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CONSUMER REPORTS IN ACTION

How Safe Is Our Food?

The risks and how to avoid them



IT'S ESTIMATED THAT tens of millions of people in the U.S. typically get sick every year from bacteria in food, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Last year, confirmed cases of foodborne illness rose by 20 percent, and hospitalizations and deaths more than doubled.

At the same time, food recalls due to potential contamination with bacteria such as salmonella, E. coli, and listeria increased by 41 percent from 2023, according to the nonprofit U.S. Public Interest Research Group Education Fund. Over the past year, we saw recalls on foods like deli meats, onions, carrots, and eggs. Big brands such as Boar's Head and McDonald's were involved in some recalls.

Removing food that may be contaminated from the marketplace is important in keeping us safe from foodborne illness. But budget cuts at food safety agencies could make it hard for regulators to keep up with essential oversight, says Brian Ronholm, director of food policy at Consumer Reports.

Each year, CR ranks the 10 foods linked to the biggest U.S. recalls and most serious illness outbreaks from bacterial contamination. (See more at CR.org/10riskyfoods.) You can protect yourself by taking steps like the following:

- **Sign up for food safety alerts** from CR at CR.org/foodalert.
- **Wash your hands** for at least 20 seconds with warm, soapy water before you prep food and after touching raw meat, eggs, or flour. Wash cutting boards and other utensils, too.
- **Don't rinse meat, poultry, or fish.** Doing so can spread bacteria.
- **Cook food to the proper temperature;** use a meat thermometer to check.
- **Serve hot foods hot and cold foods cold.** Don't let perishables (cheese and other proteins, salads, and cut produce) sit out for more than 2 hours, or 1 hour if it's hot outside.



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Health Wire



Do This for a Big Mood Boost

Group arts classes like painting, music appreciation, and dance reduced depression and anxiety significantly in older adults, a recent analysis of 39 studies found. In fact, researchers said the classes were as helpful for mood issues as some drug therapies.

Source: *Nature Mental Health*, March 5, 2025.



THE BEST MOVES FOR GOOD SLEEP

Exercises that strengthen muscles were best for promoting sleep, according to a Thai review of 24 studies on the effect of physical activities on slumber in older adults with insomnia. When participants rated their sleep quality, strength training improved their scores more than exercise like walking or cycling did.

Source: *Family Medicine and Community Health*, March 4, 2025.



Healthy Oils for a Longer Life

Consuming about 2 tablespoons of healthy oils every day—like olive, canola, or soybean oil—was associated with a 16 percent lower risk of dying over 33 years compared with those who consumed less of them, a study found. The researchers, who tracked 221,054 adults, also said that budget-friendly plant oils like canola and soybean were as effective as olive oil, which may be pricier.

Source: *JAMA Internal Medicine*, March 6, 2025.



In a study of people ages 50 and older with hypertension, tighter blood pressure control was better for the brain. Those who kept their systolic (top number) blood pressure below 120 for at least 3.3 years were 14 percent less likely to have mild thinking and memory problems than others.

Source: *Neurology*, Feb. 11, 2025.

The Right Amount of Sunscreen

People who bought pricier sunscreens slathered on smaller amounts than those who used cheaper brands, according to a study. Researchers say this could hike skin cancer risks. Whichever sunscreen you buy, opt for one with an SPF of at least 30 and apply an ounce (a shot glass full) to your body.

Source: *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology*, Jan. 13, 2025.



The Problem With Insulin Pumps

If you use an insulin pump or a continuous glucose monitor that connects wirelessly to your smartphone, check the settings regularly, the Food and Drug Administration says. Software and hardware updates could cancel blood sugar

alerts you've set up or change how you receive them. Missing these alerts could lead to dangerous blood sugar levels. So check your smartphone settings every month, after system updates, and whenever you connect your phone to a new device.

Source: Food and Drug Administration, Feb. 5, 2025.



Important News About Pain Meds

Ibuprofen or acetaminophen? How much is okay? The answers you need for relief.

