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The ultimate HEALTHY DAY

If you could have the healthiest day of your life, what might it look like? Here it is, in a nutshell. By Nick Hadley



LUNCHTIME

Busy people tend to eat at their desks, however, you'll get more done in the day if you take your lunch outside and nurture your "nature neurons". A University of Michigan study found that spending an hour in green environs such as a park improves memory and boosts attention span by 20 per cent.

+ TIP: To help ward off that afternoon slump, Burgess recommends having a good lunch that includes at least one serve of wholegrains (brown rice, quinoa or pasta), one serve of quality protein such as a tin of tuna or an egg and at least two cups of salad or cooked veg. "Because it's hard to get your five serves of veg a day, if you don't include them at lunch you're never going to get there," she adds.



5PM

When you knock off work, really knock off. "Pick a point along the road or a train/bus stop on the way home and decide that once you pass it, you no longer think about work," clinical psychologist Dr Cindy Nour says. "Instead, think about home, your kids or being present for your partner."

Before you get home, stop off at the gym for some weight training. "It helps with maintaining bone mineral density, so as we age we can maintain the ability to complete daily tasks with ease," Williams says. "It's also associated with reducing depression and anxiety." Additionally, the more muscle mass you have, the faster your metabolism will be. "So even when you're lying down watching TV, your resting metabolic rate will be higher."

+ TIP: Research has found that post-work exercise is optimal for your body. "Studies show that muscle temperature and other physical parameters reach a peak in late afternoon, so your body is ready to exercise then," University of Cambridge neurobiology professor Michael Hastings says.



NIGHT-TIME

Connect with friends face to face. Good social connections lead to a 50 per cent increase in longevity, regardless of age, gender and health, the journal PLOS Medicine reports. What better reason to meet pals for dinner?

A recent study reveals that only 8.2 per cent of Australians meet the recommended vegetable intake, so Burgess says to aim for the ideal dinner plate of "half veg or salad, a quarter of lean protein (meat, seafood or a meat alternative), and a quarter of a quality grain such as brown rice, pasta or bread".

Finally, sleep well. "Have a routine where you go to bed at about the same time," sleep expert and Victoria University associate professor Gerard Kennedy says. "And get up at roughly the same time."

+ TIP: Have any snacks at least an hour before bed and make them carbohydrate-based – such as wholegrain crackers with a thin spread of peanut butter – to help raise the body's production of serotonin and prepare the brain for sleep.


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EARLY MORNING

Ideally, you'd open your eyes to the sounds of nature and the light of the rising sun through half-open blinds. "Daylight signals your biological clock to stop secreting melatonin, a hormone that makes you sleepy," psychologist James B Maas says.

If this isn't feasible, try the Lark Un-Alarm Clock and Sleep Sensor (\$129.95). This wristband delivers gentle vibrations to your wrist to softly rouse you from your sleep, rather than the jolt of an alarm. It works with iPhone, iPod touch and iPad.

+ TIP: A recent Harvard study found that women who woke up with flowers nearby felt a day-long mood lift.



BREAKFAST

Choose food wisely and you'll be rewarded with more energy, a stable mood and a steady appetite. For up-to-date and rigorously researched information on food choices, refer to the National Health and Medical Research Council's publication Australian Dietary Guidelines, which is free from the food fads that sweep through the internet.

Accredited practising dietitian Emily Burgess says: "The best diet [for a whole day] would include plenty of vegetables, fruit, reduced-fat dairy, wholegrain breads and cereals and quality protein: lean meat, chicken, fish, nuts and seeds."

If your breakfast consists of a good-size portion of protein (such as a cup of low-fat Greek yoghurt with a 30g serve of chopped almonds), you'll feel fuller and less likely to overeat for the rest of the day, according to data from the University of Missouri.

Before you head out the door, set aside five or 10 minutes to meditate. Focused meditation has been linked to the formation of larger amounts of grey matter in the brain areas associated with positive emotions, mental stability and heightened focus.

+ TIP: Before your first cup of tea, coffee or juice, drink a glass of water. The journal Obesity reports that increased water consumption can rev up the metabolism.



9AM, AT WORK

Open-plan offices can sound like munitions factories, but rather than blocking out distractions, pay attention to the effect they have on your body (such as a tense jaw or shoulders) and relax those areas.

+ TIP: "Prolonged sitting is associated with premature death, heart disease and diabetes," Katie Williams, an accredited exercise physiologist at Exercise & Sports Science Australia, says. "Get up every 30 minutes, place your bin on the other side of the room or stand up when you're on the phone."