



Maybe it's time to put down the phone and go outside for a walk.

Nature on Your Mind

These days, many of us spend more time indoors and on screens than ever before. Excess screen time is associated with eye strain, back pain and poor overall health from constant sitting. Maybe it's time to put down the phone and go outside for a walk.

Researchers have studied what happens to our minds and bodies when we are outdoors, and it is good news. Hearing birds chirp, feeling the wind and noticing sunlight are linked to brain-boosting benefits and improved mood, according to the American Psychological Association.

One mechanism that might ease our stress is leaving the city for natural, untamed areas. Studies show that when we are in wild spaces, our sympathetic nervous system relaxes. This is the part of our nervous system that maintains our heart rate and blood pressure and blood sugar.

Researchers have found that people's bodies relaxed within five minutes of going outside. There is also evidence that getting outside helps with sleep. Some of the research seems to point to benefits for any

length of time outdoors, so don't let a tight schedule keep you from an outdoor respite.

Green spaces, such as forests and fields, are beneficial outdoor spaces. But researchers also say it's helpful to go to blue spaces, which are outdoor spots located near water.

One theory for why nature is so powerful is that our ancestors learned to read the environment for signs of safety, and we are designed to connect.

Finding a few green spaces or water views can be beneficial, even if they are urban parks or waterfronts. Slow down, go outside and enjoy birds, sky and all the rest that nature has to offer.

best bits



■ August 31 is International Overdose Awareness Day.

This global event remembers those we have lost to overdose deaths. Opioid drug abuse is an epidemic in the U.S. Oxycodone, hydrocodone, fentanyl and other opioids are highly addictive painkilling medications. They were widely prescribed for pain in the 1990s and early 2000s. Through the years, misuse of prescription and illicit opioids increased. Learn more at cdc.gov/overdose-prevention/index.html.

■ Contact lenses aren't risk-free.

Sleeping in contacts increases the risk of infection in the cornea. Removing contacts without washing hands first and skipping cleansing contacts with disinfecting solution can also lead to eye ailments. Contact Lens Health Week, from August 17 to 21, is a good time to make sure you're following healthy contact lens habits at cdc.gov/contact-lenses/about/.



■ This month, National Immunization Awareness Month teaches the

importance of vaccination against several serious, sometimes deadly diseases; it also celebrates the successes of immunization. It's an important reminder to talk to your health care provider about any vaccinations you may need, including the flu shot. Get yours as soon as possible. The flu shot reduces the risk of infection and lowers your chances of being hospitalized and treated for serious complications if you do become ill.

Micronutrients: Small nutrients with a big impact

tip OF THE month

By Cara Rosenbloom, RD

Potassium

Potassium is an essential mineral that helps regulate fluid balance and maintain healthy blood pressure levels. It works together with sodium to keep blood pressure in check, helping the body excrete excess sodium through urine. Health care professionals recommend an eating plan that is rich in potassium, such as the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet. Good sources of potassium include fruits and vegetables like bananas, oranges, potatoes, spinach, tomatoes and avocados, as well as beans and dairy products. Filling half your plate with fruits and vegetables at meals is a simple way to boost potassium intake and support overall heart health.

Micronutrients are vitamins and minerals that the body needs in small amounts, but they play important roles in keeping you healthy.

The body needs 29 essential micronutrients daily. These include 13 vitamins (such as vitamin C and vitamin D) and 16 minerals (including iron, zinc and calcium). Micronutrients are called **essential** because the body cannot make them, so we must obtain them from food.

Each micronutrient plays a slightly different role in the body. Here are some examples:

- Vitamin B₁₂ helps keep the nerve cells healthy.
- Vitamin C helps the immune system work properly.
- Vitamin D helps your body absorb calcium for strong bones.
- Iron helps make red blood cells.
- Potassium helps the heart function properly.

Micronutrients are different from macronutrients, which are carbohydrates, protein and fat. We need these macronutrients in larger amounts because they provide calories that fuel the body (macro = large). Micronutrients do not provide calories, and we need them in smaller amounts (micro = small). Micronutrients support many processes that allow the body to maintain normal function.

