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6 Health Mistakes Smart People Make

The little things you can fix right now to keep your body healthy and happy in the long run.

By Sari Harrar



MISTAKE 1: Dropping pounds with diet drinks.

A University of Texas Health Science Center study found that people who sipped one diet soda a day for seven years were 41 percent more likely to be overweight than non-soda drinkers. The reason: Diet drinks often lead to overeating as people "spend" the calories they just saved on a second slice of pizza or a cookie. There's also evidence that artificial sweeteners may whet your appetite for more sweets.

THE SOLUTION: Sip water, coffee, or unsweetened tea. If you crave a sweet taste, add a half teaspoon of sugar (just 7 calories) or natural agave syrup (10 calories) to coffee or tea. If plain water is too bland for you, try a flavored unsweetened water.

MISTAKE 2: Skipping the second opinion on a major condition.

It could alert you to alternatives your first doctor never mentioned or even correct a dangerous misdiagnosis. The best plan is to find an experienced doctor affiliated with a different hospital or practice.

THE SOLUTION: Sign up for an online consultation service. Try the Cleveland Clinic's MyConsult (elevelandclinic.org) or Johns Hopkins University's Remote Medical Second Opinion (jhintl.org/for-patients).

MISTAKE 3: Quitting antidepressants cold

turkey.

Maybe you're feeling good again, but abruptly abandoning them could saddle you with flulike symptoms, insomnia, nausea, and a blue mood for at least a week — a problem called "discontinuation syndrome."

THE SOLUTION: Don't give up. "If you're feeling better, it means your antidepressant is working," says Dr. Nada Stotland, president of the American Psychiatric Association. If you must stop, alert your doc and taper off slowly (e.g., reduce your dose by one-fourth every two weeks). And if depression creeps back at any point, resume your full medication.

MISTAKE 4: Forgoing a follow-up.

Fear and inconvenience prevent 30 to 50 percent of women from getting additional checks if a Pap test (a cervical-cancer screening) reveals suspicious-looking cells. But catching cervical cancer in its earliest stages boosts your odds for survival to 92 percent; allowing cancer to spread drops your chances to 39 percent or lower.

THE SOLUTION: Check in with your doc right away. If your Pap revealed only slightly unusual cells, you may just need another visit in four to six months to test for cancer-causing strains of the human papillomavirus (HPV). If the follow-up results are negative, resume with your regular annual routine.

MISTAKE 5: Popping extra acetaminophen.

The label says "650 milligrams every four to six hours," so wouldn't a little more kick the pain faster? "Acetaminophen is misused because it's considered 'safe and mild,'" says Dr. Anne M. Larson, of the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center. Exceeding the recommended dosage can lead to liver damage or even failure and kills about 100 people each year.

THE SOLUTION: Stick with the advised dose. And don't mix acetaminophen with other drugstore remedies. "Nearly all over-the-counter cold, flu, sinus, and allergy remedies also contain acetaminophen," Larson says, as do some menstrual-cramp formulas and prescription painkillers like Vicodin, Darvocet, and Percocet. If you're unsure, ask your doctor or pharmacist.

MISTAKE 6: Getting too tipsy.

Sure, a drink a day helps keep your heart healthy. But downing your week's quota on the weekend is a bad plan, a University of Buffalo study says. Getting tipsy just once a month triples heart-disease risk. Says Suzanne Thomas, Ph.D., of the Medical University of South Carolina's Charleston Alcohol Research Center: "Alcohol is especially toxic for women because we're smaller, we have more body fat [which processes alcohol more quickly than muscle], and we have lower levels of stomach enzymes that metabolize alcohol than men do."

THE SOLUTION: Start off the evening with club soda. And save the wine for dinner. That way, the food in your stomach slows the absorption of alcohol. Thomas also stretches her drinks: "I'll befriend the bartender and ask for one serving of gin in three separate glasses with tonic over the course of the night. That's three drinks — but only an ounce of alcohol." Wine spritzers also do the trick. Just don't forget to tip.

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