

# 7 Ways to Stay Healthy After 40

Age 40 is a milestone when the risk of many health conditions increases. This makes the birthday a perfect time for taking stock of your health, experts say.

Whether people have demanding jobs, aging parents, growing children or all of the above, it's easy to put health aside. But 40 is the time to evaluate your wellbeing, and to plan for the long-run.

"Forty is a good time to take a deep breath, and, although you have a lot of other things out there, do a little introspection and say, 'OK, there are some things I need to do to make sure I stay healthy,'" said Dr. Sandra Fryhofer, an internist at Piedmont Hospital in Atlanta.

And if you're not there yet, there's no reason to wait, said Dr. William Zoghbi, professor of medicine at the Methodist DeBakey Heart and Vascular Center in Houston and president of the American College of Cardiology.

"It's not like people are going to wake up and say, 'I'm 40, I'm going to change everything I'm doing to get healthier,'" Zoghbi said. Instead, "the earlier they can start, the better it is for them."

## Here are seven ways to stay healthier when you are nearing or turning 40:

At age 40, vision can start to worsen, so have your eyes checked out, Fryhofer said. "You need to be able to read the fine print on medicine labels, and lots of different labels. If you don't have reading glasses and you can't read the fine print, you might miss some important information," Fryhofer said.

She also suggested wearing sunglasses to prevent further damage. "Too much sun exposure can increase cataracts, so sunglasses are a good idea," Fryhofer said. "Make sure they have the UV-A [and] UV-B protection."

A diet high in fruits and vegetables — which are full of antioxidants, vitamins and minerals — may slow vision loss, added Heather Mangieri, a spokeswoman for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

The leading cause of blindness in the elderly is a condition known as macular degeneration. It affects 9.1 million Americans over age 40. "Macular degeneration tends to be genetic, but we can use nutrition, a diet rich in lycopene (found in red fruit and vegetables) and antioxidants to slow down that vision loss," Mangieri said.

## Know your numbers

Age 40 is a good time to look into your numbers for blood pressure, cholesterol levels, blood sugar and body weight. "People need to know what their cholesterol level is and if they haven't checked before age 40, they should," Zoghbi said.

When you visit a pharmacy, take time to get your blood pressure measured, and visit your doctor to get a simple blood sugar test, he suggested. Knowing these numbers will help you and your doctor identify potentially hidden disease risk-factors.

For example, people with higher blood pressure are at higher risk of heart disease, stroke and kidney failure, Zoghbi said.

## Explore your family history

During your fifth decade, it's time to look carefully at your family tree to find out if your genetics increase your risks for diseases such as cancer or heart disease. "Once you hit 40, when things go wrong, you have to think of the C-word and that's cancer, because you're no longer a kid," Fryhofer said. "That's a good time to make sure you understand your family history."

For example, those with a family history of colon cancer may want to get a colonoscopy at age 40, instead of waiting until age 50, Fryhofer said.

The same goes with heart disease: a calcium test can help determine whether your arteries are starting to harden, and if you need major lifestyle changes or medications.

"People get by with a lot until they hit 40, but then when you hit 40, it's got to be a little bit about you. It can't be just worrying about everybody else," she said.

## Muscle up

Starting at age 40, we lose about 1 percent of muscle mass per year. So people can benefit from incorporating weight-bearing exercises, along with cardiovascular exercise, into a weekly physical activity plan, Mangieri said. "Even if it's using cans of soup to do some bicep curls — it doesn't have to be in a gym, it just needs to be some sort of resistance training," Mangieri said.

As we age, we also become less flexible. Mangieri suggested adding yoga or Pilates, which can help improve flexibility, core strength, balance and range of motion. "If we can maintain our muscle mass and maintain our strength, then as we get older, we can continue to do the things we enjoy doing," Mangieri said.

## Fiber is your friend

The days of gorging without gaining weight are over. And as your metabolism slows around age 40, eating fewer calories can boost health. But you should also make sure to get adequate fiber and fluids, Mangieri said.

"We want to make sure the calories that are decreasing come from things like sweets, but we keep those high-fiber foods in the diet, and we also make sure we meet our fluid needs. That's really important," Mangieri said. "Make sure that our daily eating plan is packed full of nutrient-dense food, like lean protein, fruits and vegetables and low-fat dairy and whole grains.

"Those items are important through all the stages of life, but as we get older, we want to make sure we maintain those high-nutrient foods even though our caloric needs are less," Mangieri said.

## Consider the big picture of your lifestyle

Dr. Elizabeth Jackson, an assistant professor at the University of Michigan emphasized the difference that a generally healthy lifestyle can have on preventing heart attacks and strokes.

For cardiovascular events, "we know that the risk increases with age, and you can't get younger. There's no cure for getting older," Jackson said.

But losing the spare tire around your middle could help you not only fit into your clothing, but reduce the risk for heart disease, diabetes and vascular diseases.

"When you think of lifestyle modifications, there's a lot of bang for your buck in all different factors," Jackson said.

Doing regular physical activity, reducing stress levels, maintaining a healthy weight and eating a diet high in fruits, vegetables and polyunsaturated fats all "help keep our blood vessels healthy," Jackson said. "And that keeps our heart healthy, that keeps our brains healthy, and it really helps us prevent that waistline increasing. An investment in healthy lifestyle will pay off through every subsequent decade," she said.

## Butt out

Age 40 should include a reality check for smokers.

"If you're a smoker, it's time to take this seriously and stop it by whichever way, shape or form. Get some help," Zoghbi said.

Quitting "is not easy, but believe me, it will decrease the incidence of everything bad that you can think of, from heart attacks [to] heart disease, stroke, kidney failure as well as lung cancer and lung disease," he said.

## Thyroid check

People who feel worn out, and are gaining weight and whose hair and skin have lost their luster, may consider getting their thyroids checked. This neck gland helps control energy levels and regulates hormones, and 40 is a time "when thyroid disease can show its face," Fryhofer said.

A test can determine if your thyroid is functioning as it should, she said. An underactive thyroid is primarily results from genetic condition causes, but you can stave off its complications with prescription medications, Fryhofer said.

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