

Steps to good health, one at a time

We asked Jean Hailes specialist women's health GP, Dr Lee Mey Wong, for her tips on how to get on track for healthy living.

We're living longer thanks to the advances in medicine, better nutrition, healthcare, education, and economic wellbeing. But are we living more healthy lives? The statistics suggest not.

According to 2017-2018 [data](#) provided by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, three in five women were overweight or obese and one in three women exceeded the alcohol risk guidelines.

We struggle with mental health too. According to the 2020 Jean Hailes National Women's Health Survey, one in three respondents reported having had anxiety and one in four depression.

But there's good news – women do want to improve their health. The same survey revealed that the three topics women wanted more information on were anxiety, weight management, and healthy eating/nutrition.

Everyday steps count

It's possible to reset your health, even with small everyday steps. Australian Government [guidelines](#) suggest that, every week, we try to notch up between 150 to 300 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity – activity where you're exercising but can still talk – or 75 to 150 minutes of vigorous intensity physical activity – activity where you're huffing and puffing so much that you find it hard to talk.

They're important steps for our long-term health. Being overweight or obese can take a huge toll on health and can contribute or lead to serious conditions like type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer.

Dr Wong is a great believer in the benefits of physical activity and fitness on physical and mental wellbeing. She says the targets are a great starting point for women, and can be managed simply. "You don't have to rely on a gym, and you don't need sophisticated equipment to be fit," she explains. "You can just go back to basics by getting on a bike or going for a walk."

Activity time

As a mother to two young children, Dr Wong understands that many women can be time poor. She points to the Jean Hailes Women's Health Survey, which revealed that 31.7% of women aged 25-44 did not have enough time to attend health check examinations.

Her tip for exercise is to not wait for the time to do it, but to make it part of your weekly schedule.

“One of the strategies for time-poor women is to schedule in exercise instead of being impromptu about it,” she says.

“To reach the 150-minute target, women would have to sit down and work out on what days they can exercise. So many women miss out because they are too busy, too tired or, if they schedule it at the end of the day, lacking the motivation.

“It's best to schedule exercise at the start of the day when they feel most motivated.”

Alcohol alert

As our lives were hijacked by COVID-19, more of us turned to alcohol to soothe our stresses and strains. Around 18% of the respondents in the Jean Hailes National Women's Health Survey admitted to drinking more. This was highest among women aged 25-44 (25.8%).

Yet there are major health risks associated with alcohol. “The risk of breast cancer goes up by 10% if you go from drinking nothing to one standard drink every day,” says Professor Kate Conigrave, chair of the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) Alcohol Working Group, which late last year released [new guidelines](#) to reduce the health risks from drinking alcohol.

The guidelines suggest that we drink no more than 10 standard drinks a week and no more than four standard drinks on any one day. For those under the age of 18, or women who are pregnant or breastfeeding, no alcohol at all is the advice. The less you drink, the lower your risk of harm from alcohol.

Professor Conigrave says the new guidelines advise a lower 'safe' level of alcohol because of growing evidence that alcohol, even in low doses, increases the risk of breast, colon and rectal cancers. It can also increase the risk of cancers of the mouth, throat, oesophagus and liver.

Dr Wong says she often advises her patients to have a glass of water sitting beside a glass of wine. “Not only does it tend to limit the sips of wine you take, but it's also good for hydration,” she adds.

Eating well

A diet rich in wholegrains, fibres, fruit and vegetables will put you on the road to good nutrition and healthy living. It's also advisable to limit the amount of fat, sugar and salt you use. Choosing healthy and nutritious foods can help to reduce your risk of developing chronic health issues like diabetes, heart disease and obesity.

Sleep

Dr Wong says it's very important to get enough good-quality sleep. "If there was one thing I could improve for women in all stages of life, it would be sleep," she says. "It impacts so much on the quality of life, mental and physical."

She believes the must-have eight hours of sleep is a myth and that when it comes to sleep, quality is more important than quantity. "Some people could have good-quality four or six hours sleep a night and that is enough for them," she explains. The number of hours sleep we need is often individual. "Some mothers with young children can survive with very little sleep," she explains. "[However], it's very important for children and young people to have both length and quality of sleep."

For more information on healthy eating, physical activity, alcohol use and sleep, visit <https://www.jeanhailes.org.au/health-a-z/healthy-living>

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