WHETHER IT'S FOR an occasional headache or chronic arthritis, there will be times you may need to reach for pills for pain. But people respond in different ways to pain meds, so what's safest and most effective isn't always clear.

For older adults, "there are concerns about some seemingly benign over-the-counter medications for pain," says Allen Andrade, MD, a geriatrician at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City. For instance, OTC pain meds like ibuprofen (Motrin and generic) are more likely to cause gastrointestinal bleeding or kidney damage.

And for lingering discomfort, like a backache that lasts for months, "there are few effective oral pain medications that are safe to take long-term," he says. In addition, what's appropriate for you may depend on your overall health, the cause of the pain, and whether you have an underlying medical condition like heart disease or kidney disease.

What to do? These answers to common questions can help.

Q What's best for occasional headaches or muscle aches?

As we age, the OTC medication acetaminophen (Tylenol and generic) is usually recommended as the first-line treatment for everyday pains like those above. It's thought to have less risk of side effects than nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) like ibuprofen (Motrin and generic) and naproxen (Aleve and generic). (Those can cause GI bleeding, and long-term use has been linked to heart attack, stroke, heart failure, and kidney problems.) Too much acetaminophen, however, can lead to severe kidney damage, so take no more than the recommended doses. In general, this means that people ages 65 and older should take no more than 3,000 mg of acetaminophen in a day—and a maximum of 2,000 mg daily if they have liver disease.

Q What if acetaminophen doesn't help enough?

For most older people, when everyday pain like muscle aches doesn't respond to acetaminophen, it's often fine to take an NSAID such as ibuprofen for a short

period of time. "If you're an older adult who doesn't have severe liver disease, kidney disease, or heart failure, it's usually okay if you limit it to a five-day course and check with your doctor beforehand," says Andrade. You'll want to ask your doctor which NSAID is best for you, and check in with your doctor if you end up taking an NSAID for longer than a week. "I often suggest ibuprofen to my patients vs. naproxen (Aleve and generic)," says Claudene George, MD, a geriatrician at the Montefiore Medical Center in New York City. "It's shorter-acting, which means it stays in your system for less time if there is a complication."

If you think you'll need an NSAID for a few days, ask your doctor whether you should also take an OTC drug to protect you from ulcers or GI bleeding. Such medications include famotidine (Pepcid and generic) and omeprazole (Prilosec and generic).

Q Is it safe to use acetaminophen every day for osteoarthritis?

If you regularly take acetaminophen more than twice a week, it's best to

talk with your doctor about whether you should limit your daily dose to 2,000 mg, says George. Here's why: A 2024 study published in the journal *Arthritis Care & Research* found that people ages 65 and older who used acetaminophen regularly for 20 years were more likely to develop conditions such as gastrointestinal bleeding, heart failure, high blood pressure, and chronic kidney disease. The higher the dose, the higher their risk.

For OA pain, adding in a topical OTC anti-inflammatory may give you sufficient relief at the lower dose of acetaminophen. "It seems to work best on joints where there's not a lot of tissue, like your knees, hands, and wrists," says W. Michael Hooten, MD, a pain specialist at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn. (See more in "When to Try Topical Meds," at right.) You can apply a topical to the affected joint three to four times daily, for as long as you need the relief.

Q Is it safe to take acetaminophen plus an NSAID?

Alternating between the two medications is sometimes helpful. In general, Hooten recommends that those who need this for pain relief start with acetaminophen, then layer on ibuprofen as needed. If you use this strategy, try taking a lower-than-recommended dose of ibuprofen, at least initially, to reduce the risk of side effects, says Hooten. Limit use of the two medications together to five to seven days.

Q I take aspirin for my heart. What if I need pain relief?

Acetaminophen is your safest option, says Andrade. When NSAIDs are used with aspirin, even short-term, they raise your risk of a GI bleed or kidney disease. And because NSAIDs may also increase the likelihood of heart attack and stroke, they may negate the heart benefits you get from a daily aspirin.

