



Healthy MercyCare Health Plans LIVING

A wellness newsletter for MercyCare members

Winter 2022



Managing portion size

Enjoying our favorite festive recipes is a common way we connect with friends and family. We tend to eat more when gathered in large groups for long periods than when alone. Being ready for holiday parties can prevent overeating and help with weight management. Try a few of these strategies to help with portions before you attend the next social event.

Perspective

The average dinner plates in the 1960s were about nine inches in diameter. The average dinner plate size today is over 11 inches in diameter. Our serving sizes have increased along with our plates. See for yourself why plate size matters! Fill a dinner plate as you normally would. Now, fill an appetizer plate. Does the plate size impact how you see portions? Measure how much is on each plate. Is there a difference in how much you took? Try using smaller plates to help manage portions.

Step-down method

Let's continue our experiment. Identify the true serving size of your food. You may need to look it up. [MyFitnessPal.com](https://www.myfitnesspal.com) is a great resource. Measure a serving size of each food on your dinner and appetizer plates. Study what a serving size looks like on each plate. How did your helpings differ from the serving size? Getting familiar with how serving sizes appear on your plates can be helpful if you don't want to measure portions. Gradually reduce helpings to get closer to serving size.

Sugar versus hunger

Enjoy holiday sweets in moderation. Increased sugar intake can throw off your body's hunger and fullness signals. This change can lead to increased cravings. Check in with your stomach. Are you physically hungry or riding the rollercoaster of sugar highs and lows?

Pace and taste

Slice all of the food on your plate into small bite size pieces before eating. Chew each piece entirely before taking another bite. Move each piece around your mouth as you chew. Focus on the flavors and textures as you do so. Slow down and "experience" your food. This practice can improve your enjoyment of a meal. It can also help you eat less.

Rest and digest

Start with moderate amounts of food. Give your body time to process the food. Check in with how hungry you still are. Distance yourself from the treat if you can't get enough of your grandma's cookies. Time and a shift in attention can give your body time to digest food and let you know if you are still actually hungry.

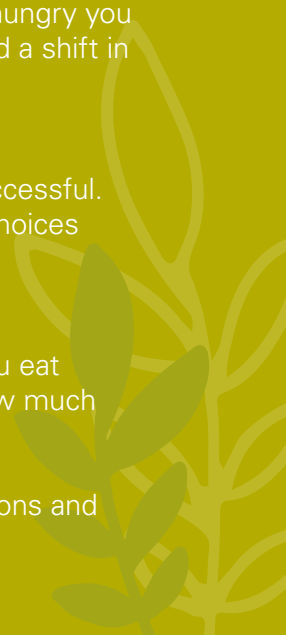
Plan and prepare

Have a basic idea of when and what you are going to eat. You don't need an elaborate plan to be successful. Get to know your grocery staples. Having a few easy, quick recipes can help you make smart food choices without the stress.

Track

There are many ways to monitor food intake. Write items down or use an app. Try to track before you eat whichever method you choose. The idea behind this approach is to bring awareness to what and how much you eat.

Working on forming these habits before attending large group gatherings can help you manage portions and your weight. Make changes slowly. Be patient with yourself. Enjoy all the flavors of the holidays.



Fancy cranberry mocktail

Serving size: 2 cups

Ingredients

- 1 can cranberry sparkling water
- ¼ cup orange juice (fresh if possible – no sugar added)
- ¼ cup real cranberry juice - no added sugars (read the label)
- 1 tsp lemon juice
- Garnish with fresh cranberries and fresh mint (optional)
- Ice

Instructions

Fill two glasses with ice. Divide the recipe between the two cups. Mix and add your garnish if desired. Serve immediately.

Seasonal ingredient highlight: Cranberries

Cranberries are a tart fruit rich in history and health giving properties. Native Americans used cranberries for dye, medicine, and as a symbol of peace at feasts. Early settlers often called them “crane berries” for the flower’s likeness to the head of a sand crane. Cranberries are also a good source of Vitamin C. They appear to prevent urinary tract infections as well. Read nutrition labels when buying cranberry juice. Sugar is often added to offset its tart flavor.



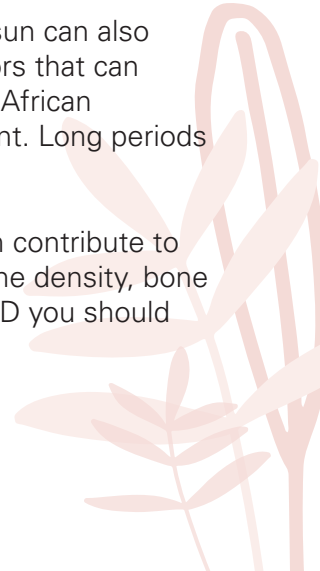
Vitamin D

Vitamin D is an essential vitamin. Essential means your body needs it but cannot make the vitamin on its own. You must take it in some other way. This is usually done through food or supplements. Vitamin D can also be formed by exposing your skin to the UV rays in sunlight. This method of getting vitamin D is important. Few foods contain vitamin D naturally. Great options are fish liver oil and the flesh of fatty fish. Common fatty fish are mackerel, salmon, trout and tuna. Beef liver, egg yolks, cheese and mushrooms have small amounts as well. Many items have vitamin D added to them to help take in calcium. Milk and cereal are common examples. You may notice the best sources of vitamin D are higher in fat. Vitamin D is most easily absorbed when paired with fat.

