

Mindful health choices to improve your mental well-being

Get mindfully healthy by adding these positive choices into your life:

Nourish the mind

Good nutrition is important for mental well-being. The food you use to fuel your bodies helps to nurture your mind. Healthy eating can improve mood, enhance brain function and can help with feelings of stress, anxiety and depression.

- Follow [Canada's Food Guide](#). Include more vegetables and fruits, whole grains, lean meats, fish, nuts and beans into your diet
- Start the day with breakfast. It replenishes essential nutrients and provides energy
- Pay attention to what, why and how much you are eating. Deal with food cravings and stress by being active, spending time with family and friends and reaching for healthy snacks

Be tobacco-free

If you smoke, quitting is the best thing you can do to improve your health. Understanding why you smoke and learning new healthy ways to deal with stress can help you on your journey to quit.

- Monitor your smoking habits to determine your triggers
- Develop a plan, including a quit date
- Find healthy substitutes and make changes in your environment and daily routine
- Ask the people around you for support

Limit alcohol

Drinking less is best to reduce the risk of mental illness including depression, anxiety and alcohol addiction. Set limits for yourself and stick to them.

Plan non-drinking days every week to avoid developing a habit and if you drink follow [Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines](#):

- No more than 10 drinks a week for women, with no more than 2 drinks a day most days
- No more than 15 drinks a week for men, with no more than 3 drinks a day most days
- These are the maximum daily and weekly levels. It is recommended that you drink less to reduce the risk of cancer and other alcohol-related conditions

Move more

[Being active](#) for at least 150 minutes or 2.5 hours per week can improve your mental and physical health.

Here are some ways to fit physical activity into your day:

- Take the stairs, go for walking breaks, stand when talking on the phone, sit tall at your desk and maintain good posture to build core and back muscles
- Hold [walking meetings](#) to get energized and generate creative ideas
- Use an [active mode of transportation](#) for distances less than one kilometre. Consider walking, cycling or rollerblading for short distances



Make the connection

Supportive relationships with family, friends and colleagues can build a sense of belonging and contribute to good physical and mental health. Social supports can protect you from the effects of stressful life events. Here are some ways you can stay connected:

- Schedule time with family and friends
- Volunteer your time
- Try something new and meet people with similar interests
- Incorporate teambuilding activities into meetings

Rest and relax

Sleep plays an important part in mental health. A refreshed brain improves mood, decision-making and social interactions. Most adults need about 7 hours of restful sleep per night.

- Get into a routine. Try to go to bed and wake up at the same time every day—including your days off
- Limit caffeine, nicotine and alcohol before bed as they can disrupt your sleep
- A quiet, dark and cool room is best for a good night sleep
- Engage in relaxing activities such as yoga, tai chi and mediation

“Me” time

By relaxing, refocusing and being recharged, we are able to better focus on our responsibilities and commitments.

Schedule “me” time into your day by choosing something relaxing and restorative.

Some examples include:

- Take a five to 10 minute break to sit quietly, spend time with a pet or listen to music
- Read a book or go for a brisk walk
- Take part in a class that you are interested in

Strive for balance

Competing priorities and multiple roles can make it difficult to balance your work and family life.

Restore balance by:

- Setting clear boundaries between work and family life that will help decrease conflicts and the stress associated with it
- Take time to refresh and recharge yourself
- Accessing services offered by your employer, including the Employee Assistance Program can help you to manage a work-life balance

Experience nature

Enjoying the outdoors has been shown to decrease your risks of chronic disease, increase your energy levels and lead to positive thinking.

Take time for a walk in local green spaces including your backyard, neighbourhood parks, [York Region Forests](#) or [Conservation Areas](#). Your mental and physical well-being will thank you. Include more nature in your daily routine by:

- Walking at lunch with a friend in a local park
- Scheduling walking and talking meetings with colleagues in green spaces outside your office building
- Participating with friends and family in local trail events



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Nourish the mind

The food we use to fuel our bodies also helps to nourish the mind.

Proper nutrition and good food choices are essential for your overall health and state of wellbeing. When your body gets the right mix of nutrients, it can function better in every capacity. Eating healthy will increase mental and physical performance, improve energy levels and help prevent short-term illnesses and chronic conditions, such as digestive problems, heart disease, diabetes and some cancers.

