

2 News Briefs

- Attitude affects aging and brain health.
- Preserving function during prostate radiation.
- Exercise may reduce addictive cravings.

3 Vision

Don't ignore floaters and flashers.

4 Exercise

Build core strength with three key moves.

5 Treatment

Repair joints with your own platelet-rich plasma.

6 Healthy Aging

How integrative medicine can help keep you well.

7 Mind & Memory

Tips to create a positive joyful disposition.

8 Ask Dr. Ferrell

- Should I take potassium for heart health?
- Why can't I uncurl my finger?
- Can long can I keep taking HRT?

The Story Of 'biotics And Your Health

The role of pre, pro, and antibiotics in health and medicine.

Most people have taken antibiotics to get rid of a bacterial infection. While those medications have their place, it has also come to light that overprescribing and inappropriately taking antibiotics can negatively impact what is now understood to be very important bacterial colonies that live inside our gut and on our bodies. Collectively called the microbiome, the bacteria cells inside our bodies outnumber human cells by at least 10 to one, scientists estimate. This microbiome is very diverse and contains strains of good bacteria commonly referred to as probiotic bacteria. Researchers are just beginning to understand how and why the microbiome is important for human health.

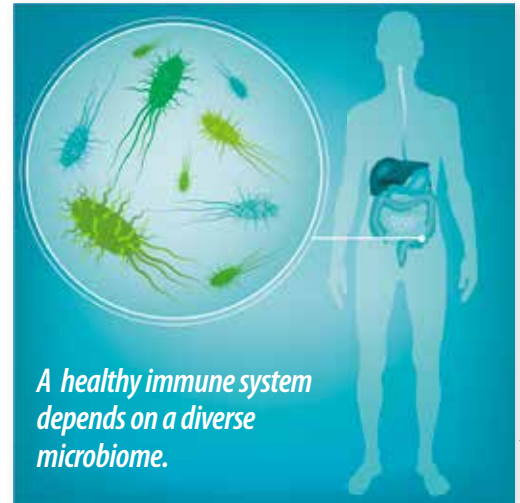
“High microbiome diversity may help protect us from illness,” explains Kirsten Tillisch, MD, associate professor of medicine, UCLA Oppenheimer Center for Neurobiology of Stress and Resilience, Division of Digestive Diseases. “It is particularly important for seniors to support a healthy microbiome by eating a diverse diet with plenty of fruits and vegetables because as we age our microbiome becomes less diverse.”

A loss in diversity could lead to increased risk of diseases or symptoms—making it ever more important to keep the bacterial colonies themselves healthy and well fed.

You Need Prebiotics to Support Probiotics

Probiotic bacteria, like all living organisms, need a food source. And that food source comes from prebiotics. Without enough prebiotics, the beneficial probiotic bacterial colonies can dwindle, leaving room for harmful bacteria to take over.

So, it's important to nourish the gut microbiome with the right foods. Prebiotic foods generally include those that are high in fiber.



Prebiotic foods include:

- Chicory
- Jerusalem artichoke
- Legumes including lentils, lima beans, chickpeas, red beans, soy products
- Resistant starches, which are found in whole grains, cooked and cooled pasta, rice and potatoes

While probiotics are getting the praise for their impact on health, they couldn't do it without the supporting role that prebiotics play.

A Closer Look at Bacteria and the Ecosystem

It's not currently possible to follow all the millions of bacterial strains that swirl inside our gut on a daily basis. To better understand how bacteria influence health, scientists are isolating specific strains to see what impacts they may have. One of the most well-known of these bacterial strains is *Lactobacillus rhamnosus* GG (LGG). This strain of bacteria, which is part of many popular probiotic products, has a reputation as a health-promoting bacteria. Researchers have found evidence that they can help with intestinal problems, respiratory infections and

Continued on page 7

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Negative Attitudes Toward Aging Affect Both Physical and Cognitive Functions

