

7 EASY HEALTH CHECKS YOU CAN DO BEFORE BREAKFAST THIS WEEK





There's no replacing your doctors, but you're truly on the front lines. To that end, it's important to stop acting only like a patient and start thinking like a physician — observing and really listening to your body.

Here are seven simple do-it-yourself health checks you can do while your morning coffee brews this week. You'll come away with helpful snapshots of your current health and fitness levels that you can share with your doctor. Plus, you'll be better equipped to ask the right questions at your next appointment. You may even catch a potential problem before it becomes serious.

MONDAY Health Check #1

Stand Without Using Your Hands

Go to your favorite chair, get comfortable,

and then try standing without using your hands to propel yourself. "I do this test in clinic a lot," says Fernanda Heitor, M.D., a geriatrician at Northwestern University School of Medicine. "It gives us a lot of good information on hip flexors and balance."

If you're unable to stand up without a helping hand, the muscles that allow your hip joint to

flex may be weak, which could make you wobbly and prone to falling. One of the best ways to strengthen these muscles is to turn this self-check into an exercise. In fact, it's called a Sit-to-Stand, and it looks like this:



To try it: Stand in front of a sturdy chair with your feet about hip-width apart. Brace your core, hold your arms in front of you, and slowly lower your body onto the chair. Pause, then press through your feet to stand up again. Try to repeat this move 10 to 30 times.

This is a good exercise to do every day. And it's OK to use a chair with arm rests for support, if needed. Other low-impact physical activities, like walking, can also help strengthen these muscles. although Dr. Heitor says <u>physical therapy</u> may be necessary to shore them up.



TUESDAY Health Check #2

Reach for Your Toes

Start today with this gym-class throwback:

Sit on the floor (or couch or bed) with your legs straight out in front of you, then slowly bend forward from your hips, reaching as far as you comfortably can. If you're flexible that is, you can reach your toes — then your arteries probably are too.

The connection may not be obvious, but when researchers from the University of North Texas studied a group of older adults, they noted a positive link between flexibility and heart health. The most limber of the bunch also had the healthiest arteries, according to the report published in the *Journal of Sports Medicine and Physical Fitness*.

That may be because your arteries and muscles are composed of similar tissue. "If your arteries are healthy, that means your muscles are going to be healthy," says Joseph Flaherty, M.D., a geriatrician and volunteer clinical professor of geriatric medicine at UT Southwestern Medical Center.

One great way to improve both your flexibility and in-turn your heart health? Try a <u>SilverSneakers</u> <u>Yoga class</u>. Sessions are offered both in-person and online. For a taste of one of our classes, watch this short video. Bonus: It begins with a Forward Fold the formal name for reaching for your toes.





WEDNESDAY Health Check #3

Stretch Your Shoulders



Here's another simple way to test the health of your ticker. Raise your arms up over your head. Now stick them out straight in front of you. If both movements make your shoulders scream, then you may have a shoulder joint

problem or rotator cuff tendinopathy, a musculoskeletal issue. Both conditions are linked to a heightened risk of heart disease, according to research from the University of Utah published in the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*.

"If there is pain in the shoulder joint that does not radiate much, then most of the time it is due to rotator cuff disease," explains study author Kurt Hegmann, M.D., M.P.H. "The shoulder joint is relatively resistant to arthritis, other than rheumatoid arthritis."

Even if you can pinpoint a trigger for your pain say, you recently fell or lifted something heavy — there is still most likely an underlying cardiovascular component, says Dr. Hegmann.

What's the connection? Cardiovascular disease blunts your body's blood supply, making your tendons more prone to thinning and weakening, he explains. That means rotator cuff tendinopathy could serve as a warning sign of ticker trouble—and should prompt you to ask your doctor to check your blood pressure and cholesterol. The good news: Regular exercise can help **protect you against heart disease**.



THURSDAY Health Check #4

Size Yourself Up

There are two numbers that shouldn't shrink as you get older: your height and your weight (assuming you're at a healthy weight). If you lose half an inch or more in height, you may be on your way to osteoporosis, thanks to deteriorating vertebrae in your spine, says Dr. Flaherty.