The food you eat has the potential to affect your mental health and wellbeing at every stage of life. Good nutrition is integral for a healthy mind and can improve mood, alertness, concentration, performance, memory and cognition. Healthy eating is also linked to improved brain function and can reduce feelings of stress, anxiety, depression and other mental health issues.

Nutrition tips for good mental health and overall wellness

- Improve your overall health by including a combination of these nutrients in your diet:
 - Omega-3 fatty acids
 - Minerals such as zinc, magnesium, copper, selenium and iron
 - B-vitamins such as thiamine, folate, vitamin B6 and B12
 - Antioxidants such as beta-carotene, vitamins C and E
- Follow [Canada's Food Guide](#). Include dark green and orange vegetables, fruit, whole grains, nuts, beans, lean meat and fish
- Limit your intake of foods high in saturated fat, sugar and salt
- Enjoy at least two servings of fish each week. Choose fish high in omega-3 fats like salmon, trout, mackerel, herring and sardines
- Start the day with breakfast; it replenishes essential nutrients and provides energy. Eat small meals and snacks every three to four hours, throughout the day
- Cut down on the caffeine – especially at night. It can disrupt sleep and make you feel irritable. Caffeine is found in coffee, tea, energy drinks, chocolate and some soft drinks
- Drink water. Your brain depends on proper hydration to function at its best
- Focus on food, not supplements. Remember, supplements are not an alternative to a healthy, varied diet. Speak to a health professional if you think you need a supplement
- Pay attention to what, why and how much you eat. Deal with food cravings and stress by being active, spending time with family and friends and reaching for healthy snacks

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Be tobacco-free

If you smoke, quitting is the single best thing you can do to improve the length and quality of your life. Becoming tobacco-free significantly lowers your risk of many chronic health conditions such as cancers and heart and lung diseases. There is growing evidence that quitting tobacco use improves mental health, decreases depression, anxiety and stress.

Identify stress

It is a common misconception that tobacco reduces stress and anxiety. Using tobacco reduces nicotine withdrawal symptoms, which feel similar to anxiety, but does not alleviate stress or address the root cause. Identifying the source of anxiety or stress will help you find ways to cope without turning to tobacco.

Find alternatives

Instead of smoking, deal with life's stressors with meditation, deep breathing, physical activity, limiting alcohol, eating a well-balanced diet, drinking water, counseling or talking with supportive friends and family.

Stop smoking medications can help to control cravings and nicotine withdrawal. Speak to your healthcare provider or pharmacist for more information.

Many people find breaking their psychological dependence on tobacco to be the hardest part of quitting. Tobacco use becomes closely connected with other activities such as drinking coffee, talking on the phone, driving or just taking a break. Smoking can also be a way to connect socially with others or be a psychological support when feeling lonely, bored or stressed. Understanding why you smoke and learning new healthy behaviours is vital to quitting.

- Monitor your smoking for a few days to find your triggers
- Find healthy substitutes and have a plan to do something else when wanting to smoke
- Make changes in your daily environment to avoid being tempted
- Ask the people around you for support
- Motivate yourself with the reasons you have for quitting and include positive thoughts and rewards

For more information on how to quit smoking, visit york.ca/tobacco



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Drinking less alcohol is best

Do you follow [Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines](#) when you drink? If you are between 25 and 65 years of age:

Women — have no more than two standard drinks per day and no more than 10 per week.

Going to a party? Have no more than three standard drinks on any one occasion.

Men — have no more than three standard drinks per day and no more than 15 per week.

Having a night out with friends? Have no more than four standard drinks on any one occasion.

Do not drink when you are:

- Taking medication or other drugs
- Planning on becoming pregnant, pregnant or breastfeeding
- Driving a vehicle, using machinery or other tools
- Making important decisions and responsible for the safety of others

Drinking less is best to reduce chronic health problems such as:

- Cancers of the mouth, larynx, pharynx, breast, colon, liver and rectum. The higher the consumption of alcohol, the greater the risk for these cancers
- High-blood pressure, stroke and other cardiovascular diseases
- Liver disease
- Diabetes

- Mental health problems including depression and anxiety
- Alcohol addiction and alcoholism

Drinking less is best to reduce other drinking-related problems such as:

- Social problems including unemployment and family problems
- Unintentional injuries such as traffic injuries, alcohol poisoning and falls
- Intentional injuries such as fights, sexual assault and domestic violence

If you choose to drink, plan ahead:

- Have a designated driver: do not drink and drive
- Stay within or below the limits: have no more than two standard drinks in any three hours
- Alternate alcoholic beverages with non-alcoholic ones
- Eat before and while you are drinking

Are you curious about your drinking?