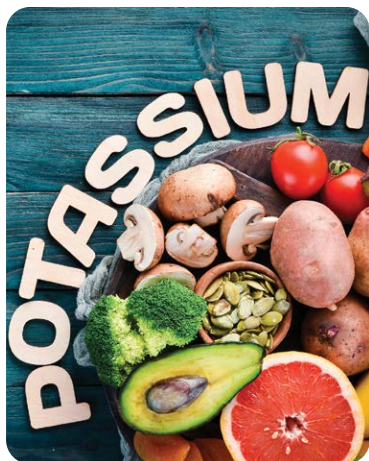
Plus, some micronutrients can act as antioxidants and may protect against cell damage associated with cancer and heart disease. Antioxidant micronutrients include vitamin C, vitamin E, selenium and zinc.



The good news? You don't need to count every milligram of every vitamin and mineral you consume. Keeping track of 29 different nutrients is difficult and time consuming. Instead, just focus on eating a balanced diet using the plate model:

- Half your plate: fruits and vegetables.
- One quarter: whole grains.
- One quarter: protein foods, such as fish, poultry, dairy, eggs and beans.

Eating a variety of foods across these groups naturally provides a wide range of micronutrients.



easy recipe

Edamame Dip with Vegetables

- | | |
|--|------------------------------|
| 2 cups shelled edamame, defrosted (green soybeans) | 1 tsp extra-virgin olive oil |
| 2 tbsp tahini (sesame seed paste) | 3 tbsp fresh lemon juice |
| 1 clove garlic | ½ tsp salt |
| | ½ tsp cumin |



Add all ingredients to a food processor or blender. **Blend** until smooth and creamy. **Thin** with water as needed until desired texture is achieved. **Salt** to taste. **Transfer** to a serving bowl. **Serve** with 2 cups colorful, mixed sliced vegetables, such as carrots, red pepper and cucumber, for dipping.

Makes 4 servings. Per serving:

134 calories | 7g protein | 8g total fat | 1g saturated fat | 5g mono fat | 2g poly fat | 11g carbohydrate | 4g sugar (0g added sugar) | 3g fiber | 306mg sodium

Avoid Doom Scrolling

Repeatedly checking out bad news can be unhealthy. Of course, the internet and social media are popular ways to stay informed about things that can potentially impact your safety or your region: a pandemic, hurricanes or earthquakes. But doom scrolling (also known as doom surfing) — searching for and reading article after article filled with bad news — isn't healthy.

Constantly scrolling through bad news can trigger sadness, anxiety or anger and contribute to headaches and lost sleep. What's more, finding differing information about medical crises or worrisome topics can be confusing and result in even more doom scrolling. This can lead to an addiction to doom scrolling.

Try these tips to avoid, or reduce, doom scrolling:

- Go on a doom scrolling diet; check the news just once or twice daily.
- Avoid surfing for varying opinions on medical news. Stick to reputable sources, such as the CDC and the National Institutes of Health.
- Keep your phone out of easy reach. For example, don't put it on your nightstand while you sleep.
- Take a respite from technology. It's a good way to see how much calmer you can feel when you take a vacation from doom scrolling.
- Turn off notifications. Ask people to not share negative news with you.
- Don't use your phone during meals or in-person interactions. Use silent mode when you're with people so you can give them your full attention and take a break from a flood of content.

If doom scrolling distresses you to the extent it interferes with your work, sleep or relationships or you can't stop it, talk to your health care provider.



If your energy is dragging, you could be dehydrated.

Hot summer days can result in dehydration. A primary symptom is fatigue. Even mild dehydration reduces your energy because it lowers blood volume and blood flow to your brain, causing your heart to work harder. The solution? Drink more water throughout the day — even if you don't feel thirsty — and especially in the heat when outdoors or exercising. Note: Medications, such as antihistamines, can also dehydrate you. Check with your health care provider or pharmacist if you have questions.

How to Stop Overthinking

By Eric Endlich, PhD

If you ever feel stuck when you need to make a decision or get started on a project, you're probably familiar with overthinking. Overthinking can lead you to replay past events as well, wondering if you said or did the right thing.

Overthinking — repeatedly running through scenarios in your mind — can spring from a number of causes:

- Fear that you'll make the wrong choice and be judged by others.
- Desire to make the perfect decision that you won't regret.
- Memories of past experiences that ended badly.
- Being in an environment that discourages risk-taking.

Being paralyzed by inaction can waste time and energy, lead you to doubt yourself and cause you to miss deadlines or opportunities.