Q What's safe and works for severe discomfort?

For an acute flare-up of severe pain, or after surgery, your doctor may suggest tramadol (Ultram and generic), a milder opioid. This prescription drug is often considered safer for older adults than some stronger prescription pain drugs, says William Raoofi, MD, an interventional pain medicine specialist at Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore.

Keep in mind, however, that tramadol is considered addictive, and has been linked to an increased risk of hip fracture and worsening confusion in older adults with dementia. Raoofi typically prescribes it for only a few days.

Another option, says George, is a short course of acetaminophen plus a low dose of an opioid such as codeine (do this only under a doctor's guidance). "If that doesn't work, we might consider a stronger prescription pain reliever short-term," she says.



WHEN TO TRY TOPICAL MEDS

For chronic discomfort, notably the joint aches that can come with osteoarthritis, the over-the-counter topical nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory cream diclofenac (Voltaren and generic) is often the best first option, says geriatrician Claudene George, MD. A Cochrane review of 39 studies found that it significantly reduced pain in about 60 percent of people. And because topical NSAIDs—which can come in a cream, gel, or patch—are less likely to be absorbed by your liver or kidneys, they're much safer for older adults to use regularly than oral ones, says George. Some research suggests that NSAID-based topicals may also help with the acute pain of sprains and muscle strains, too.

There's less evidence for other kinds of topicals, like those that contain lidocaine or capsaicin (the substance that makes chili peppers spicy), says W. Michael Hooten, MD. But, "anecdotally, some patients tell me that they find that they help," he says. He doesn't recommend topicals with CBD, however. "It doesn't appear to be absorbed into your skin at all," he says.



LEARN

For pain-relief strategies that harness the power of your mind, go to CR.org/mindpower.

HOW PHYSICAL THERAPY CAN HELP

Research consistently shows that physical therapy helps provide relief to—and improve the quality of life for—those living with muscle or joint aches. "The goal is that once you strengthen and stretch certain muscles, your pain

improves to the point where you don't need to take medication anymore," says geriatrician Luke Kim, MD, of the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio. In PT, you can also learn how to move in ways that are easier on your body and when to

use ice or heat to help relieve discomfort. "If it hurts to pick something up off the floor, a PT can teach you ways to overcome that discomfort," says Allen Andrade, MD, of the Mount Sinai School of Medicine. Your doctor can

recommend a physical therapist near you, and, with a referral, your PT is usually covered by Medicare. Keep in mind that once you stop physical therapy, you'll need to keep up with the exercises at home to maintain your gains.

What to Eat for Better Sleep

The vegetables, grains, nuts, and fats that make a difference



A GOOD NIGHT'S REST can become more elusive as you get older. "Biological changes that occur with age can make you wake more frequently and spend less time in deep sleep, which is essential for cell repair and clearing toxic waste out of the brain," says John Saito, MD, a spokesperson for the American Academy of Sleep Medicine. "So even if you think you're getting the recommended 7 to 9 hours of sleep, you may wake up feeling less refreshed and restored than you used to." In addition, sleep disorders—such as sleep apnea and restless legs syndrome—are more common with age.

What can you do? Having a sleep schedule and exercising regularly can help, but don't overlook your diet. "The evidence showing a connection between diet and sleep is so strong that eating well should be an essential part of your sleep strategy," says Erica Jansen, PhD, MPH, a nutritional epidemiologist at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Knowing that connection and how it works can help you choose the right foods to get better rest.

How Diet Affects Sleep

Studies have found that the way you eat affects the quantity and quality of your sleep in three specific ways.

> Hormone regulation. Several hormones—chemical messengers that affect and manage hundreds of body processes—are involved in sleep. Key among them is melatonin, which is responsible for regulating our sleep-wake cycles. Levels rise late in the day to tell the body to prepare for sleep and decrease in the mornings to help us wake up. "As we age, melatonin signals and receptors aren't as strong as they used to be, so you may need more of it to regulate your circadian rhythms," Saito says. What we eat can help. Our bodies use tryptophan—an amino acid in some foods—to produce a lot of the melatonin we need. Some foods also contain melatonin.