A long-term study of 4,135 adults age 50+ from the Irish Longitudinal Study on Aging (TILDA) suggests that negative perceptions about getting older may change both physical and mental health later in life. The reverse, a positive attitude, improves the experience of aging, according to the study. Researchers at Trinity College Dublin examined data collected from cognitive and frailty tests based on interviews and assessments by nurses. They reported that older adults with negative attitudes towards aging had slower walking speed and worse cognitive abilities two years later, compared to older adults with more positive attitudes towards aging. This was true even after participants' medications, mood, their life circumstances and other health changes that had occurred over the same two-year period were accounted for. Furthermore, negative attitudes towards aging seemed to affect how different health conditions interacted. Frail older adults are at risk of multiple health problems, including worse cognition. In the TILDA sample, frail participants with negative attitudes towards aging had worse cognition compared to participants who were not frail. However, frail participants with positive attitudes towards aging had the same level of cognitive ability as their non-frail peers.

Functional Anatomy Approach for Prostate Radiation Spares Critical Structures

In a recent paper published in *Lancet Oncology*, researchers reported on the capacity of vessel-sparing radiotherapy to preserve sexual function in 90 percent of patients with prostate cancer at a five-year follow-up while also maintaining excellent cure rates. Researchers looked at how MRI, and a clear understanding of functional anatomy (and its variations from patient to patient), can allow radiation oncologists to plan a course of treatment that spares critical structures. "In the past cure came at a steep price in lost quality of life, but with modern refinements it is increasingly possible to meet the new standard of successful prostate cancer treatment," says Patrick W. McLaughlin, MD, lead author and professor of radiation oncology at the University of Michigan Medical School. The benefit of the functional anatomy approach goes beyond improving sexual function as it has improved urinary and rectal function as well. MRI was deemed a critical tool for accurately outlining the prostate anatomy and planning radiation therapy. "If you define the functional structures and limit dose to them, you can achieve cure and excellent quality of life," says co-author Daniel E. Spratt, MD, chief of the genitourinary radiation oncology program at the University of Michigan. MRI may also confirm if a cancer is non-aggressive, making surveillance rather than treatment a viable option.

Exercise Increases Reward Centers in Brain and May Reduce Addictive Cravings

In a small UCLA study, researchers found that exercise combined with psychotherapy helped people addicted to methamphetamine to regain dopamine (pleasure/reward) receptors in their brain. Methamphetamine, a highly addictive drug, causes the brain to overproduce dopamine (a neurotransmitter), which creates intense euphoria. With continued abuse, the drug damages dopamine receptors. More of the drug is needed to feel pleasure, further damaging receptors. With treatment, the receptors can recover but it can take a long time. The study, published in *Neuropsychopharmacology*, randomized two groups of people. Positron emission tomography, or PET scans, showed that there was no significant difference in dopamine receptors at the beginning of the study. After eight weeks, a second PET showed that those who exercised on a treadmill three times a week for an hour and also added some resistance training had a 15 percent increase in the number of dopamine receptors compared to the nonexercisers, who showed an increase of only four percent. According to lead author Edythe London, professor of psychiatry in the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior at UCLA, understanding the molecular mechanisms by which exercise affects dopamine signaling in people who are trying to overcome addictions could lead to new clinical approaches to improve treatment not only for people with addictions but also for people with neuropsychiatric disorders. Funding for the study came from the National Institutes of Health and the National Institute on Drug Abuse. ■

Annoying Visual Floaters And Flashers

While common, don't dismiss these symptoms as they could signal serious eye problems.

Floaters look like small black dots or strings in your peripheral vision and tend to appear more often after the age of 50. These shadowy figures result when the part of your eye called the vitreous contracts.

"The vitreous starts out like a semi-solid gel," explains Pradeep Prasad, MD, ophthalmologist, UCLA Stein Eye Institute. "As we get older it liquefies and contracts. Around the age of 50, it starts to peel away from the retina and condensations form within the vitreous cavity, which we perceive as floaters."