Reaching and maintaining a healthy weight is important, but losing weight can also mean losing muscle mass — which can be worrisome if you're part of the 70-plus crowd. "If you lose your muscle, that makes you weaker," Dr. Flaherty says. "It may throw your balance off and increase your risk of falling and fracture."

Today, step on the scale and measure your height. Record your measurements and place them somewhere handy. (You can use the notes app on your phone or a small notebook.) These numbers will

become your new baseline that you and your doctor can use for comparison at your annual checkups. Then, set a reminder to repeat this self-test every week.

To lower your risk of osteoporosis, eat <u>bone-</u> <u>building foods</u> like salmon, spinach, and sweet potatoes. And do weight-bearing activi-



ties, such as walking, dancing, strength training, or even gardening. <u>Strength training</u> will also help keep your muscles strong, even if you're trying to lose weight.



FRIDAY Health Check #5

Examine Your Eyes and Nails

Today we're looking for signs of anemia,

the most common blood condition in the U.S., affecting some 3 million Americans, according to the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI).

Pull down your lower eyelid: Is the tissue a healthy pink color or a light, white hue? If it's the latter, you may have anemia, says Dr. Heitor. "There are a lot of little blood vessels

in that area, and it's translucent." That means you can see the blood flowing through, which will be brightly colored if it's rich in red blood cells.

Iron deficiency is perhaps the most well-known cause of anemia. It may also be a result of kidney disease, chronic inflammation, intestinal bleeding, or cancer, Dr. Heitor says. Anyone can develop anemia, reports the NHLBI). But people on blood thinners and adults over 65 are among the groups that are at an increased risk.

To check whether an iron shortage may to be blame, place a droplet of water on your fingernails. "If it doesn't roll off, that is a telltale sign"—what's known as a <u>spoon nail</u>—"of iron-deficiency anemia," she says. Talk to your doctor, who can properly diagnose and treat you. They may recommend iron supplements and an iron-rich diet that includes generous helpings of legumes, spinach, raisins, lean meat, and enriched bread.



SATURDAY Health Check #6

Stick Your Tongue Out



When you first wake up, stick out your tongue and look in the mirror. If there are teeth marks on your tongue where it rests against your molars, then it may be blocking your breathing while you sleep. In a study in

the *Saudi Medical Journal*, folks with these indentations were significantly more likely to have obstructive sleep apnea.

Or answer this question: Do I feel rested? If you've had eight-plus hours of shut-eye and the answer is "no," then it may be time to ask your doctor about sleep apnea.

"It's commonly missed because there's still a lot of ageism among doctors," Dr. Flaherty says. "If you tell your doctor, 'I'm just so tired all the time,' the doctor might say, 'You're old, what do you expect?" So be prepared to state your evidence: how long you're sleeping per night and how fatigued you are in the morning.

You may also want to schedule a dental checkup. The Sleep Foundation reports a connection between nighttime teeth grinding and sleep apnea. Your dentist will be able to spot signs of teeth grinding (also called sleep-related bruxism).



SUNDAY Health Check #7

Look at Your Eyelids

Age spots, crow's feet, and ... xanthelasmata? This funky-sounding word is the technical name for fatty deposits that can crop up on your eyelids. They're soft, yellowish growths that "look kind of like butter," says Dr. Heitor.

On the upside, they're usually not painful and they don't spread, he adds. But that doesn't mean their presence is benign: People with xanthelasmata are at increased risk of

clogged arteries, heart attack, and stroke, according to a report in the *British Medical Journal*. The reason: Xanthelasmata may be an outward sign that your body retains cholesterol, both beneath your skin and inside your arteries.



Request a cholesterol check if one crops up. One word of caution: Even if your total cholesterol comes back within the normal range, ask your doctor for a complete lipid panel to break down the ratio of LDL (often called "bad") cholesterol to HDL (often called "good") cholesterol, Dr. Heitor advises.

In the absence of high total cholesterol, xanthelasmata could still indicate low levels of HDL cholesterol, "the scavenger particle that eats the bad cholesterol," she says.





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YOUR DIY HEALTH CHECKS TRACKER

This week, observe and listen to your body. Record your results and share them with your health care provider at your next checkup (or sooner if you have a concern). Keep this list handy and repeat the checks often.

My results