

AGE WELL

WANT TO LIVE WELL TO A RIPE OLD AGE? THESE SLEEP AND EATING HABITS WORK TOGETHER TO HELP OUR MIND AND BODY AGE IN A HEALTHY WAY, SAYS **DANIELA MASSENZ**.

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FOR ALL SORTS of reasons we can't always predict what will happen to our health as we age, but most of us will probably live longer than our parents, thanks to advances in health, medicine and general lifestyle enhancements. And no one wants to live those years as a physical or mental old crock, am I right? Some simple habits can help us have meaningful years with good quality of life.

IT'S ALL ABOUT INFLAMMATION

Our recommendations are complementary and intertwined, and their common denominator is a reduction in inflammation.

'Inflamm-ageing' describes chronic low-grade inflammation that's believed to accelerate biological ageing and worsen many age-related diseases. Thanks, Wiki!

Research shows compellingly that systemic inflammation is an underlying cause in many of our health problems – like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, Alzheimer's, depression, weight gain, raised cortisol, insulin resistance, high blood pressure and other metabolic diseases.

The interconnections between the systems of our body explains why, for example, you'll often find that a depressed person will experience gut issues, weight gain, sleep problems (too much or too little) as well as arthritis. We overwork, sleep too little, eat unhealthily and live in a state of heightened stress, which causes an inflammatory response.

So, looking after our sleep, our diet and our gut can only have benefits for our present and our future.

IMPORTANT! Before you embark on fasting or take measures to alter your gut flora, please consult your doctor to confirm that these are suitable for your personal health needs.

1. SLEEP WELL

Huge amounts of research and literature have been generated in the past few years about the importance of sleep. Their conclusion: Getting regular, good-quality sleep is one of the best things we can do for our health.

You'd think this would be a no-brainer. But an increasing number of us – children and adults alike, and mostly women – are chronically sleep

deprived. Most women will also experience bouts of insomnia during their lives (especially during menopause).

WHAT'S THE MAGIC FORMULA?

With sleep, it's about quantity AND quality. How much is ideal? Experts agree we should have a minimum of seven and up to nine hours a night for our bodies, brains and emotions to function optimally. We have been told that we need less sleep as we age but, surprisingly, the difference is negligible, according to the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC). A teen needs 8-10 hours of zzzs to cope with all that growing, while adults aged 18-60 need seven or more hours. Those aged 60-64 need 7-9 hours, and 65+ still need 7-8 hours.

HOW DO I KNOW I'M GETTING GOOD-QUALITY SLEEP?

The CDC guides us:

- ❖ Do you wake feeling unrested even after getting enough sleep?
- ❖ Do you hit the snooze button repeatedly?
- ❖ Do you wake up repeatedly during the night?





- ❖ Do you snore or gasp for air (both symptoms of sleep disorders)? If it's a 'yes' to one or more of these, your sleep quality is not optimal.

WHY DO WE NEED SLEEP?

It's simple. If we don't sleep, we die, eventually. Sleep is when our body works hard on vital repair. Interestingly, there's only a 10% decrease in our metabolic rate while we sleep.

Repair occurs when we're in REM (rapid eye movement) sleep. It takes 3-4 hours to get into the first REM cycle, so if you don't sleep enough or have interrupted sleep, you miss out on this essential repair.

HOW SLEEP AFFECTS OUR BODY

- ❖ Our muscles relax and tissue-repairing growth hormone is cranked up to repair weakened muscle fibres.
- ❖ Poor sleep causes chronic low-grade inflammation (because of that REM cycle).
- ❖ Lack of sleep increases appetite and, in turn, weight gain, because the gut increases production of the appetite-stimulating hormone ghrelin (which triggers sugar cravings). We consume more kilojoules in an effort to keep going. Fatigue also suppresses leptin, a fat-cell hormone that tells your brain when it's time to stop eating.
- ❖ Sleep also regenerates cells, including skin cells.

SLEEP AND THE BRAIN

- ❖ It is very necessary downtime for our brain.
- ❖ Sleep deprivation causes depression, stress, anxiety, irritability, forgetfulness and fuzzy thinking.
- ❖ It slows us down and we make more mistakes. The American National Institutes of Health has likened the effect of sleep deprivation on the brain to driving while drunk.
- ❖ During sleep, enzymes repair

brain cell damage caused by free radicals as well as removing toxic waste by-products.

❖ Lack of sleep means the brain's neurotransmitters and neurons are unable to rest or regenerate. This has been implicated in the development of Alzheimer's.

LIGHT, MELATONIN, RHYTHMS – OLÉ!

Light, melatonin (sleep onset hormone) and circadian rhythms (the tiny biological changes our body experiences around the clock) are all linked in a complex system, a *BMC Public Health* article says.