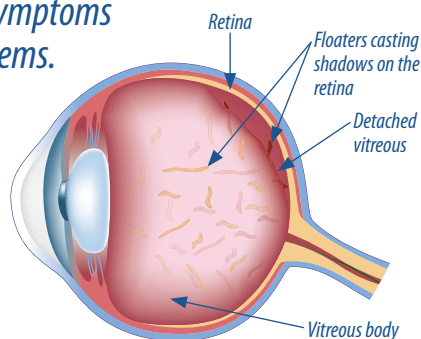
That same pulling away process can stimulate the retina and cause the perception of flashes.

Be aware of warning signs

Trouble signs are when floaters and flashers suddenly occur in abundance or have rapidly increased in number. Then, it's time to visit your eye doctor. That is because floaters and flashers may be symptoms of more serious issues, such as retinal tears, detachment, and more rarely infection and inflammation (uveitis). While you don't have to rush to the emergency department, it is recommended that you see your doctor within 24 hours. Waiting any longer puts you at risk for possible long-lasting eye damage.

"Earlier is always better," emphasizes Dr. Prasad. "If we see the tear, we can fix it immediately in the clinic with a laser. It generally takes less than 10 minutes and it is a very low-risk procedure."

It's also a very effective procedure because it can prevent a tear from turning into a more serious detachment. Once that tear turns into a detachment, it usually requires surgery to fix.



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Floaters and flashers are more common after age 50.

A Detached Retina is Serious

The retina is the light-sensitive layer of tissue that lines the inside of the eye and sends visual messages through the optic nerve to the brain. When it is pulled away from its normal position, or detached, it can cause permanent vision loss if not promptly treated.

If a retinal blood vessel is torn, blood will spread into the vitreous and block your vision. Any time vision is lost even partially, it's an emergency. Seek medical attention immediately.

Regular Screenings Can Save Your Vision

The only way to know if your floaters or flashers are innocuous or something more is to have a comprehensive eye exam. Your eye doctor will examine each eye for common vision problems as well as eye diseases—some of which do not have any early warning signs. That is why annual eye exams are generally recommended starting at age 60. It's also especially important for people with diabetes to have a comprehensive dilated eye exam at least once a year. Screening exams generally include the following:

- ➔ **Visual acuity test.** The basic eye chart test, which gauges vision at various distances.
- ➔ **Dilation.** Eye drops widen the pupil and allow the doctor to see deep tissues, including the retina, macula, and optic nerve.
- ➔ **Tonometry.** Better known as the

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

- **Floaters** and flashers typically occur after age 50.
- A sudden increase in frequency signals a potential problem—see your doctor within 24 hours.
- **Caught** early, a simple tear can be repaired in the office.
- **White** women are at the highest risk for floaters and flashers.

puff-of-air test used to assess eye pressure.

➔ **Visual field test.** This measures your peripheral vision; loss may be a sign of glaucoma or retinal tear. The last of the baby boomers will hit 65 by 2029. The National Eye Institute (NEI) estimates that 16.4 million Americans will have difficulty with vision, much of which can be fixed with glasses, contacts or surgery.

"Early detection and intervention—possibly as simple as prescribing corrective lenses—could go a long way toward preventing a significant proportion of avoidable vision loss," says NEI Director Paul A. Sieving, MD, PhD.

Those Most Likely to Be Affected

Non-Hispanic whites, particularly women, are the largest group of people affected by visual impairment and blindness, according to the NEI. African-Americans hold second place for those most likely to be visually impaired. That statistic may shift to the Hispanic population as they increase in number and age. Also, Hispanics have higher rates of diabetes, which is associated with eye diseases, most of which are treatable.