To break this pattern, try strategies such as:

- Noticing when you're mentally replaying situations repeatedly.
- Committing to moving on or making a decision by a specific time.
- Focusing on steps you need to take now; you can address future decisions as the need arises.
- Considering possible positive outcomes instead of contemplating worst-case what-if outcomes.
- Recognizing that our actions are never perfect, and you'll learn something useful regardless of how things turn out.
- Reminding yourself that you've done many things successfully in the past, and you can continue to improve with experience.

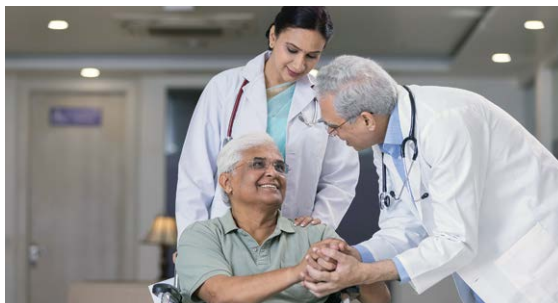


It may require effort to change these mental habits, but you'll be rewarded with more time and energy to focus on the things you really care about.

Diagnosis: Predisease

Has your health care provider diagnosed you with a predisease condition?

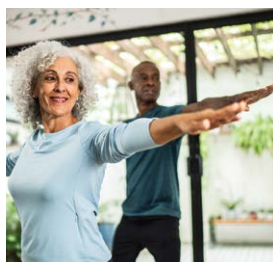
This is a change in your health often found through routine screenings. Such exams can identify conditions not at the stage that classifies them as disease but also not at a level entirely disease-free.



Common predisease conditions include:

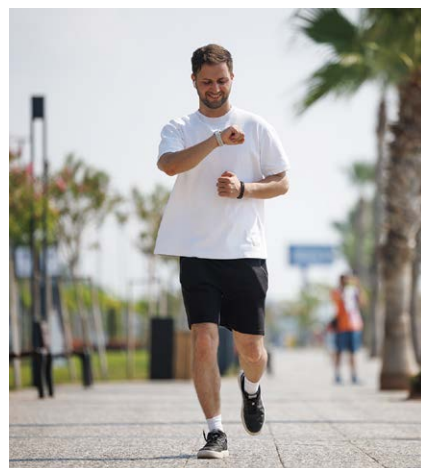
- **Elevated blood pressure:** Your blood pressure levels are 120 to 129 systolic and less than 80 diastolic. It's considered a predisease when it's higher than normal (<120/80) but not elevated enough for a diagnosis of High Blood Pressure Stage 1.
- **Prediabetes:** Your fasting blood glucose levels are between 100 and 125 — higher than normal but below a diabetic level.
- **Osteopenia:** This is moderate bone loss but not enough to qualify as osteoporosis.

Call to action: Prediseases often progress to full-on diseases unless we take preventive steps. Say your provider determines your blood pressure is inching upward. You can take steps to control it, such as losing excess weight and self-checking your blood pressure routinely, often before medication is needed. The same is true with prediabetes, undesirable cholesterol readings, and to a lesser extent low bone mineral density.



Treating prediseases via lifestyle changes — often diet, stress control and exercise — can be far better than taking medication with potential side effects. Note: Do not confuse a predisease with a pre-existing condition, which is an insurance term. Pre-existing refers to any condition for which you have received a diagnosis and treatment before you enrolled in a new health care plan. A health insurer can't deny you coverage or raise rates if you have a medical condition when you enroll.

Rethinking 10K Steps



Do you need 10,000 steps a day to stay fit? Not at all. That number was created by one of the first pedometer manufacturers.

Research shows that if you walk fewer than 1,500 steps a day, you're more likely to be frail and weak and to fall. Steps are only one measurement of health and wellness. It's also important to include strength training, aerobics and balance activities, such as tai chi and yoga, to your physical activity routine.

General guidelines: People younger than 60 should try to walk 8,000 to 10,000 steps a day to achieve maximum fitness benefits that support life expectancy and cardiovascular

Video gamers: Turn down the volume.

Persistent video game noises are linked to irreversible hearing loss, according to several national and international studies. The CDC warns that irreversible noise-induced hearing loss results from prolonged exposure to sounds above 70 dB. Recent findings indicate that gamers often are exposed to high-intensity sound for hours at a time, making them vulnerable to hearing loss.

