

The new health discoveries that could CHANGE YOUR LIFE

From foods that reduce dementia risk to why your Monday-night exercise class shouldn't be missed, health, fitness and wellness experts share what they're excited about this year – and what it means for you



TAKE YOUR BLOOD PRESSURE, BOOST YOUR SLEEP

'I've always asked my clients to see their GP and get blood tests done to check for pre-existing medical conditions that need to be treated alongside insomnia,' says women's sleep coach Dr Kat Lederle (drkatsleep.com). 'I've now added blood pressure to the list. A 2023 study showed that women who regularly sleep less than seven hours, or struggle to fall or stay asleep, have a higher risk of hypertension [high blood pressure]. If that sounds like you, get your blood pressure checked, as hypertension can be treated and may prevent future cardiovascular problems. High blood pressure can also impact sleep. It can cause breathing problems or, when blood pressure does not drop at night (as it should), this could be associated with short-term stress.'



POP THE 'SUNSHINE SUPPLEMENT', PROTECT YOUR EYES

'Women in midlife are at risk of developing eye-related conditions in the years ahead,' says Miss Rajni Jain, consultant ophthalmic surgeon at Hendon Hospital. 'Some changes may be attributed to hormonal fluctuations, others to the natural ageing process. New research shows the use of antioxidant supplements may mitigate some of this. Other research shows that vitamin D supplementation may enhance your tear film, reduce inflammation and protect you from developing dry eye disease. If you have age-related macular degeneration, the latest studies suggest lutein/zeaxanthin, vitamins C and E and zinc supplementation could reduce the likelihood of developing advanced disease.'

RINGFENCE YOUR ME-TIME, LOOK AFTER YOUR MIND

'Several observational studies over the past few years consistently show that participation in active leisure activities is highly protective for women's mental health,' says Dr Julie Hannan, counselling psychologist and author of *The Midlife Crisis Handbook*. 'One study suggested that leisure-based physical activities enhance your feelings of achievement and competence, and this, combined with the social benefits, has multiple psychological benefits. However, studies also show women's leisure activities are often hindered by time constraints and societal expectations. Don't be held back by these – do something that fires you up and make sure this time is carved out and protected.'

REST SMARTER, GROW HEALTHIER HAIR

'Sleep is so important for maintaining a healthy hair growth cycle,' says Sara Alkazraji, of the Institute of Trichologists, who owns Ilkley Moor Trichology Clinic. 'According to a recent study looking at hair samples from healthy perimenopausal and menopausal women, the stress hormone cortisol was found to be much greater in women with poor sleep quality. Increased cortisol levels can impact on the hair's growth cycle, in particular shortening the anagen stage (the growing phase). This reduction in anagen could cause hair to look thinner and become weaker. So, I recommend patients incorporate gentle exercise, such as walking or swimming, into their daily routines to improve sleep. Magnesium supplements can also help induce sleep and relax muscles and may raise levels of gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), a naturally occurring amino acid that has a calming effect on the brain.'

**The holy grail:
a really good
night's sleep**



PUT PEN TO PAPER, DEVELOP HEALTHIER THINKING PATTERNS

'People have been journaling since time immemorial, but it's now a science-backed practice,' says cognitive behavioural therapist Sarah Rees (sarahdrees.co.uk). 'Research shows that writing about thoughts and feelings reduces stress and promotes mental health. This is because writing engages the logical pre-frontal cortex, which provides clarity – in a nutshell, we process information and release it rather than ruminating.' To get started, Sarah suggests trying the following every day to help you develop new positive, healthier patterns of thinking, feeling and responding.

- Set a timer for 10 minutes and start writing – don't worry about structure or grammar.
- Ask yourself: what have my thoughts been over the day? How do I feel? What am I motivated to do? How am I responding and behaving?

SNACK ON EDAMAME, EASE MENOPAUSE SYMPTOMS

Dietary adjustments can help, says nutritionist Karen Newby, author of *The Natural Menopause Method*. 'A new study showed how a plant-based diet that minimised oils and included daily soya beans significantly reduced the frequency and severity of postmenopausal hot flushes after 12 weeks. While more studies are needed, one of the mechanisms (alongside the soya beans) is more plants benefitting the gut microbiome. An abundance of beneficial gut bacteria is needed to convert phytoestrogens from food (also found in tofu, miso, ground linseed and edamame beans) into their more bioactive isoflavone form.'