Unfortunately, there's nothing you can do to prevent floaters and flashers. But you can be wise about your eyes. Good eye health practices include wearing sunglasses especially when in exceptionally bright environments such as snow and water, eating a healthy diet and having your eyes examined every year. ■

Gain Better Balance With A Strong Core

Essential exercises to build key shoulder, hip and back muscles.

When most people think of core strength, they tend to think of stomach muscles and endless sessions of grueling situps. The truth is core muscles are about more than just abdominal muscles. The core consists of the deep muscles of the trunk. Think shoulders, back, hips and yes, stomach muscles, too.

“A strong core provides a foundation from which all movement occurs,” explains Ellen Wilson, PT, director, UCLA Department of Rehabilitation Services. “If the core isn’t strong, it doesn’t matter how strong the arms and legs are—it will be very difficult to maintain balance.”

The following core exercises can easily be done at home and do not require any special equipment. In all of them, imagine that you are wearing a corset that wraps around your torso and keeps trunk muscles drawn in and your spine long. Those same trunk muscles pull in automatically if you cough or sneeze. So, if you have trouble finding them, cough a few times and notice how your muscles pull inward.

The pelvic floor is also a core muscle. By contracting it (like you’re trying to stop the flow of urine), you are also strengthening an important core muscle. Pelvic floor muscular engagement, like the trunk muscles, should be gently drawn in to support the body *before*



Simple core exercises improve balance.

you move. If you grip too hard and tight, it will be difficult to move. Dancers move with ease and grace with a supportive, but not iron-stiff core.

Stabilize and Strengthen Shoulders

With freedom comes responsibility is an old cliché that applies aptly to the shoulders. The ball and socket joint of the shoulders enables a wide variety of movements: hitting tennis balls, reaching up into cabinets, and wrapping your arms around your loved ones. Injuries occur when the shoulder joint isn’t properly stabilized by supporting muscles. That’s one reason why micro tears in the rotator cuff are so common. To better anchor movements, you need the support of the

muscles under your arms (serratus anterior) and between the shoulder blades (rhomboids). Target those muscles with the scapular push exercise shown at the bottom of the page.

A Healthy Strong Back

The muscles along your spine form a beautiful chevron pattern connecting all the vertebrae. These muscles go from smaller to larger, providing flexibility and stability to the spine. In the Jet Airplane exercise on the next page, the goal is to lengthen and lift the spine as well as to open the front of the body. Essentially, it’s a mini backbend. It’s an ideal exercise to counterbalance constant upper back forward motions such as working at the computer and driving.

In this exercise, the upper back will arch but only slightly (it usually feels really good to do so). It’s tempting to arch back higher but the sensation of length is also every bit as important to avoid excess stress to the lower back muscles. Once you gain more flexibility and strength in your upper back, you will backbend more easily.

Strengthening Hips and Lower Belly

The Toe Dips exercise targets the deep abdominals or the corset (transversus abdominis) and strengthens the hip flexor muscle (psoas), a muscle that connects from the lower back and inserts into the front of the thigh. In this exercise, sometimes, the front of the thigh will overwork until the deep core and psoas muscle are properly developed.

SCAPULAR PUSHUPS

These can be done against a wall, on your knees with your elbows on the floor or in the more traditional pushup position on your hands and feet. The target muscles are below the armpits and between the shoulder blades.

1. Bend your elbows a few inches, squeeze your shoulder blades towards each other and hold for a few seconds.
2. Slowly push your arms into straight position and hold.

TIP: Keep your shoulders down and away from your ears.