Protect your hearing:

- ✓ Reduce volume.
- ✓ Measure environmental sound intensity using apps.
- ✓ Opt for speakers and wearing protective earplugs instead of headphones.
- ✓ Take extended breaks to avoid long exposure.
- ✓ Get your hearing checked, especially if you have trouble hearing conversations, high-pitched sounds or experience ear ringing (tinnitus).



health. But taking far fewer can still be beneficial, according to the Harvard School of Public Health. If you're older than 60, you may achieve a healthy benefit between 6,000 and 8,000 steps.

Tip: Try a pedometer. It's an easy, inexpensive way to get motivated. A mile walk is approximately 2,000 steps; 10,000 steps are nearly five miles.

Note: The number of steps and distance varies among individuals. The most important thing is to just walk.



Risks of Calcium Deficiency

By Cara Rosenbloom, RD

Calcium is an important mineral for overall health. It supports bones, helps muscles contract and helps blood clot normally. We need calcium from food daily, since the body cannot make it on its own.

Calcium requirements:

- Women 18-49 and men 18-69: 1,000 mg daily.
- Women 50+ and men 70+: 1,200 mg daily.

Dairy products, such as milk, yogurt and cheese, are great sources of calcium. Many plant-based drinks, such as soy, oat and almond milk, are fortified with calcium. Some calcium is also found in broccoli, almonds and fish canned with their bones, such as sardines and salmon.

What happens if you don't get enough calcium? If the body does not get enough calcium, over time it begins to leach calcium from the bones to maintain normal body functions. This can weaken bones and increase the risk of fractures.

Long-term calcium deficiency can lead to osteoporosis, a condition where bones become fragile and break more easily. Osteoporosis often develops silently with no early symptoms. You may not realize you have it until a bone breaks.



Combat osteoporosis with weight-bearing exercise (e.g., walking daily) and getting enough of the nutrients required for bone health: calcium, vitamin D, protein, magnesium and vitamin K.

Food versus supplements? Try to get calcium from food and drinks before turning to supplements. Food provides other helpful nutrients that improve calcium absorption. Use supplements when you can't get enough calcium from food, but talk to your health care provider about the right dose. Too much is linked to kidney stones and heart problems.



Regular eye exams are important for children.

Children are susceptible to nearsightedness, amblyopia (lazy eye), eye infections and other problems that, if left untreated, can interfere with reading, focus and learning. Identifying and treating problems early gives youngsters the best opportunity for healthy vision long term. Children's Eye Health and Safety Month, sponsored by Prevent Blindness and the National Optometric Association, is a great time to schedule your child's eye checkup. Learn more at [preventblindness.org](https://www.preventblindness.org).

Temporomandibular Joint: What is it?

You may have heard someone say TMJ, without knowing it stands for temporomandibular joint. When working properly, these two joints on either side of your face help you chew and talk. They open and close your jaw. During routine visits to your dentist, they may place their hands on these joints and ask you to open and close your mouth while they check to make sure the joints are working properly.

For many people, these joints can cause problems. It's estimated that TMJ disorders are the second most common musculoskeletal disorder in U.S. Problems include pain, clicking sounds, headaches and trouble chewing. Problems are so common that researchers estimate 12 million Americans are affected, most between ages 20 and 40. More women than men are affected.

The causes of TMJ problems include a jaw injury, grinding your teeth, arthritis in the jaw or a misaligned bite. Stress that causes people to clench their jaw is one thing that can be treated. Reducing stress sometimes reduces the symptoms. If you have any of the symptoms, tell your dentist.

You can find relief for TMJ symptoms, although finding the right treatment may take time. Some remedies can be as simple as pain relievers, or muscle relaxers. Treatment can also include physical therapy or mouth guards or trigger point injections. In some cases, surgery is recommended.



Wildfire: Evacuate

It's important to heed evacuation orders for wildfires. While some people want to wait it out, it's a dangerous decision to stay behind. Leaving as soon as it's recommended is wisest, because if you wait until authorities order you, you could be caught in a deadly scramble and traffic.

Leaving early also helps firefighters keep roads clear of congestion so they can work more effectively. If you live in an area susceptible to wildfires, follow these important steps:

1. **Keep** an emergency kit in your vehicle.
2. **Create** an evacuation checklist and keep it handy. Include what to do inside your home (shutting windows and doors, removing highly flammable window treatments) and outside your home (turning off propane tanks, connecting garden hoses) in an evacuation. Learn more at readyforwildfire.org.