> Inflammation. Eating too much of certain foods—such as processed meats, refined carbohydrates (like white bread), saturated fats, and added sugars—can increase levels of inflammation in the body, which can have negative health effects. For example, an analysis published in 2021 in the journal *Sleep Health* found that people who ate an inflammatory diet had a 40 percent greater risk of sleeping 6 hours or less per night than those who adhered to an anti-inflammatory diet.

One reason may be that a diet filled with inflammatory foods leads to the release of excessive amounts of inflammatory cytokines, says Marie-Pierre St-Onge, PhD, director of the Center of Excellence for Sleep & Circadian Research at the Columbia University Irving Medical Center in New York City. Cytokines are molecules that help regulate sleep; some are inflammatory and others are not. High levels of inflammatory cytokines can trigger sleep disturbances.

> Gut microbiome. Your gut and your brain are closely connected and

communicate directly with each other through molecules called short-chain fatty acids. These are made in the gut from certain foods we eat. "Those fatty acids influence the 'clock genes' that help set our circadian rhythms and regulate our sleep-wake patterns," St-Onge says. They also help keep inflammation in check.

Eat to Improve Your Slumber

"No individual food can work magic on your sleep," says Arman Arab, PhD, a research fellow in the medical chronobiology program at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. "You need to follow a healthy diet over time to see positive effects."

Focus on these steps:

► **Put more plant foods on your plate.** Diets that have been shown to improve sleep have one thing in common: All have lots of fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains. A 2023 study published in *Sleep Health*, for example, found that people who followed a healthy plant-based diet had 55 percent higher odds of better sleep quality. And the Mediterranean diet, which is heavily focused on plants and has few animal products, was linked to a 14 percent lower risk of insomnia in a 2024 review of 37 studies published in the journal *Sleep Medicine Reviews*.

'No individual food can work magic on your sleep. You need to follow a healthy diet over time to see positive effects.'

—Arman Arab, PhD

Such a diet may improve sleep in two ways. Plant foods help the gut make short-chain fatty acids. And several of those foods (including tomatoes, walnuts, and cherries) are good sources of melatonin. Others—like legumes and leafy greens—are rich in tryptophan, the precursor to melatonin.

A plant-forward diet also increases your intake of antioxidant polyphenols. Some research has found that a higher intake helped people fall asleep faster and stay asleep longer. Polyphenols also suppress the production of inflammatory cytokines and boost the production of anti-inflammatory ones.

► **Fill up on fiber.** Found in all plant foods, fiber improves the health of your gut microbiome and helps control overall inflammation and the release of inflammatory cytokines. Fruits, nuts, vegetables, legumes, seeds, and whole grains are all great sources of fiber.

► **Choose anti-inflammatory fats.**

"Using olive oil and consuming other poly- and monounsaturated fats can help reduce inflammation," Arab says. These fats are found in avocados and nuts. Limit your intake of saturated fat (found in foods like red meats and butter), which can be inflammatory.

► **Get plenty of "helper" nutrients.**

Your body requires certain vitamins and minerals to help convert tryptophan into melatonin. These include vitamin B6, magnesium, and zinc. Vitamin D may also help with melatonin production and improve sleep in other ways.

If you eat well, you probably won't need to take a supplement. "By adhering to a Mediterranean or other healthy, plant-based diet, you'll have a good intake of all the nutrients that are essential for good sleep," Arab says. For example, poultry, fish, and chickpeas are great sources of vitamin B6. Nuts and green leafy vegetables provide magnesium. Legumes and whole grains contain zinc. And mushrooms and salmon supply vitamin D.



For more tips on getting better rest, go to CR.org/healthysleep.

5 FOOD HABITS THAT CAN KEEP YOU UP

Don't feel refreshed in the a.m.? Avoid these eats.