Illustration by Alayna Paquette

EXERCISE

These exercises can all be done daily. Be sure to tighten the trunk muscles and then perform the exercise. Doing so builds the right firing

sequence of muscles, and it also creates muscle memory. Repeat each exercise 8-10 times. As you get stronger, increase repetitions. ■

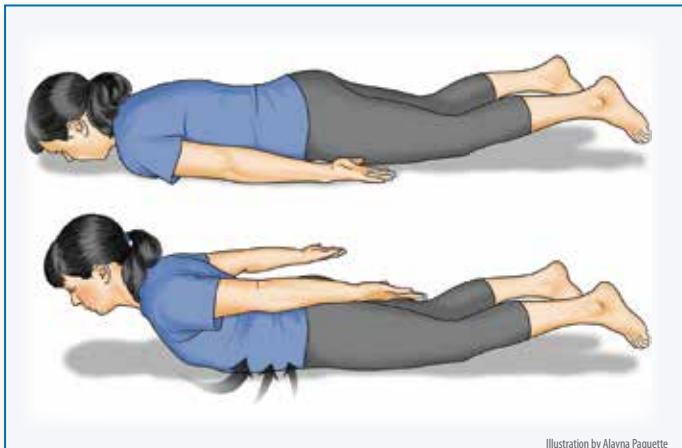


Illustration by Alayna Paquette

JET AIRPLANE LIFT

Lie face down on a mat with your forehead down and arms at your sides.

1. With your nose facing the floor, engage your trunk muscles, lift up and reach your hands behind you like a jet airplane.
2. Hold the position as you inhale, slowly lower as you exhale.

TIP: If you feel strain in your lower back, slightly tuck your tailbone under toward the floor and/or don't lift as high.

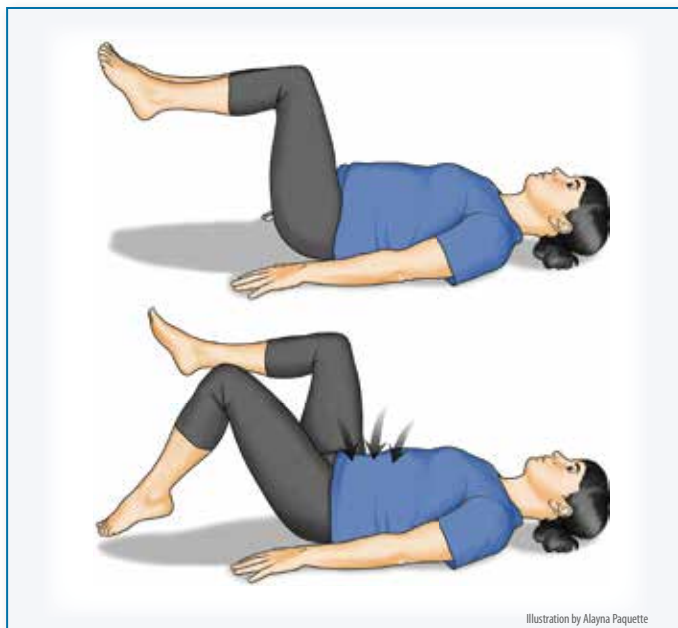


Illustration by Alayna Paquette

TOE DIPS

Lie down on your back with your knees in a tabletop position.

1. Slightly press your spine into the floor and pull your belly in like you're zipping a tight pair of jeans.
2. Inhale to reach one toe down as if dipping it into water.
3. Exhale to return the leg to 90-degree angle. Repeat with other leg.

TIP: Do not allow your hips to move, just your legs. Also, do not allow the belly to balloon outward; pull your belly in as you do this exercise.

PREVENTION

Injectable Treatment Uses Your Own Body's Inflammation Fighters

Platelet-rich plasma (PRP) is injected directly into an injured area using concentrated growth factors drawn from a patient's own blood. Studies have shown that PRP has been effective in treating chronic tendon injuries, including knees, elbows and hips. The entire process, from drawing the blood, spinning it in a centrifuge to concentrate the plasma, to patient



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PRP may help rebuild cartilage.

injection, takes about 20 minutes.

Brad Thomas, MD, orthopedic surgeon and faculty member at the UCLA Department of Orthopedics was an early adopter of the treatment. He has been treating patients with it for nearly 10 years and now teaches other

orthopedic surgeons how to successfully administer PRP.

