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# Wellness Matters

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Good Health

## Mind Your Mental Health

The winter months can be challenging for many and can take a toll on your mental health. Shorter days and cooler temperatures may cause you to spend more time indoors or get less natural light exposure. As the pandemic continues, you may be finding this time of year even more gloomy.

**Winter Blues** Health experts refer to this seasonal sadness as the “winter blues.” Some people may even develop a more severe type of depression called seasonal affective disorder (SAD), which is specifically related to the shortening of daylight hours. However, winter is a great time to develop healthy self-care habits to boost your mental health for the months ahead. Try the following tactics:

- Get outside for some natural sunlight. Not only can nature help relax your mind, but the air can be refreshing.
- Keep up with your fitness routine, as exercise can

improve your mood. It doesn't need to be a formal workout either; just 15 minutes of movement each day can help.

- Create a winter bucket list so you have fun activities to look forward to during the season. This can help shift your thinking from negative to positive.



- Stay connected with friends and family—even if you do so virtually. It's essential to surround yourself with people who support and inspire you.

Everyone has occasional bouts of sadness, but these feelings are usually temporary. If your mood

lingers to the point of interfering with daily life functions, talk with your doctor about your concerns.

**Depression** Depression is a common but serious illness. There is no single cause of depression, but it likely results from a mix of environmental, biochemical, genetic, and psychological factors. Not everyone experiences the same symptoms, which can include the following:

- Persistent sad, anxious, or “empty” feelings
- Guilty, worthless, and/or hopeless feelings
- Irritability, restlessness, and/or fatigue
- Loss of interest in activities once found pleasurable
- A dramatic change in appetite
- Insomnia
- Thoughts of suicide

If experiencing any of these symptoms, talk with your doctor—depression is a treatable disorder.

## Making Better Health Care Decisions

With the start of the new year, now is the time to refocus on your health. An important step in this process is to establish a continual, trusting relationship with your health care providers, particularly your primary doctor. Research shows that patients who have a good relationship with their doctor receive better care and are happier with the care they receive. These patients feel empowered to openly and effectively communicate, resulting in collaborative, informed health care choices.

Be sure the doctor you choose to visit is covered by your plan and is seeing new patients. Ask relevant questions to determine if the doctor will fit your needs, such as average wait times for appointments or if the doctor specializes in a particular disease. If necessary, ask to speak directly to the doctor over the phone or in person. Take your time choosing a doctor and, as appropriate, visit at least once per year so that you can build and maintain a rapport.

Overall, it's important to be an active participant in your health care. To make better health care decisions, remember the acronym "**PREPARED**" when discussing a health issue; delay any decisions until you are satisfied with your answers:

**P**rocedure: what course of action is being suggested?

**R**eason: why is action needed—is your health in harm?

**E**xpectation: what benefit(s) can you reasonably expect from a suggested care plan?

**P**robability: what are the odds you will achieve those benefits?

**A**lternatives: what other choices are available?

**R**isks: what possible problems could occur?

**E**xpense: what are your costs?

**D**ecision: do you have enough information to make an informed choice?



## Healthy & Nutritious Reduce Your Alcohol Intake

Excessive alcohol use is responsible for 1 in 10 deaths among working-age adults every year, according to the CDC. Excessive alcohol consumption has immediate effects that increase the risk of injuries, motor vehicle crashes, and alcohol poisoning, plus serious long-term health issues like liver disease, high blood pressure, stroke, cancer, or depression.

There are clear health benefits to drinking less: you may experience increased energy, better sleep quality, improved mental health, boosted immune system, and a healthier complexion. After weighing the risks and benefits of alcohol, you may be considering reducing your consumption; try the following:

- Track your intake: be aware of quantity
- Set a limit: drink in moderation
- Opt for nonalcoholic alternatives: try mocktails, sparkling water, or juice instead
- Learn how to say "no": politely decline!
- Try a dry month: "Dry January" is gaining steam; try a month-long break from alcohol

If you or a loved one are concerned about alcohol use, talk to a doctor or use the *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration* (SAMHSA) National Helpline by calling 800-662-HELP (4357).