

CAFFEINE helps to stimulate bowel movements, but limit intake to no more than 300 milligrams (about the amount in three to five 6-ounce cups of coffee) per day.



Gastrointestinal Guidance

Q: How can I relieve constipation?

A: People with constipation have infrequent bowel movements (fewer than three stools per week) or simply struggle to pass stools. While chronic constipation can cause complications or indicate a health problem, most cases can be prevented and alleviated with lifestyle changes.

For starters, slowly add fiber to your diet. Aim for 20 to 30 grams each day or at least two servings of fruit, three of vegetables, and 6 to 11 of whole grains such as brown rice, bran muffins, oatmeal and whole-wheat bread. Drink five to eight 8-ounce glasses of water and other beverages daily. Avoid alcohol and high-fat, high-sugar foods.

Walk at least 20 minutes per day: Regular exercise stimulates intestinal movement. Avoid delaying bowel movements, as ignoring the urge causes stools to harden. Some find placing the feet on a foot rest while sitting on the toilet establishes a more comfortable position for bowel movements.

Complementary approaches including massage, acupuncture and dietary supplements can help as well. Psyllium fiber powder or tablets are available in bulk or in packaged products like Metamucil or Citrucel. In addition, many people find a daily magnesium supplement (500 milligrams) relieves constipation. Magnesium might be contraindicated for certain health conditions, so check with your physician to determine an amount that's appropriate for you.



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CONSTIPATION
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Swimmer's Ear Solutions

Swimmer's ear can take the fun out of summer activities. But with the right treatment and prevention, you can keep it a short-term inconvenience.



Swimmer's ear is an itchy, painful infection of the outer ear canal, often affecting those who swim in pools, lakes and streams.

Unless the ear canal is cut or scratched, you can treat it yourself. Make a mix of equal parts white vinegar and rubbing alcohol or white vinegar and water. Use a clean bulb syringe, and warm the mixture to body temperature by holding the bulb in your hand. Place several drops into your ear and let it work for two to three minutes by keeping your head tilted. Stay out of the water until it is healed.

To help prevent swimmer's ear, shake your head after swimming to remove water from the ear canal. Gently dry your ears with the corner of a tissue or towel. Swim only in clean water and be careful about pools with too few or too many chemicals.



* Improve Your Fitness

Improving muscular strength and endurance, aerobic fitness and flexibility can improve overall health by decreasing risk for conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes or low back pain. Fitness improvements also can help control these conditions.

To improve your fitness, start by taking the President's Challenge Adult Fitness Test at

www.AdultFitnessTest.org. Then set benchmarks for personal fitness goals and evaluate your progress over time. As you work to improve fitness – through increased frequency, intensity and time spent exercising – retest yourself and compare your performance to your previous fitness scores. Comparing your fitness to others' with different abilities, bodies and age limitations will not give you an accurate picture of your health or progress.

If you have an existing medical condition or injury, talk to your doctor before taking the tests.

FITNESS
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RECLAIM FAMILY DINNERS Teens who eat with their families are less likely to abuse drugs, and girls who eat five or more family meals per week are one-third less likely to develop unhealthy eating habits.



Raising Responsible Kids

When children misbehave, it's easy to blame pop culture and peer groups for setting bad examples. Raising responsible, respectful kids, however, starts with setting a good example at home. Youngsters learn kindness, reliability, generosity, empathy and other principles through their parents' words and actions. Telling children to be considerate is important, but modeling good conduct and calling attention to thoughtful acts make a more lasting impact.

Teach children to act with integrity, even when it seems like no one is watching. Encourage kids to be better friends and citizens, rather than concentrating only on their own wishes. Talk about decisions and consequences. Model good manners, and demonstrate and discuss appropriate ways to solve conflict. Point out good deeds and show children how to help others – whether reaching out to a new student, sticking up for someone or simply paying a compliment. Set and enforce acceptable standards of behavior, and recognize positive actions.



Office Visits for Adolescents and Teens

Confidentiality at the doctor's office is just as important for good care for older kids as it is for adults. The next time you take your adolescent or teen for an office visit, don't be surprised – or upset – if the doctor asks to speak to your son or daughter alone.

Private interviews between physicians and older children often include discussion of smoking, sex, substance abuse and mental health issues. For kids to initiate these types of topics with their parents can be awkward, but kids actually do want to discuss them with parents or with a knowledgeable adult, according to Tracy T. Trujillo, MD, a Hill Physicians pediatrician in San Ramon. The physician becomes the liaison between parent and child.

"Without the right information from a reliable source, these younger patients can unknowingly engage in risky behavior, delay care or not get care at all. So parents must have trust in their child's doctor," he says. "If the discussion doesn't take place, help could come too late."



Seeing Clearly

Q: When should I have my child's vision tested by an optometrist?

A: Cases of nearsightedness, or myopia, jumped 66 percent in the past 30 years, says a study published in December in the *Archives of Ophthalmology*. Today, 40 percent of Americans struggle to see distant objects.

Recent research discredits the theory that too much screen time, reading or other close-up work causes nearsightedness. While the reasons for increased myopia remain a mystery, children who play outside more have lower rates of nearsightedness – even if they spend as much time in front of a computer or TV screen as children who play outside less. Genetics also play a role.

Because nearsightedness often shows up during childhood, scheduling vision screenings for youngsters is crucial. The American Academy of Ophthalmology recommends examining newborns' eyes at birth, followed by vision screenings during regular pediatric visits. When infants and children fail vision tests, or when doctors find children at increased risk for eye problems, they should be evaluated by an ophthalmologist or optometrist. These eye specialists are trained to diagnose and treat eye conditions, prescribe glasses or lenses and, in the case of ophthalmologists, perform eye surgery. Contact your health plan and/or vision plan to determine your child's vision coverage.

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