Take the [Check Your Drinking \(CYD\) Survey](#).

Always consider your age, body weight and health. These factors may affect the impact of alcohol and you may need to lower your limits for drinking.

For more information substance abuse, visit the [Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse](#).



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Let's move more

Physical activity is beneficial for the body and the mind. When done on a regular basis, it can prevent and control cardiovascular risk factors such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol and can help protect against type 2 diabetes, breast and colon cancer and osteoporosis. Physical activity has also been linked to improved sleep, reduced stress and improved mental health.

Participation in workplace physical activity programs helps to build positive relationships and create opportunities for social interaction. This helps to reduce barriers and foster better relationships with your colleagues.

[The Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology](#) recommends that you accumulate at least 150 minutes or 2.5 hours of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per week. This can be done in bouts of 10 minutes or more. Any type of physical activity you do is good for your health. Benefits like a drop in your blood pressure and increased energy may begin during your first week of regular physical activity participation. After three months, you may experience improved posture and balance, stronger muscles and bones and have a more positive outlook on life. According to the Public Health Agency of Canada, about half of the functional decline that occurs between the ages of 30 to 70 is the result of an inactive lifestyle and not as a result of aging.

So, let's move more! Here are some ways to fit physical activity into your day:

- **Fit in physical activity whenever you can.** Take walking breaks, stand when talking on the phone, print documents to a printer further away and walk to a colleague's desk instead of using the phone or email
- **Mind your posture.** Sit tall at your desk and maintain good posture throughout the day. This can help to build your core and back muscles
- **Take the stairs.** Walking up a flight of stairs builds and tones lower body muscle mass and can burn five times more calories than riding an elevator
- **Hold walking meetings.** Walking meetings help to energize people and generate creative ideas
- **Form or join a [walking club](#) at your workplace.** Walking in a group can be more enjoyable and motivational, and provides you with opportunities to meet and converse with others
- **Participate in wellness programs** at work such as yoga, Zumba and other fitness challenges
- **Use an [active mode of transportation](#)** for distances less than one kilometre. Consider walking, cycling or rollerblading

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Make the connection

Supportive relationships with family and friends, plus a sense of belonging can contribute to good physical and mental health. Here are some ways you can stay connected:

Schedule time with family and friends

Individuals with a strong sense of community belonging are twice as likely to report very good or excellent self-perceived mental health. People who remain actively engaged in life and connected to those around them are:

- Generally happier
- In better physical and mental health
- More capable to cope effectively with change and life transitions

Volunteer your time

Feeling socially connected and having a sense of belonging can encourage people to volunteer and take pride in the condition of their communities. Did you know 12.5 million Canadians volunteer their time to charitable and not-for-profit organizations? Volunteering can:

- Help build self-esteem and develop life-long skills
- Strengthen the community
- Improve health and build relationships

Try something new and meet people with similar interests

Frequent participation in social activities has a positive impact on adults. Try to get involved in physical or recreational activities with other people including: sports, hobbies, committees and family outings.



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Rest and relaxation – let your mind take a break!

Like healthy eating and physical activity, being well rested and relaxed is vital to good physical and mental health and overall quality of life.

Lack of sleep can make you feel sad, anxious and depressed. It can also affect your concentration, memory and ability to get things done. Good quality sleep rests the brain and helps it work properly. Proper sleep can improve our mood, decision making and social interactions. On average, most adults require at least seven hours of restful sleep, but that amount can vary from person to person.