► **Ultraprocessed foods (UPFs) such as soda, hot dogs, and chips:** They're typically high in sugar, sodium, and saturated fat, and low in fiber. A 2024 study published in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* found that every 10 percent increase in the amount

of UPFs in a diet was associated with a 5 and 9 percent higher insomnia risk for women and men, respectively.

► **Caffeine:** "Older adults don't metabolize caffeine as quickly, so it lingers longer in your system," says John Saito, MD. That's why

drinking coffee, tea, or caffeinated soda after noon can affect your sleep at bedtime.

► **Alcohol:** It may make you feel sleepy, but it will also make your sleep less restful. Alcohol disturbs sleep rhythms and leads to more episodes of waking up throughout the night.

► **Spicy foods:** Any food that might give you heartburn or indigestion—like those that are spicy, acidic, or high in fat (Buffalo chicken wings can hit all three)—can keep you awake.

► **Liquids too close to bedtime:** Chugging a large glass of water or sipping herbal tea



before you climb into bed can disrupt sleep if it leads to getting up multiple times in the night to go to the bathroom. Hydrate a few hours beforehand.

The Surprising Way to Tame Stress Fast

Learning to breathe deeply is truly effective



LIFE CAN SOMETIMES be stressful. Health worries, financial concerns—even watching the news—can get you wound up.

And feeling tense isn't just unpleasant; it's also bad for your health. Chronic stress can contribute to or worsen sleep problems, headaches, gastrointestinal issues, high blood pressure, and depression and anxiety.

But there's an easy, natural way to counteract stress: Take a deep breath.

Why Deep Breathing Is Calming

High-stress situations make you feel tense because they activate your sympathetic nervous system. This triggers the well-known fight-or-flight response, says Willie E. Lawrence Jr., MD, a preventive cardiologist and chief medical officer with the Cardiac and Vascular Interventional Group

in Dallas. As a result, you breathe quickly and shallowly, your heart rate spikes, and your arteries narrow, which raises your blood pressure.

Breathing deeply counteracts this. It activates your diaphragm, a muscle at the bottom of your ribs, which stimulates the vagus nerve that runs from the brain to the abdomen. This activates your parasympathetic nervous system, lowers stress hormones, slows breathing, and brings your heart rate and blood pressure back to normal. The result: You start feeling calmer and more relaxed. Slowing your exhalations can enhance this, Lawrence says.

Of course, deep breathing won't eliminate all of your tension. But studies have found plenty of positive effects. A 2023 meta-analysis published in *Scientific Reports* found that using

various breathing techniques was linked to less overall stress and improved mental health. A 2019 review of three studies connected using your diaphragm muscle while breathing to a long-term reduction in stress levels and a short-term drop in blood pressure.

How to Get the Benefits

Most people breathe shallowly throughout their day. To learn how to breathe deeply, lie on your back, slowly inhale—letting your rib cage expand and your stomach rise—then exhale, letting them contract and fall. Over time, deep breathing more of the time may become natural for you.

Juanita Guerra, PhD, a clinical psychologist in New Rochelle, N.Y., and Lawrence also suggest doing exercises that slow your breathing, which can offer a reset when you're under pressure. Try practicing one or more of the moves below once a day. (Start with three to five cycles at a time.)

➤ **Box (or square) breathing:** Inhale for four counts, hold your breath for four, exhale for four, and hold again for four.

➤ **4-7-8 breathing:** Inhale through your nose for four counts, then hold your breath for seven. Then slowly exhale through your mouth for eight counts.

➤ **Alternate nostril breathing:** Close your right nostril with your thumb and inhale. Close your left nostril with your ring finger and release your thumb; exhale, and then inhale. Close your right nostril and exhale. Start again.



3 MORE WAYS TO RELAX

Deep breathing may be even more effective at reducing stress when it's done as part of another activity. That also helps you incorporate deep breathing more easily into your life, says Willie E. Lawrence Jr., MD, a preventive cardiologist in Dallas. Consider these options.

Yoga, Pilates, and tai chi: These exercises focus on controlling your breath while you're moving your body.