A chief culprit for our increasing loss of sleep is technology. Electronics are stimulating, as we go down various online rabbit holes instead of powering down that device. And the specific artificial light of screens disrupts the light-dark cycles of our circadian rhythms by suppressing melatonin.

❖ Download the free F.lux app at just-getflux.com – it adjusts your screen's brightness according to time of day.

SIMPLE TIPS FOR A GOOD NIGHT

DO:

- ❖ some exercise daily, so both your body and your mind are tired
- ❖ drink soothing, caffeine-free chamomile or lemon balm tea from afternoon
- ❖ have a relaxing bath – the temperature drop as your body cools helps with sleep
- ❖ switch off electronics an hour before bedtime (set an alarm if you have to)
- ❖ take 600mg of magnesium half an hour before bed – It has a direct calming effect on brain and muscles
- ❖ sleep in your bed, in a cool, dark, quiet room
- ❖ spray relaxing lavender essential oil on your pillow.

❖ Try a mental power-down exercise if your mind is buzzing: Put each thought into a wastepaper basket as it floats into your head. Or power down your body: Envision an on/off switch on each body part (feet, calves, thighs, belly, torso, head). Breathe in deeply and exhale as you flick the switch to power down each part, as you would a laptop. Start with your feet and move up the body, ending with your head.

DON'T:

❖ eat too late, and avoid caffeine and alcohol at night.

2. FASTING

Unlike other eating fads, intermittent fasting (IF) seems to be here to stay, and it appears to have some substantial benefits.

The Mayo Clinic says that, besides weight loss, IF has an anti-ageing effect and can improve markers of physical and mental health. Some scientists think fasting puts our cells under mild stress. Responding to this stress strengthens the cells' ability to deal with stress and potentially fight off some diseases.

SO WHAT IS 'IF'?

It's a blanket term for a number of fasting protocols. The rule is limiting yourself to eating within a specific time frame. Outside that time, you eat very little or no food at all.

AND THE BENEFITS ARE ...

WEIGHT MANAGEMENT

A fasting period causes your body to use its own fat stores to burn energy.

As reported by Bizjournals.com, the day's last meal provides energy to fuel the body for a couple of hours. Then, the body uses stored energy for the next six hours. After that, it shifts to burning off fat as its energy source. This is why fasting protocols are 16 hours or

'A fasting period causes your body to use its own fat stores to burn energy.'

longer, to give the body time to transition into fat burning,' explains Luke Corey, a performance dietitian at the Mayo Clinic. When fasting is combined with exercise, you could expect to lose between 1.5 to 2kg a week.

POSITIVE EFFECTS ON AGEING

Corey goes on to explain that fasting supercharges the metabolism, so the body breaks down nutrients more efficiently and burns more calories.

It has also been shown to slow down the degradation of DNA and accelerate DNA repair, slowing down the ageing process. It increases antioxidant levels and can help to reduce chronic inflammation that occurs as people age.

IMPROVED PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Various studies show that IF results in improved cholesterol levels. Good high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol is increased, while bad low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol is decreased.

It can also help lower blood pressure, improve glucose control and reduce fat deposits in the liver.

Fasting can also enhance the gut microbiome (see more below), and can help with sleep quality, cognition and memory, Bizjournals.com reports.

CHOOSE YOUR BEST FAST

It all sounds simple (and it is), but you need to determine which type of fasting is best for you.

IMPORTANT! There are some contraindications to IF – if you're diabetic or have a blood-sugar issue, for instance, under 18, pregnant, or have a history of eating disorders. Consult your doctor or a dietician before you proceed.

Healthline.com points out that there is some evidence IF may not be as beneficial for some women as it is for men, because female bodies are extremely sensitive to calorie restriction. There have been reports of blood-sugar control issues and menstrual cycle changes. To reduce any adverse effects, it is recommended that women rather do daily 14-16 hour fasts, the 5:2 diet or modified alternate-day fasting.

TYPES OF FASTING

DAILY METHOD This is the most popular and follows a 18/6, 16/8 (14/10 if you're a woman) pattern. So, you eat regular, healthy foods during a six-, eight- or 10-hour period each day, then you fast for the remaining 14, 16 or 18 hours. For instance, you can eat from 8am to 4pm (eight-hour period) or 10am to 8pm in the 10-hour eating window. This method has been found to be the most sustainable.

5:2 METHOD

The average adult needs about 8 700 kilojoules (2 079 calories) a day to function. Here, you eat normal, healthy meals for five days a week and limit yourself to 500 to 600 calories (2 092 to 2 500 kilojoules) for two days.

ALTERNATE-DAY METHOD You eat normally every other day. On fasting days, you eat only 25 per cent of your daily caloric needs. For example, if you eat 8 700 kJ on normal days, you'll eat only 2 092 kJ (500 calories) on the fasting days.