"Growth factors in the blood

decrease the inflammatory process, decrease pain and speed natural healing," says Dr. Thomas. "Initially we were treating acute injuries with PRP but now use it to treat arthritis in most every joint, from hands to hips."

PRP is thought to regenerate cartilage. But the time to consider it is before there has been excessive cartilage damage. The ideal candidate has mild cartilage loss and wants to slow down the process.

Studies have shown that PRP can be as effective as steroid injections, with virtually no side effects except for injection site pain. Some patients benefit from a single injections but most need more than one, says Dr. Thomas. The treatment lasts for about six months. Unfortunately, insurance is unlikely to cover it. ■

What Is Integrative Medicine?

It is a coordinated, multidisciplinary health approach integrating Western and Eastern medical practices.

At its essence, integrative medicine is a patient-centered philosophy of personalized care that integrates evidenced-informed Western medical services and complementary modalities. Those include: traditional Chinese medicine (acupuncture and herbs); mind-body practices such as yoga and tai chi; meditation in various forms; and massage therapy. The general goal is to provide healing with less-invasive interventions whenever possible. Also, integrative medicine is not always about treating diseases; it's about helping healthy people maintain and optimize their health.

Though anyone can hang a sign outside their door claiming to be an integrative healthcare practitioner, there is a major guiding association, the Academic Consortium for Integrative Medicine and Health (ACIMH), to which most major medical centers subscribe. Its mission includes establishing standards for research in integrative medicine and integrating complementary treatments into clinical care within academic institutions. Among its members are UCLA, Harvard, Johns Hopkins, Duke, Cleveland Clinic and many others nationwide.

Justin Laube, MD, is an integrative primary care physician at the UCLA's Center for East-West Medicine who works with senior patients and finds that many benefit from the integrative approach. "Many patients feel overwhelmed by the complexity of medical care and are often struggling with polypharmacy, or excessive use of prescription medications," explains Dr. Laube. "At our clinic, we help patients find lower risk, low-cost options to manage medical concerns, and offer a variety of methods to optimize their wellbeing."

For some patients that may mean prioritizing the prescription medi-



Integrative medicine reaffirms the relationship between practitioner and patient, focuses on the whole person, is informed by evidence, and makes use of all appropriate therapeutic and lifestyle approaches, healthcare professionals and disciplines to achieve optimal health and healing.

—Academic Consortium for Integrative Medicine and Health

cations that are truly essential, and reducing extraneous medications that are increasing risk without providing long-term benefit. For all patients, healthy lifestyle choices are part of the treatment plan.

Defining the Ailment and Treatment

Discovering what's really wrong with a patient is akin to solving a mystery. Sometimes the symptoms are clear-cut and the treatments choices are obvious. Others are not so easy.

Such was the case with one of Dr. Laube's patients, a 60-year-old woman who recently emigrated from Iran. Her chart detailed a long list of medications for chronic migraines, none of which provided much relief. When asked about her symptoms, she described feeling heaviness in her head. "She couldn't really open her eyes," explains Dr. Laube. "When we asked her about her life, we discovered she was a caregiver

to a husband with complex medical issues. She also has a lot of stressors related to the move from Iran. Most of her symptoms came from that complex stress."

Dr. Laube encouraged her to see a psychologist and to try the resources available through UCLA's MARC (Mindful Awareness Research Center). She took his advice. Sometime thereafter she reported that her vision was less blurred and was pleased that she had tools for stress that didn't involve frequent trips to the doctor or taking prescription medications.

Finding Integrative Providers

An online search will result in a plethora of integrative medicine clinics. Many are run by internal medicine, family medicine and preventive medicine doctors who are board certified in their fields. They may or may not be aligning with the ACIMH definition. According to Laube, some clinics are cash only and may sell supplements, vitamin infusions, and other services that can be controversial. "For now, I recommend integrative medicine providers who take insurance and are not trying to sell you anything beyond good health and medical management advice," says Dr. Laube. "It is best to see a board certified integrative MD or DO (doctor of osteopathy) who will coordinate your care across multiple providers."

