

Staying active and eating well

Providing care and support can place enormous demands on your time as well as your physical and emotional energy. It might feel impossible to find the time in your schedule, but a healthy lifestyle is essential for both your health and the health of the person you support. Regular exercise and the food we eat both play a vital role.

Exercising for body and mind

Exercise has benefits for your physical health, as well as your mental health – it makes you feel good because it reduces the body's stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol. At the same time, it stimulates the production of endorphins - the body's natural painkillers and mood elevators. Exercise is a great way to help you reduce stress and cope better when stressful situations arise.

Australian Government guidelines recommend that adults do at least 30 minutes of moderate to intensive exercise most days of the week. If you are just starting out, remember that any physical activity is better than none. It might feel like a lot of work when you start, but as you get fit, you'll begin to tolerate exercise, then enjoy it, and finally depend on it. If you are new to exercise, or you have a health condition, it is recommended that you seek medical advice from your GP before commencing an exercise program.

Tips to get you started

Start small: Focus on the recommended 30 minutes of exercise and break them up into more achievable 10-15 minute blocks to begin. You can start your morning with simple stretches or go out for a short walk. As you meet these goals, you can then challenge yourself to go further.

Choose an activity you enjoy: You are more likely to stick with an exercise that's fun, rewarding, and suits your lifestyle, abilities and taste. Choose an outdoor activity if you enjoy being outside. Think of an activity that you used to do when you were younger and give that another go.

Stay motivated: Turning your exercise into a habit is the best way to stick to your exercise routine. Once you have decided on your activity, repeat the activity consistently in the same context, creating cues for yourself that serve as reminders. For example, the context can be an event (when I finish work) or a time of day (before breakfast). Some people find it helpful to keep a record while they are forming a new habit by keeping a daily or weekly diary or checklist.

Make it social: Exercising with other people can make it more fun and can also help you stay motivated. Try an activity with a friend, join a group class at the gym or a try a running club. If you can't meet in person try one of the many free or paid group activities online.

Sneak in some physical activity: As a caregiver you might not always have the time to get to formal exercise activities. You can incorporate physical activity in your day-to-day activities. For example, suggest to the person you care for that you both go for a walk, park the car further away from your next appointment or use the stairs rather than the lift. Set up a reminder on your phone to get up and stretch.

Healthy eating for physical and mental health

The benefits of healthy eating habits are numerous. A balanced diet provides the body with essential nutrients, and helps reduce the risk of physical health problems such as diabetes and high blood pressure. But did you know that diet can also impact your mental health?

Research suggests that high intakes of fruit, vegetables, fish, and whole grains are associated with a reduction in risk for depression. The food we consume can also directly impact our energy levels, sleep, concentration, fatigue, and stress levels.

The Australian Guide to Healthy Eating

The Australian Guide to Healthy Eating recommends a variety of foods from the following five groups every day:

- Plenty of vegetables, including different types and colours
- Fruit
- Grain (cereal) foods, mostly wholegrain and/or high cereal fibre varieties such as breads, cereals, rice, pasta, noodles, polenta, couscous, oats, quinoa and barley
- Lean meats and poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, nuts and seeds, and legumes/beans
- Milk, yoghurt, cheese and/or alternatives.

If you have a health condition, or you're in need of specialised dietary recommendations, talk to your GP or find an Accredited Practising Dietitian near you.

It can be hard to find nutritious foods and drinks when you are providing support for others, but with a little preparation, healthy options are within reach.

Here are some tips for healthy eating

'Eat the rainbow' and limit your intake of saturated fat, added salt, added sugars and alcohol: Try to pick a wide variety of colours in your food choices based on the five food groups from the [Australian Healthy Eating Guidelines](#).

Keep healthy snacks around: Fresh or dried fruit, unsalted nuts, or even dark chocolate (at least 70% cocoa solids) are great to keep within reach - in your drawer at your desk or in the glovebox of your car. These kinds of snacks will help you maintain longer lasting energy and help prevent those afternoon dips.

Eating out in a healthy way: Choosing nutritious meals when you are away from home can be more challenging. Whether in a restaurant or take-away shop, meals can be higher in saturated fat, added salt and sugar. Try aiming for menu items that have plenty of vegetables and lean protein options such as a warm roast vegetable and chicken salad, or ask to swap hot chips for a side salad or steamed vegetables.

More information

Get Healthy: [An information and coaching service](#) connecting you to a personal health coach who can assist you via telephone with getting active and eating healthy.

Health Direct: [Healthy lifestyle information](#), including healthy food swaps and exercise and fitness topics.

Eat for Health: [A government website](#) with plenty of information, tools and resources on eating well.

Healthy Food Guide: [Healthy eating information](#) and nutritious recipes.