24-HOUR METHOD You fast for 24 hours before eating again, usually only once or twice a week. The downside of this can be extreme fatigue and irritability, as well as headaches. The other methods are gentler.

WHAT YOU CONSUME IS CRUCIAL

Doing intermittent fasting is not an excuse to binge on the 'bad' stuff when you do eat. For good results, stick to a healthy, nutritious diet with lean protein (to prevent the body consuming your muscle), whole foods and plenty of colourful vegetables as well as unrefined carbs.

During the fasting periods, you may drink black coffee, black or green tea and water, without disturbing the fast.



3. LOOK AFTER YOUR GUT

Gut-health maintenance is becoming mainstream. Medical researchers have suspected a link between gut health and skin health for nearly a century, but research has only recently revealed just how much gut health can impact all areas of our body and psyche.

OUR SECOND BRAIN

The brain and gut start out with the same type of tissue in a foetus. As it grows, one part develops into our central nervous system, while the other controls the functioning of our gastrointestinal tract. Connected by a nerve, both systems work together and influence one another, which is why we often feel gastrointestinal symptoms when we are anxious.

WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL ABOUT THE GUT?

It's the host with the most. Our gut hosts our microbiome – a colony of many millions of good bacteria that play an important role in our immune and digestive systems. There are also bad bacteria, and the key to a healthy gut is keeping these in check. We also need a balance of different types of good bacteria.

IT'S ABOUT IMMUNITY

It's been discovered that over 70% of the body's immune system is located in our gut tissue.

IT'S A PRODUCER AND FACILITATOR

Gut bacteria produce the B 'energy' vitamins and influence our body's ability to use vitamin D. About 9% of our serotonin is produced in the gut, not to mention many of our other 'happy' and 'anti-anxiety' brain chemicals.

IT KEEPS US TRIM

One study found that lean people have 70% more gut bacteria (more of the type we want) than overweight people.

IT MAKES OUR SKIN HAPPY

While we may not understand why entirely, improving our gut health has been shown to have an impact on skin conditions such as eczema and acne. Taking lactobacillus and bifidobacterium (good bacteria) helps boost gut immunity. This can reduce the severity of skin allergy conditions and inflammation (which also causes premature skin ageing).

IT HELPS US SLEEP

The gut produces 400 times more melatonin than the brain's pineal gland, and its production is affected by gut bacteria balance. Low vitamin D, melatonin and serotonin levels are also linked with IBS (irritable bowel syndrome).

AND, THAT BRINGS US TO... INFLAMMATION

When all is right in our gut, the good guys and the bad live in harmony; the gut wall allows nutrients to enter the body, while toxins (harmful bacteria, viruses and fungi) are kept out. When an imbalance causes the bad guys to take over, toxins can enter the bloodstream, sending our immune system into overdrive as it detects the unwelcome intruders. It overreacts, and – presto – you have inflammation.

HOW CAN I TELL IF MY GUT IS UNHAPPY?

Obvious signs include IBS, diarrhoea, constipation, bloating and wind. But gut imbalances can also be seen in things like sugar cravings, brain fog, adrenal fatigue, eczema and acne.

THINGS THAT MESS WITH OUR GUT

Excessive antibiotic use. They kill both the good and bad bacteria, so reserve antibiotics for when you absolutely need them. And take a probiotic supplement too.

Hormonal birth control.

Stress and too little sleep.

Eating processed, nutrient-poor food, refined grains and sugar.

Alcohol and caffeine.

Eating too little plant fibre and other prebiotics.

GUT NURTURE

Poor digestion means we don't process and extract nutrients efficiently, even from nutritious foods.

Eat prebiotic-rich foods. Garlic, onions, lentils and chickpeas have a particular kind of fibre that gut microbes feed on. They then produce short-chain fatty acids that improve gut health and reduce inflammation.

Eat minimally processed food, lean meat, garlic, ginger and oregano oil.

Fermented foods like kimchi, sauerkraut, tempeh, yoghurt and kombucha are chock-full of probiotics.

Eat good fats (cold pressed extra-virgin olive oil, salmon, avocado) and take an omega-3 supplement.

It's always best to get nutrients from food, but probiotic supplements are a good stopgap. Make sure you choose a quality brand with live, multiple strains of probiotics that include lactobacillus and bifidobacterium.

Get extra support with digestive enzymes like amylase, protease, lactase, bromelain and papain. Blended formulas break down a wide range of foods.

Take a good multivitamin.

• For more on the importance of supplementing your diet, turn to page XXX.

WANT TO READ MORE?

'The Neuroprotective Aspects of Sleep' on ncbi.nlm.nih.gov

'Intermittent Fasting For Women: A Beginner's Guide' on healthline.com

'Intermittent fasting can aid in weight loss, anti-aging and overall health' on bizjournals.com

'What to know about intermittent fasting for women after 50' on webmd.com