Vitamin D is not usable right when you take it in. It needs to be broken down in the liver first. It then travels to the kidneys to be broken down further. From there, it heads to the small intestine where absorption occurs. Why is all this so important? Vitamin D plays several roles in your health. It keeps your bones strong and helps to prevent muscle cramps caused by low calcium levels. Vitamin D also helps manage cell growth, makes proteins, boosts immune function, and breaks down carbs.

Vitamin D deficiency can occur with low intake over time. Limited exposure to UV rays from the sun can also influence low levels. Low UV rays are common during winter months in the Midwest. Other factors that can impact deficiency include darker skin and poor kidneys, liver and digestive tract function. Black or African Americans are most often affected. Those who eat minimal meat, fish, and dairy are often deficient. Long periods of feeding breastmilk without vitamin D supplements can also be a cause in infants.

Vitamin D deficiency has been linked to a variety of physical and mental problems. Low levels can contribute to schizophrenia, depression, and seasonal affective disorder. Other health problems include low bone density, bone softening, heart disease, and cancer. Age, gender, and health status influence how much vitamin D you should have daily. Talk with your doctor or a dietitian to learn more.



Mindfulness practices

Mindfulness is a way of paying attention to your thoughts, feelings, sensations, and environment. This means being aware of what is happening in the present moment without trying to problem solve.

There are many mindfulness practices that are short and easy. Having several ways to practice mindfulness that you enjoy is important. You may need to vary what you do. Here are a few things to try.

Disconnect: We get a lot of info at one time through our electronic devices. Take a break from screens regularly to give your brain time to process and reboot.

Mindful eating: Savoring your food can occur well before you eat. Enjoy the smells while cooking, look at your food once plated, and let it roll around your mouth with each bite. Practicing mindful eating can also help you to eat more slowly. This can prevent overeating. Check in with where hunger is coming from. Take notice of the fullness of your stomach to pick up on if other things are driving hunger such as boredom, stress, habit or cravings.

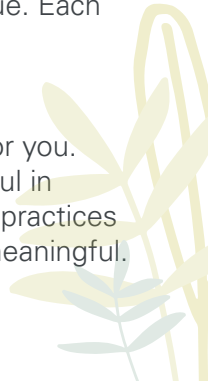
Intention setting: Deciding that an activity is being done for mindfulness can make it more relaxing. Block off time so you can fit stress busting activities in. Using a shared calendar lets others know you are busy.

Attitude of gratitude: Make practicing gratitude a habit. This can be as easy as noticing the little wins. Slow down to allow yourself to be aware of what you touch, hear, smell, taste or see. This helps to cultivate thankfulness. Note when you say “thank you.” This will help you be aware of how you express thanks. Is it a true gesture of gratitude, a habitual response, a hasty

aside, or an afterthought? Try to be more in the moment when giving thanks. Can you name what you feel grateful for? Practicing gratitude can strengthen your immune system and improve sleep patterns. It can also help you learn the art of patience.

Meditation: Meditation can be thought of as how to quiet the brain while being aware of your body. Meditation practices can vary, such as short bursts of quiet time, take a peaceful walk, or a centering exercise. A common approach is to sit in your chair or on the floor in a quiet space, close your eyes, and focus on your breath. Start with two minutes. Expand this to as long as is comfortable to you. You may want to try a centering exercise such as a body scan. Bring your focus to the top of your head and move it all the way to your toes. Your brain may wander. That's okay. Pause, refocus and continue. Each person has their own way of focusing.

Holidays can be stressful. Try different approaches to see which works best for you. Knowing several you enjoy can be useful in different situations. Using mindfulness practices regularly can make this season more meaningful.





Self-care over the holidays

The end of the year can be an exciting, fun time. Thanksgiving and other holidays like Christmas, Yule, Hanukkah and Kwanza give everyone something to celebrate. Some of us may have a harder time getting into the holiday spirit. Parents of young children can feel burnt out from shopping. People who host holiday parties may dread party setup and clean up. Maybe you're one of many who has recently lost a family member or friend, making the holidays a little harder. We're here to remind you that's okay!

The holidays are meant to bring light in the darkest season of the year and coldest in Wisconsin and northern Illinois. It's also a time to check in and take care of yourself. Self-care is a huge topic in mainstream culture right now, but what is self-care? How do you do it? What if you don't like any of the self-care activities people talk about? Let's break it down!

What is self-care?

Self-care is many things. Most simply, it's taking care of and checking in with yourself. Every day you are doing activities to make sure you're taken care of. It's not just taking medicine you may need, picking good food options, getting enough sleep and practicing regular hygiene activities. It's taking care of your own well-being and happiness, especially when life is stressful.

How do you do this?