3. **Locate** your pets and take them with you.
4. **Gather** cover-ups to protect against heat and flying embers. For example: Wear long pants, sturdy footwear, dry bandanas, goggles or glasses.
5. **Follow** the escape routes determined by the officials. Never take your own shortcuts.
6. **Don't** return until officials give the okay.

Waterpark Cautions

Dangers lurk at waterparks — both hidden and obvious. Keep your eyes open when it comes to your and your family's safety at waterparks.

Here are some hazards and advice for avoiding them:

Drowning: Supervise your children at all times. Make sure young or new swimmers wear a Coast Guard-approved life jacket. Wave pools carry the biggest drowning risk so keep your young or weak swimmers within arm's length.

Injury: Read the posted signs that state age, height, weight or other requirements before letting your children go on a ride. Enforce the park's rules by insisting children walk instead of run and go down the water slide feet first and face up. Consider water shoes to give little feet traction and protect them from cuts and scrapes.

Sunburn: Slather on the sunscreen before you go and throughout the day to protect children's skin. Apply every two hours, especially after water activities.



Bacterial infection or waterborne illness: Bandage children's cuts before they go in the water. Water shoes can also help keep their toes from getting cut or scraped. Tell your children to never drink or knowingly put water from the pool in their mouths. Keep children away from drains where bacteria can collect.

Dehydration: Make sure your children drink water (not pool water) throughout the day.

Exhaustion: Give your children water and snack breaks in the shade every hour or so even though they may want to keep on going.



dollars & sense

Q: Is it okay to pay off debt with my 401(k)?

A: **Probably not.** It might seem tempting to pay off debt, especially high-interest debt, by using your 401(k) but this isn't the wisest choice. Before tapping into your retirement savings, weigh the drawbacks against the relief it may provide.

Here is why it is a bad idea:

- If you are younger than 59½, withdrawing from a traditional 401(k) triggers immediate financial consequences.
- The withdrawn amount is treated as ordinary income, meaning you will owe federal and potentially state taxes.
- The IRS imposes a strict 10% penalty on the distribution.

By removing your money early, you permanently sacrifice years of tax-advantaged compound interest, which can drastically reduce your future retirement funds.

Between taxes and penalties, you could easily lose between 30% to 40% of the distribution. For example, withdrawing \$10,000 might only leave you with \$6,000 to put toward your debt.

A possible alternative, which is still not a great idea, is, if your plan allows, take a loan against your 401(k). Plans allow participants to borrow up to 50% of their vested balance (up to \$50,000) without triggering taxes or penalties, provided you repay the loan with interest to yourself. However, if you leave your job, the loan becomes due immediately and failure to repay transforms the loan into a taxable early withdrawal.

The bottom line: A 401(k) withdrawal should be an absolutely last resort. Exploring safer alternatives, such as debt consolidation, aggressive budgeting, or a balance transfer to 0% interest credit cards, are better choices than distributions from your retirement accounts.

— Jamie Lynn Byram, PhD, CFP, AFC, RSSA

MRIs for Back Pain: What You Need to Know

Almost everyone has back pain at some time in their life. You might think you need to get a magnetic resonance imaging scan that uses magnetic fields to create pictures of the lower spine.

You may be surprised to learn that in most cases, you don't need an MRI. This imaging test isn't standard for low back pain. Here's why:

- Less than 5-10% of all low back pain is due to a specific underlying spinal condition.
- In the remaining 90-95% of cases, no serious spine cause is found.
- Low back pain often gets better on its own within six weeks.

In fact, MRI is one of the most overused tests for low back pain in the U.S. Most of the time, a physical exam and medical history review are enough for diagnosis and treatment. Instead, pain should be managed with treatment, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, exercise, pain management or physical therapy.

MRIs are recommended if you have any of these red flags:

- Cannot pass urine or stools.
- Cannot control your urine or stools.
- Difficulty with walking and loss of balance.
- Back pain that is severe in children.
- Fever.
- History of cancer.
- Other signs or symptoms of cancer.
- Recent serious fall or injury.
- Back pain that is very severe, and pain medication doesn't relieve it.
- Leg that is numb or weak and it is getting worse.

If you have low back pain but none of the red flags listed above, getting an MRI won't lead to better treatment, more pain relief, or a quicker return to activities. If the pain doesn't subside or worsens in four to six weeks, your provider may order one.