Tips to better sleep:

- **Avoid sleep disrupters.** Limit caffeine, alcohol and nicotine before bedtime because they can interfere with sleep. Heavy, high-fat meals before bed can also disturb a good night's sleep
- **Stick to a routine.** Try to keep the same sleep and wake schedule every day – even on weekends
- **Get moving.** Physical activity during the day can help you sleep better and more soundly
- **Make your bedroom a sleep-friendly environment.** A quiet, dark and cool room is best for a good night sleep
- **Slow down.** Your body needs time to shift into sleep mode. Use the hour before bedtime for quiet time activities like reading, listening to music or practicing relaxing techniques

Relaxing practices can help you sleep better and cope with stress and decrease anxiety. Types of relaxation practices include deep breathing, meditation, yoga, tai chi, taking a warm bath and massage. Try to include these into your daily or nighttime routines to help settle your mind and body.



Me time

It is very common to become so involved in giving to others that we fail to give to ourselves. Often, people feel guilty or selfish taking time for themselves. Creating more personal “me time” tops the list of what most people want.

When you take time for yourself, you are really making space for yourself in your life – giving your mind and body a break and time to re-energize. By relaxing, refocusing and being recharged, one comes back to responsibilities with a greater focus, commitment and enjoyment.

Try building breaks or scheduled time into your days and don’t wait until you are burned out. Make sure you do things that you enjoy and that invigorate you. Enjoy your favourite hobby and use the time to take care of yourself in whatever way you choose. This could be a 5-10 minute break to sit with a tea quietly, cuddle with your pet, or just listening to music. If you have more time, read a chapter of a book, go for a brisk walk, soak in the tub, or take part in a class that you have always wanted to do. This doesn’t mean taking time alone, unless that is what you choose to do. People need relationships in order to stay well.

Whatever you choose to do with your “me time,” make it relaxing and restorative – and if you don’t like it, find something else.

Don’t skip your scheduled “me time.” It is as important as all the other things that take place in your day.



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Strive for balance

Canadian adults are spending more time at work and commuting to and from work. They play multiple roles, including those of a worker, parent, spouse, friend, caregiver and community volunteer. Work commitments, commute time and competing priorities can make it difficult to achieve balance in work and family life. Here are some strategies to help you create balance:

- **Set clear boundaries between work and family life** to create harmony. For example, make it a rule to not check work email from home or respond to telephone calls during meal times. Put work devices aside during family time
- **Take time to refresh and recharge yourself.** Take a vacation. Studies show that vacations can help break the stress cycle and enable you to rest and recuperate. They help foster stronger connections with family and friends. You can also refresh and recharge by participating in a hobby or activity that you enjoy, such as reading, listening to music, gardening, yoga, tai chi, meditation or taking a cooking class
- **Move more.** Physical activity can help clear the mind and increase your productivity and effectiveness
- **Access health and wellness services** provided by your employer
- **Practice healthy habits.** Eat healthy by following [Canada's Food Guide](#). Be physically active for mental and physical health by following the [Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines](#) and accumulate at least 150 minutes or 2.5 hours of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per week, in bouts of 10 minutes or more. Socialize with others, [live tobacco free](#) and [limit your alcohol drinking](#)



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Benefit from spending time in nature

Nature can make you happier, healthier and more relaxed. Trees, plants and blue skies decrease stress, improve mental well-being, benefit short-term memory, attention span and lower your risk for several chronic diseases including diabetes, heart attacks and cancer.

It is estimated that 90 per cent of time is spent indoors. We are constantly being stimulated with the increase in technology use and busy urban environments. Your body and brain do not get a rest – and when you are stressed, your levels of cortisol, a stress hormone, go up. A walk in nature has been shown to lower cortisol levels and also increase serotonin levels which can create a calmer you. Nature allows your brain to recover, restoring attention and creativity. Your body becomes more relaxed and revitalized. A daily walk in nature can also help positively manage depression and anxiety.

Nature at home

Nature can be found right outside your door: in a local park or forest, a tree lined street or in your own backyard. Organizing a family walk to the park, playing tag with your kids in the backyard or planting a flower or vegetable garden are just a few ways to connect with nature at home.

Nature at work

Workplaces with views of natural scenery or access to nature walks have been known to have happier, creative and present employees. Try walking with colleagues at lunch or conduct walk and talk meetings in nature. If you do not have nature nearby, try placing a few plants on your desk or having a poster of your favourite forest hung on your wall.

Nature in every season

Enjoy the outdoors no matter what time of year. Each season has something to offer. After immersing yourself in nature, you will feel refreshed and more able to face the everyday challenges of life.