CONSIDER HYPNOTHERAPY, HELP YOUR HORMONES

'Hypnotherapy can help some menopause symptoms without the need for hormones or medication,' says Dr Naomi Potter, founder of Menopause Care (menopausecare.co.uk). 'Research has shown it successful for improving mood, sleep, hot flushes and night sweats, and it's endorsed by the North American Menopause Society and recommended by the British Menopause Society consensus statement on treating hot flushes without hormones. As such, it's now sufficiently evidence-based that we've started offering it in my clinic. The principle of hypnotherapy is understanding your symptoms and their impact on your life. You are guided by a therapist into a state of deep relaxation and, using the understanding of these issues, suggestions are made for positive, sustainable change. How we think about and process symptoms affects our emotions, and these feed back to affect our experience of these symptoms. Changing our feelings and beliefs about symptoms positively can reduce their intensity.'



Getting outside
is great for
mental health

GET YOUR VITAMIN GREEN, REDUCE YOUR STRESS LEVELS

'There's a vast quantity of research on the restorative power of being in nature for our bodies and minds – it can lower blood pressure, heart rate and stress levels,' explains psychotherapist William Pullen (williampullenpsychotherapist.com). 'A recent study raises the hypothesis that the release of oxytocin – the 'bonding' hormone released when we have positive human interaction, such as eye contact or hugging – plays a part. Being in nature may activate the oxytocinergic system, which reduces fear and stress levels and enables reorganisation of functions in the brain – this support, say the researchers, can lead to fundamental psychological changes. Whatever the mechanism, science backs the health benefits of getting into green space as often as you can.'

RETHINK PROTEIN, LOSE BODY FAT

'It's important women get enough protein, especially if they're trying to lose weight,' says nutrition scientist Stacy Sims, author of *Next Level: Your Guide To Kicking Ass, Feeling Great And Crushing Goals Through Menopause And Beyond*. 'A recent study indicates that by increasing daily protein intake, sedentary women could improve their body composition through diet alone. The research focused on women with normal-weight obesity who did not exercise. They were split into two groups: high protein intake or standard protein intake, for 12 weeks. At the end of that period, the high protein intake group had significantly increased lean mass and decreased fat mass compared with the standard intake group.' Current guidelines are 0.75g protein per kg body weight per day, so 45g/day for a 60kg (9st 6lb) woman.

TWEAK YOUR DIET, PROTECT YOUR MIND

'There's lots of evidence demonstrating that healthy lifestyle habits can reduce your rate of cognitive ageing and improve memory, and midlife is a key time to start putting these habits into practice,' says chartered psychologist Kimberley Wilson, author of *How To Build A Healthy Brain*. 'In a study of more than 3,500 older adults, flavanols (beneficial plant compounds) restored memory in people with poorer diets. Around 500mg per day is linked to better memory and heart health. This is the amount found in 2½ cups of green tea or 1½ cups of pinto beans. Other good sources include apples, berries, grapes, vegetables, legumes and wholegrains. So starting the day with a large cup of green tea, having berries with your porridge, a salad with lunch and wholegrains at dinner should get you over the line.'



START WITH 15 MINUTES OF MOVEMENT, MAKE OVER YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

'We know from research that physical activity can improve mental health, but I'm often asked how much of it is needed to reap the benefits,' says Dr Brendon Stubbs, clinical-academic physiotherapist at King's College London. 'The latest research shows an increasing benefit up to 150 minutes over the course of the week. However, we also know anything is good – in fact, our research shows just 15 minutes can provide a meaningful uplift in mood.'

A diet makeover can impact mind as well as body



EAT IN A 10-HOUR WINDOW, SUPPORT YOUR GUT HEALTH

'In our ZOE 'Big IF' study on intermittent fasting, we asked 140,000 people to try to eat within a 10-hour window, fasting for the other 14 hours overnight,' says Dr Sarah Berry, a nutrition scientist at King's College London. 'Of participants, 60% found they could follow time-restricted eating (TRE). Those who did had increased energy and improved mood and gut health. Consistency was key: participants who varied the timing of their eating window didn't gain the same benefits.' □