Keep in mind that an MRI scan creates detailed pictures of your spine. It can pick up most injuries that you have had in your spine or changes that happen as you age (degeneration). These degenerative changes usually don't cause back pain and rarely factor in determining treatment.



Also, MRI results can lead to:

- Your provider ordering additional, unnecessary tests.
- You worrying about your health and back even more. If you're so stressed you don't want to exercise, this may cause your back to take longer to heal.
- Treatment you don't need, especially for changes that happen naturally as you age.

MRI scans also have risks:

- **Rarely, the contrast (dye) used with MRI scans** can cause severe allergic reactions or damage to your kidneys.
- **The strong magnetic fields an MRI creates** can cause heart pacemakers and other implants not to work as well. Ask your cardiologist if your pacemaker is MRI compatible; newer models may not be affected.
- **An MRI scan can also cause a piece of metal inside your body** to move. Before having an MRI, tell the technologist about any metal objects that you have in your body.
- **Pregnant women** should not have MRI scans.

Recognize that health does not always improve with more care. Even if a test or treatment has been shown to benefit some, using it as a universal standard may not be appropriate for all. Also, your insurance plan may not cover the entire cost of expensive tests such as MRIs.

In general, rely on your health care provider, not medical misinformation, to determine if you need any diagnostic test. Content such as social media posts omit the harms of tests, such as overdiagnosing or unnecessary exposure to radiation or supplements and medications that don't help you or you don't need.

The goal of quality health care: Get the right care at the right time for the best results.

Zorba's corner

Lifelong Learning and Dementia Risk

Memory loss, Alzheimer's disease, and cognitive impairment sit near the top of the list of worries people have about aging — with good reason. The older we get the greater the risk. New research shows that lifelong learning reduces that risk. Rush University researchers, along with findings from several comparative studies, have observed something striking. Individuals who problem solve and learn new things reduce their risk of memory loss by nearly 40% and if they do suffer memory loss it's later in life. The brain is like a muscle; use it or lose it. Any time you focus — whether it's problem solving, remembering things, concentrating — anything that requires effort keeps your brain fit.

— Zorba Paster, MD



Study: Need Some Calm? Try a Massage

Research shows why massage is a stress buster. Massage, an ancient form of hands-on healing, lowers stress hormones. That calms blood pressure and slows your heart rate, according to University of Miami research. Studies show stress-relieving massage lessens pain, muscle tightness and increases relaxation, too. The Mayo Clinic and other medical centers are increasingly prescribing massage therapy to help people cope with stress and pain from cancer, stomach problems, heart disease and fibromyalgia. If you have a health condition, ask your health care provider if massage is right for you. Before making a massage appointment, ask about the therapist's training, experience, credentials and fees.



Study: Statin Side Effects: What the Research Shows



For most people on a statin to lower their cholesterol, the benefits are far greater than the risks of side effects, according to a large review of multiple studies. Common side effects listed for statins include sleep problems, depression, weight gain, fatigue, nausea, headache and memory loss. Drug labels have to list potential side effects even if there's no evidence the medication causes them.

Scientists examined 23 large-scale, randomized clinical trials that involved more than 150,000 participants tracked for about five years. A statin and a placebo were compared in most of the trials. In both groups the number of reports of memory or cognitive impairment was 0.2%. Among those people given statins who had cognitive or memory problems, there was no evidence the cholesterol-lowering medications caused them. The other studies compared lower and higher statin doses.

Researchers found that four of 66 side effects were caused by statins. These side effects, including fluid buildup in ankles, legs and feet, are not common, are easy to manage with medical care and are overshadowed by the benefit of these medications in preventing heart attacks and strokes.

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Phone: 800-871-9525
Email: PBeditor@ebix.com
Website: personalbest.com

Executive Editor: Susan Cottman • **Advisers:** Jamie Lynn Byram, PhD, CFP, AFC, RSSA; Eric Endlich, PhD; Kenneth Holtyn, MS; Gary B. Kushner, SPHR, CBP; Zorba Paster, MD; Cara Rosenbloom, RD; Elizabeth Smoots, MD; Margaret Spencer, MD • **Editor:** Aimee Miller • **Designer:** Sheila B. Nupen • The content herein is in no way intended to serve as a substitute for professional advice. Sources available on request. © 2026 Ebix Inc. All rights reserved. Unauthorized reproduction in any form of any part of this publication is a violation of federal copyright law and is strictly prohibited.