building a healthy sleep routine starts with what you *can* control,” Dr. Shankar says.

✕ HIT THE MARK

Just commit to getting into bed at the same time nightly. That’s it. “I like to have an anchor to help keep me consistent when all the other variables change,” says Dr. Shankar. Quality of Zs, even the timing of your morning alarm, may be out of your grasp. But “building a healthy sleep routine starts with what you *can* control,” she says.

Q: Do my favorite activities still feel like self-care?

As Jessi Gold, MD, assistant professor in the department of psychiatry at Washington University in St. Louis, puts it, “We’re all in the Upside Down.” (Shout-out to *Stranger Things* fans.) But you should still feel *something* from the stuff that helped you feel better before.

When you watch a show or movie you like, do you still laugh? Is that sweaty run giving you a sense of release? Dr. Gold says, “You’re not meant to be happy every second, but you start to become more aware of when you’re no longer having a healthy range of emotions, or are losing interest

in activities and just going through the motions”—tip-offs to issues like burnout or depression.

The reason this question about small pleasures works better than *How am I feeling today?* “People actually aren’t that great at naming their emotions in a specific way,” Dr. Gold explains. “This phrasing gives you a more tangible feedback loop with yourself.”

✕ HIT THE MARK

Pose this Q often as a mini mental-health scan, like at the start and the end of your week. Other asks to add to the mix: *Have I (or my friends or fam) noticed anything uncharacteristic about me lately? What activities this week were life-giving versus energy-sucking?* Get a loved one involved to help spot patterns you might miss in yourself. Mind, mended.

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health

Will Power

Penciling in that overdue root canal is clutch for improving your health now. But you may be overlooking an important health-care check-in with big future implications. Nearly two-thirds of us haven't prepared an advance health-care directive, which details the treatments you do (or don't) want if you become incapacitated—and *everyone* should have this paperwork on file, says Tiffany Ballenger Floyd, an estate-planning attorney in Nevada and California. These docs are vital for your autonomy but will also guide a trusted family member or friend in making a tough call. Whether you go at it solo or with your partner or spouse, here's how to make your wishes known.

—Amy Wilkinson

1. Make a date with your state.

Living will and durable power of attorney paperwork varies by state. (Some jurisdictions mash the two into one form.) Your state's bar association website often has the proper fill-in-the-blank document. You'll have to make it official, and signing requirements differ too—you may need a witness, a notary, or both.

2. Have The Talk.

Appoint an agent who will "show up" for you, says Ballenger Floyd, whether it's a parent, sibling, or friend. Make sure they know they've been chosen, and have a chat about your wishes. If you don't appoint someone, a physician will consult your "next of kin," whom you may or may not want making decisions for you.

3. Spread the news.

These documents are only as powerful as they are accessible. In addition to keeping a copy, make sure your doctor and your proxy have easy access. While there isn't a national database that tracks this paperwork, some states, such as California and Nevada, have digital registries or "lock boxes."

4. Hit refresh.

It's a good idea to review your documents periodically, especially after a big life event like a marriage or death. Though directives prepared in one state are typically honored in another, Ballenger Floyd recommends that you update your forms in your new home state after a move.

Women's Health

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P. 85



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