

A CCF MEDIA ADVISORY

Celebrating Women's Health Week: 30 Minutes a Day to Better Health

National Women's Health Week (May 8-14, 2011) is a week-long observance spearheaded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office on Women's Health. The theme for 2011 is "It's Your Time." National Women's Health Week empowers women to make their health a top priority, and encourages them to take steps to improve their physical and mental health and lower their risks of certain diseases.

Although women in the U.S. enjoy longer life spans than men, by as many as seven years on average, women also report higher levels of aches and pains, headaches, disability, depression, and multiple other chronic health conditions. This is partly due to the fact that women live longer, and with older age comes the physical and cognitive declines.

Yet another reason why women's physical and mental health is often worse than men is that busy women put their own mental and physical health needs second to the needs of their children, partners, friends, and aging parents. An hour spent cleaning the bathroom, shuttling the kids to soccer practice, or putting in long hours at the office means an hour *not spent* exercising, sleeping, or even having sex - all activities that promote women's physical and mental health, and longevity.

On this Women's Health Week (and ideally, every week of the year!), women may want to grab an hour (or even 30 minutes) and use that precious time to:

1. **Catch some ZZZs.** One of the biggest threats to women's health is lack of sleep. Single working women and employed mothers of young children are the most likely to be sleep-deprived. To make matters worse, some research shows that women need 20 more minutes of sleep each night than men. Women tend to multi-task and use more of their brain than men, leading to a greater need for sleep. How much should women sleep? Experts find that 6.5 to 7.5 hours of restful sleep is associated with better mental health, lower risk of obesity and early mortality, and lower risk of multiple chronic conditions.

2. **Move it.** Cardiovascular activity, even if just a brisk walk around the block, is essential to women's health. The key is to find an activity that you find fun (try a Zumba class) or convenient. Public health experts recommend that adults get a weekly minimum of two hours and 30 minutes of moderate activity (such as brisk walking or dancing) or one hour and 15 minutes of vigorous activity (jogging or jumping rope). Still, stealing this much time for exercise can be a challenge from many American women. The good news is that even tiny steps, like taking the stairs rather than the elevator at work, or parking at the spot furthest away from the grocery store entrance, does the body good.

3. **Make love.** Having (consensual) sex with one's partner isn't just fun, it provides dozens of health benefits. Regular sexual activity in a committed relationship is associated with: stress reduction, lower blood pressure, stronger immune systems, better cardiovascular health, enhanced self-esteem, stronger relationship quality, and stronger pelvic floor muscles. The hormone oxytocin, which surges during sex, also is associated with better sleep and pain reduction, especially for headaches. All that, and it burns calories too.

4. **Eat a healthy home-prepared meal.** Fast-food can be tempting and tasty, especially for busy women. However, home-prepared meals - even if just a simple pasta dish with a pre-made salad, have multiple health benefits. Home-cooked meals tend to be lower in fat and sodium than fast-food. Plus, studies show that we tend to eat much larger portions in restaurants than at home, so people who dine out frequently are at greater risk of overweight and obesity.

5. **Phone a friend.** Surveys with thousands of Americans show that people who answer yes to the simple question: "do you have a confidante or someone with whom you can share your personal feelings?" is associated with lower risk of depression, poor health, and multiple daily symptoms like headaches or fatigue. Having one or two true friends can be better than having 1,000 distant Facebook friends.

6. **Have a heart-to-heart with your partner.** The old wisdom was that "marriage is good for our health." The new wisdom is that "good marriage is good for our health." Romantic partners who enjoy frequent warm and non-judgmental conversations have better heart health as well as longer life span. Physical closeness, such as hugs and holding hands, also helps bring down our stress levels and may help reduce risks of heart disease and high blood pressure. "Couple time" is essential for both partners' health.

7. **Find a brainy hobby.** Although the evidence is inconclusive, some Alzheimer's disease researchers have found that keeping our minds sharp by doing activities like crossword puzzles, reading, playing a musical instrument, or playing chess may help to delay the onset of dementia later in life. Several studies even show that learning the intricate steps of ballroom dancing (and then continuing to practice these steps for years) is associated with reduced risk of dementia. Keeping our minds sharp today may help to keep them sharp tomorrow.

8. **Learn or practice a second language.** Some researchers have also found that persons who speak more than one language are less likely to suffer from dementia. Bilingual people exercise certain parts of their brain system, by sorting through multiple options for each word, and switching back and forth between the two languages. This activity has been found to keep brains nimble in the long-term.

9. **Lift weights.** Osteoporosis is threat to middle-aged and older women, especially women who are white, Asian, narrow-boned, and who have avoided calcium-based products like milk and cheese. According to recent estimates, more than 30 million women in the U.S. suffer from osteoporosis or low bone mass. Weight-bearing exercises are an essential strategy for building up bone density, and warding off the threat of osteoporosis. Even women who don't own a set of weights can do 15 repetitions of lifting soup cans over their head. As with cardiovascular activity, doing something is better than nothing.

10. **Just breathe.** Take some time to breath, stretch, or even do a yoga pose or two. Activities that strengthen the "core" or mid-section of the body help us with our balance - an important skill that helps to fend off falls, especially among older women. Yoga, in particular, helps with posture, strength, and flexibility. Deep-breathing exercises are a great way to reduce stress and anxiety, and the perfect way to clear out one's worries.

Deborah Carr is professor of sociology at Rutgers University, and co-director of the National Institute of Mental Health postdoctoral training program at Rutgers' Institute for Health, Health Care Policy, and Aging Research. She has published widely on health, obesity, aging, family relationships, and end-of-life issues. Her research has been featured in The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, ABC News, TIME, Newsweek, and other national media.

Tel: [732-309-1807](tel:732-309-1807) . Email: carrds@rci.rutgers.edu

ABOUT CCF: The Council on Contemporary Families is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to providing the press and public with the latest research and best-practice findings about American families. Our members include demographers, economists, family therapists, historians, political scientists, psychologists, social workers, sociologists, as well as other family social scientists and practitioners. Founded in 1996 and based at the University of Illinois at Chicago, the Council's mission is to enhance the national understanding of how and why contemporary families are changing, what needs and challenges they face, and how these needs can best be met.

To learn more about other briefing papers and about our annual April conferences, including complimentary press passes for journalists, contact Stephanie Coontz, CCF's Director of Research and Public Education: coontzs@msn.com .