Other integrative healthcare practitioners that may be part of a care team include: acupuncturists, chiropractors, health coaches, psychologists, and mind-body practitioners. In a major medical center, many of those providers are located within the same department or nearby building. As part of the integrative medical doctor's network, they will likely be vetted for the quality of their services as well. Insurance coverage for these additional healthcare services may or may not be covered by all insurance plans, but there are national movements to improve this issue, such as the Integrative Health Policy Consortium (<http://www.ihpc.org>). ■

THE STORY OF 'BIOTICS—cont. from page 1

skin disorders. Some research suggests that they may even help with weight loss.

According to researchers at the University of Maryland School of Medicine (UM SOM), it appears that LGG may act as a facilitator, modifying the activity of other gut bacteria. In a small study, researchers analyzed the gut bacteria of study participants who ingested LGG twice a day for 28 days. They found that LGG fostered several species of microbes beneficial to health. The paper, *Functional Dynamics of the Gut Microbiome in Elderly People during Probiotic Consumption*, was published in the April 2015 issue of the journal *mBio*.

"It is a new idea that some probiotics may work by affecting the overall ecosystem of the gut," says Claire M Fraser, PhD, professor of medicine at the UM SOM, and director of the

Institute for Genome Sciences. "Previously we tended to think that LGG and other probiotics worked directly on the host. I think this finding has many exciting implications." According to Dr. Fraser it lends support to the idea that we need to look at the microbes in the gut as an interconnected ecosystem rather than a series of solitary bacteria. Modifying the behavior of microbes already in the gut may be just as important as adding any single species to this population.

Antibiotics Pros and Cons

Antibiotics are absolutely essential, life-saving medications for specific infections. But unfortunately some doctors and patients have used antibiotics in situations when they are not necessary, such as mild upper respiratory infections or sinus symptoms. This overuse of antibiotics can take a toll on your microbiome.

"While the microbiome usually

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **Fortify** your diet with prebiotics and probiotics by eating a variety of foods.
- **Try** adding kefir, yogurt or other fermented foods with active probiotic strains to your diet.
- **Eat** high-fiber foods daily, as they are the fuel source for probiotics.
- **Take** antibiotics as prescribed only when medically needed.

bounces back in a few months, sometimes it does not and it is possible for the changes to lead to new symptoms," explains Dr. Tillisch.

As for taking probiotics to counterbalance the undesirable affects of antibiotics, according to Dr. Tillisch, there's not yet enough evidence to show that it's effective. The best advice is to use antibiotics with caution and only when truly necessary. ■

PREVENTION



The Health Benefits of Staying Positive

Three easy ways to cultivate more joy and happiness.

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Simple practices can rewire your mind for positivity.

A positive attitude can lower blood pressure, reduce risk for heart disease, and help better control blood sugar levels. Helping people cultivate positive emotions is front and center for Natalie Bell, a certified mindfulness instructor for the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center (MARC). "Mindfulness and self-compassion practices have been shown to boost optimism in our daily lives," says Bell. "With practice, we can influence how we feel about ourselves and our experiences."

To follow are three simple methods Bell uses in her various workshops. Incorporating just one of these practices into your daily life can make a difference in a short period of time.

1 Listen to Your Inner Voice

Constant negative reinforcement diminishes self-worth and self-esteem. When you find your inner voice is harsh or critical, pause and replace those words with a supportive voice. Imagine what you might say to a friend or young person who was so critical about himself or herself. Then direct those loving words toward yourself.

2 Accept That You Are Human

Don't judge yourself for having a harsh self-critic—it is part of human conditioning. Since negativity is our default setting it will take practice to retrain the brain for positivity. Practice with patience. "The brain has a negativity bias and we tend to think about things going wrong more often,"

explains Bell, "Using simple strategies, we find anecdotally that within six weeks many people in the class are focusing more on where and how they can be more positive."