The first step is listening to yourself. This can be a lot harder than it sounds. Many of us are so used to ignoring our stress, negative feelings, or even our own needs to put something else first. The holidays are often associated with


giving and selflessness that can intensify this. We need to be a little selfish to be prepared to give to others and be selfless.

Try to start checking in with yourself once a day. Check-in when you have time to take a moment afterwards. Self-care is a habit. When we want to build new habits, it's important to start slowly and make manageable changes. Try adding more after you're used to checking in with yourself once a day.

Let's look at a few examples of times to check-in with yourself.

- When you first wake up try asking one of these questions:
 - Am I feeling well-rested?
 - Am I prepared for the day?
 - Do I feel like I can start today in a positive way?
- When you get home from work try asking one of these questions:
 - How are my energy levels right now?
 - Am I feeling more or less stressed by work than usual?
 - Do I need some time to wind down before I move on to my next activity (making dinner, picking up kids, running errands)?





Let's move on to how you incorporate self-care based on your self check-in. Moving forward, we'll use answers to, "Do I feel like I can start today in a positive way?" first thing in the morning. What can you do for yourself to make that answer yes when your answer is no? Doing an activity with the idea of setting a positive intention for the day can really help change your outlook on what's to come! Here are some examples to try.

- Make time to stop at your favorite coffee or tea shop or breakfast place and take time to enjoy your breakfast or morning drink
- Take a peaceful walk
- Do a meditation at home before you get ready for the day
- Add an extra special step to your morning routine, like putting on a sheet mask after washing your face
- Listen to an episode of your favorite podcast on your way into work
- Light your favorite scented candle or turn on a diffuser while you're getting ready

Maybe some of these things are already part of your morning routine. No matter how big or small, each of the above examples is a way you can do something that puts you first. This should not feel like a chore. Self-care should be done with purpose. Have fun with it.

What if you don't like any of the self-care activities people talk about?

There are no rules on what self-care needs to be. Reading a book is a great example. Some people love reading. Setting aside half an hour to read a book is a great self-care activity if that's you. That's not a great self-care activity if you're not a fan of reading. It bears repeating that self-care is about setting aside time to put yourself first. It may take some time to come up with what works. Even taking 30 minutes to watch a TV show sitting down, instead of it being in the background is a form of self-care. Be sure to take time to slow down and fulfill your own needs this holiday season.





Cervical cancer screening

All people who were born female are at risk for cervical cancer. The most common cause of cervical cancer is from some types of Human Papillomavirus (HPV) infections. Other things that put you at risk of getting cervical cancer are smoking, having HIV, using birth control pills for five or more years, having given birth to three or more children, or having several sexual partners. Screening can help detect cancer early. Anyone older than 21 should get screened.

The two screenings for cervical cancer are a Pap smear and HPV test. These are vaginal swab tests done at your doctor's office. The Pap smear looks for pre-cancers. These are cells that change on the cervix that could become cancer if not treated. The HPV test looks for a virus that can cause these cell changes.

HPV does not always have symptoms. You might not know you have it. HPV may go away on its own for some people. There is a chance that over time it may cause cancer if not treated. Let your doctor know if you have bleeding outside your period or abnormal discharge. These may be signs you have HPV. Some types of HPV can be prevented by a vaccine. You can still get the HPV vaccine if you are under 45 years old and have not received it.

Your doctor will contact you to follow up if your test shows that something might not be normal. There are many reasons why test results might not be normal. It doesn't always mean you have cancer.

If your test results show cells that are not normal or may become cancer, your doctor will let you know if you need to be treated. Treatment can help prevent cervical cancer from developing. It is important to follow up with your doctor right away to learn more about your test results and get any treatment that you need.

Treatments for cervical cancer range from surgery to chemotherapy to radiation. You may not need all three treatment types. The treatment will depend on how far the cancer has spread. Get tested to catch it early before it spreads. Get vaccinated against HPV if you aren't already.

The importance of lung cancer screenings

Lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer deaths worldwide. More people die of lung cancer than from breast, colorectal and prostate cancers combined. Screening increases the chance of finding lung cancer early when it is easier to treat and more likely to be cured. By adhering to annual lung cancer screening and recommended follow-up exams, there is a greater chance of not dying from lung cancer.

The United States Preventive Services Task Force recommends screening for individuals who:

- Are age 50-80 (50-77 if you have Medicare)
- Are a current smoker or have quit less than 15 years ago
- Have a smoking history of at least 20 pack-years*
- Have no signs or symptoms of lung cancer

Lung cancer screening involves a CT scan of the chest that uses a small amount of radiation to look for abnormalities or nodules in the lungs. Low-dose CT scans are the only proven method to find lung cancer early before symptoms occur. By the time symptoms of lung cancer occur, the cancer has most likely spread to other areas of the body and is much harder to treat.

There are many causes linked to lung cancer. Smoking is the leading risk factor for lung cancer and is responsible for 80% of lung cancer deaths. The remaining 20% have never smoked. The best way to reduce your risk of lung cancer is to stop smoking. Other risk factors include exposure to radon gas, secondhand smoke, asbestos, air pollution, and more.

If you think you may be eligible for lung cancer screening, schedule an appointment to talk with your primary care doctor.





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