

HEALTHbeat from Harvard Medical School

* Trusted advice for a healthier life *

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Dear HEALTHbeat subscriber,

Many of us look forward to Thanksgiving. It's a chance to enjoy good food and the companionship of friends and family. But even the most welcome holiday can bring hidden health hazards. This issue of HEALTHbeat offers tips on making your Thanksgiving a healthy one.

Also in this issue, Dr. Tom Lee, Editor-in-Chief of the *Harvard Heart Letter* talks about why sleeping pills aren't the answer for everyone who has trouble catching some zzzz's.

In this issue:

1. Prescription for a healthy Thanksgiving
2. New and Notable from Harvard Medical School:

Improving Sleep: A guide to getting a good night's rest, and

Exercise: A program you can live with

3. A Harvard Medical School physician answers:

Why won't my doctor prescribe a sleeping pill?

=====NEW FROM HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL=====

** Healthy Eating: A guide to the new nutrition

The rules of healthy eating have changed. Eating a "balanced diet" is no longer the most important goal. Instead, scientists have learned much more specifically which foods can help prevent disease and which promote it. The *Healthy Eating* report describes how the latest research has resulted in a new healthy eating pyramid, a new concept of good fats and bad fats, and a greater understanding of the components of foods and how they influence health and longevity. To read more, or to order, go to <http://health.harvard.edu/HE>.

1. Prescription for a healthy Thanksgiving

While you food shop, plan the menu, and get your house ready for Thanksgiving, consider the following health tips to make the day a healthy and enjoyable one.

Food safety. Thanksgiving dinner is a great opportunity to flex your culinary skills, but a food borne illness can put a real damper on the day. You can minimize the risk of food poisoning by washing meat and produce before handling it, cooking foods thoroughly, and refrigerating them promptly. Do not leave food out at room temperature for more than two hours (one hour if the air temperature is above 90° F). If you have large amounts of leftovers, divide them into small batches when you put them away in the refrigerator or freezer. That way, the temperature of each batch will reach a safe level faster.

Stay trim among the trimming. If there's ever a day when you're expected to eat seconds, it's Thanksgiving. But make sure you really have room for them before reaching for more mashed potatoes and gravy. How? Wait seven minutes before you decide if your appetite warrants seconds. It takes about that long for the first helping of food to reach your system and decrease your appetite.

Ask guests to bring their walking shoes. Light exercise like a walk after dinner will help you digest, decrease stress, and burn off some of the day's calories.

Dealing with family stress. If you feel yourself getting annoyed or stressed, escape to the bathroom or another private area for this quick stress reliever: Place your hands just beneath your navel so you can feel the gentle rise and fall of your belly as you breathe. Breathe in. Pause for a count of three. Breathe out. Pause for a count of three. Continue to breathe deeply for one minute, pausing for a count of three after each inhalation and exhalation.

Handling the loss of a loved one. It can be difficult to celebrate holidays after losing someone close to you. Some of these ideas may help ease that pain: place a candle on the table in honor of the deceased, include one of his or her favorite foods, or formally ask another family member to carry on a role this person used to play (for example, carving the turkey). If holiday traditions are too painful right now, consider breaking tradition. For example, go out for dinner or take a holiday trip.

Find out more about how to make healthy eating part of your lifestyle by ordering our special health report, Healthy Eating: A guide to the new nutrition. <http://health.harvard.edu/HE>.

Harvard Medical School faculty physicians develop the information in HEALTHbeat to help you achieve and maintain good health.

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2. New and Notable from Harvard Medical School

A. **Improving Sleep: A guide to getting a good night's rest**

Can't sleep? In this report, you'll learn the factors that can disturb sleep, understand the latest in sleep research, and, most importantly, find out what you can do to get a good night's rest. It also includes in-depth information and treatment options on sleep disorders, including restless legs syndrome, narcolepsy, and sleep apnea. <http://www.health.harvard.edu/IS>

B. **Exercise: A program you can live with**

Not sure how to start an exercise regimen? **Exercise: A program you can live with** will help guide you through starting and maintaining an exercise program that suits your abilities and lifestyle. You'll find answers to your questions on how much and what kind of physical activity you need, as well as advice on fitness products currently in the marketplace. <http://www.health.harvard.edu/E>

Harvard Medical School offers special reports on over 50 health topics. Visit our website to find reports of interest to you and your family: <http://www.health.harvard.edu/>.

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3. Sleeping Pills Aren't the Answer

Q I'm age 78, and since my husband died four years ago, I've had trouble falling asleep at night. I've asked my doctor a dozen times for a sleep medication, but he keeps saying no. He says the danger of falls is too great. I told him he's heartless! I wish he'd give in.

A As the saying goes, your physician is being cruel to be kind. Once you start taking sleep medications, it can be difficult to stop. And starting about age 70, people who use sedatives have an increased risk of falling and fracturing their hips—and hip fractures often have dire consequences.

Many things can cause bad sleep, but I think one possibility you and your doctor might explore is whether you're bothered by feelings of hopelessness or other symptoms of depression. If so, treating the depression might resolve your sleep problems.

There are many other changes that can help most people improve their sleep. Avoiding caffeine in the afternoon, exercising, and making sure your mattress and pillows are in good shape are just a

few. A quiet bedroom can also help contribute to a good night's sleep, particularly among older adults, who spend less time in deep sleep and are therefore more easily awakened by noises. Here are some ways to reduce or disguise noises that can interfere with sleep:

- Use earplugs.
- Decorate with heavy curtains and rugs, which absorb sounds.
- Install double-paned windows.
- Use a fan or other appliance that produces a steady "white noise." White noise devices, designed specifically to provide this kind of steady hum, are available in stores.
- Listen to soothing audiotapes.

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www.health.harvard.edu/heart

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For further reading

To learn what foods make up the new Healthy Eating Pyramid created by a Harvard doctor based on the latest nutrition research, buy our special health report, Healthy Eating: A guide to the new nutrition. <http://www.health.harvard.edu/HE>.

For further reading

To learn more about whether sleep medications may be appropriate for you, and what else you can do to get more sleep, order our special health report, Improving Sleep: A guide to getting a good night's rest. <http://www.health.harvard.edu/IS>.