3 Gratitude: Three Blessings

Martin Seligman is a former president of the American Psychological Association and the founder of the positive psychology movement. Among his many exercises for tuning the body toward happiness is this nightly ritual of writing down three things that went well and why. For example, acknowledging that your spouse made your favorite breakfast because she or he can be a considerate, loving person.

Communicating your gratefulness to another person can also work wonders for relationships. According to a recent study from the University of Georgia, researchers reported that spousal expression of gratitude was a significant predictor of marital quality. The recent study was published in the journal *Personal Relationships*. ■



Editor-in-Chief
Bruce A. Ferrell,
MD, Professor of
Medicine and
Geriatrics

Q I've been told that potassium is good for the heart. Should I take a supplement?

A Potassium is a vital mineral that helps the heart to contract and pump blood and also to maintain a steady rhythm. It's always best to get needed nutrients from foods whenever possible. Fortunately, potassium can be found in a wide range of foods, making it easy to have some at every meal. Potassium-rich foods include: leafy greens such as spinach and collards, fruits including bananas, grapes, blackberries, oranges and grapefruit, and root vegetables such as carrots and potatoes. Coconut water is also a good and refreshing source that is relatively low in calories and high in potassium. An eight-ounce glass is just 45 calories and supplies 470 milligrams of potassium. Guidelines issued by the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies of Science encourage adults to consume at least 4,700 milligrams of potassium every day. Most people consume only half that amount. But beware of overloading your diet or taking supplements without consulting your doctor. Too much potassium can lead to irregular heartbeats. Likewise, an excess amount can be dangerous to people with kidney disease. On the flipside, people who take diuretics may lose this valuable mineral in urine and should have their potassium levels checked regularly.

Q I'm a male in my 70s and sometimes my ring finger bends down and I have trouble opening my hand. It doesn't really hurt but I'm concerned. What's going on?

A A lot of people have pain and deformity in their hands from arthritic conditions, which can cause knobby knuckles and the fingers to curl slightly. But from what you're describing, you may have a condition called Dupuytren's contracture. While both men and women can have this hereditary condition, it tends to be much more common in men of Northern European descent. Cells in the hand start to duplicate and can turn into a thick nodule that pulls the finger

down toward the palm. The nodule starts small but can grow into a fibrous band that gets larger and more painful when it's touched, though this can take a long time. The condition can eventually limit your ability to grip. Typically, a physician will conduct a tabletop test to determine if treatment is needed. If you can lay your hand flat on the table, no treatment is needed. If you can't, there are several treatment options, including a newer enzyme injection that breaks down the fibers. For more severe contractures, a surgeon can remove the troublesome cord. You're right to be concerned, as it's best to have your hand evaluated before the nodules get too large for nonsurgical options.

Q As a postmenopausal woman, I was told that I'd have to stop taking hormones after five years. They certainly have helped with hot flashes and sleep issues. If hormones are needed for the body, why is it bad to keep taking them?

A There are many conflicting reports about menopausal hormone therapy. Some have shown an association with serious health risks, such as breast cancer, heart attack and stroke. Those insights first came to light during the large-scale study called the Women's Health Initiative (WHI), by the National Institutes of Health. The study was halted in 2002 when researchers determined that risks outweighed the benefits. However, three years after stopping the therapy, the increased risk disappeared. Note that the average age of the women in WHI was 63, more than 10 years older than the average age of menopause onset. A 2016 study in the journal *Metabolism*, reviewed the data in WHI and reported that hormone therapy for relief of moderate-to-severe hot flashes in early menopausal patients who have a favorable coronary profile remains a viable option. Current recommendations are to take hormone therapy for the shortest time and at the lowest effective dose. Ten years is the upper limit. While night sweats can return when therapy stops, symptoms abate with age as the body naturally transitions into the next phase of life. ■

IN COMING ISSUES

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