Mindful meditation: Paying close attention to your breathing helps you focus on the present moment and not think about other things. It's been found to reduce levels of stress hormones.

Spending time outdoors:

Research has found that being in a natural setting like a park for just 20 minutes can lower stress hormone levels. If it's difficult to get outside regularly, some evidence suggests that looking out a window or viewing natural scenes on a screen may help.

Stomach Trouble? Eat These Foods.

Yogurt, kimchi, and sourdough bread can really help



YOGURT, SAUERKRAUT, and sourdough bread may not seem to have a lot in common. But they're all the product of fermentation, a centuries-old process that generally involves adding microbes such as bacteria, yeast, or mold to foods to help preserve them.

And it turns out those microbes can do more. Studies suggest that eating certain fermented foods may help promote a healthy gut, lower blood pressure, and reduce the risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes. You have to pick the right kinds, though, for these benefits, which can be tricky unless you know what to look for.

The Power of Microbes

The microbes used in fermentation can alter food so that it becomes tastier, more digestible, or more nutritious. For instance, the yeast and bacteria that go into making sourdough bread not only give it its tangy flavor but also slow its digestion—reducing its effect on blood sugar—and increase the absorption of minerals like magnesium and zinc. Bacteria used in yogurt-making break down lactose in the milk, which makes the yogurt suitable for those with lactose intolerance.

In many cases, the microbes die after they ferment food. The broader health-protective benefits appear to come mainly from fermented food that has live microbes, says Moneek Madra, PhD, an assistant professor of nutrition at the Institute of Human Nutrition at

Columbia University in New York City. These include yogurt, kefir, buttermilk, kimchi, sauerkraut, certain pickled vegetables, tempeh, and kombucha.

Some of the microbes are probiotic bacteria, which support the trillions of “good” bacteria that live in your gut. These compounds help maintain the intestinal lining, regulate the immune system, prevent or cut short respiratory infections, and ease the symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).

A 2023 study published in the Journal of Nutrition that followed 46,091 people over 17 years found that every 3½ ounces (about ½ cup) of fermented food consumed each day led to increasing reductions in systolic blood pressure (the top BP number), triglycerides, and waist circumference, and a rise in HDL (“good”) cholesterol. According to a 2022 review in the journal Nutrients, probiotics can also synthesize vitamins, such as folic acid and vitamin B12.

Fermented Foods to Eat

“There’s no official recommended daily intake for fermented foods,” says Emily Ho, PhD, director of the Linus Pauling Institute at Oregon State University in Corvallis, but consuming them regularly seems like a good move. Follow these suggestions on the fermented foods to look for and how to add them to your diet.

► Start slow, increase them gradually.

Fermented foods can cause reflux, gas, or bloating in some people if too many servings are added into their diet at once, Madra says. Try a yogurt and berry smoothie for breakfast or add a side of crunchy kimchi to your salad at lunch. Dinner could be crumbled tempeh with brown rice and veggies.

► **Prioritize dairy.** Yogurt in particular has been linked to a lower risk of cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes, a reduced waist size, and better gut health and immune function. Scan labels for “live active cultures,” and look for plain, unsweetened varieties to avoid excess added sugars.

► **Shop in the refrigerated section.** Some microbes die when they’re heated or kept at room temperature. So for probiotics, buy refrigerated versions of kimchi, sauerkraut, pickled vegetables, and kombucha that say “probiotics” or “live active cultures” on their labels. Shelf-stable versions don’t have probiotics, nor do vegetables pickled in vinegar. To get the benefits of live cultures, choose pickled cucumbers, beets, and other veggies that have been brined (preserved in salt and water).

Dry All Over? What to Do.

Scratchy eyes. Parched skin. Dry down there. Solutions here.

UNCOMFORTABLY DRY SKIN is common enough as the years pass. But you may also notice that the very same issue affects your mouth, eyes, and, for women, the vagina.

Most of the time, it's simply part of getting older, due to natural "changes in parts of our body that produce moisture, typically over age 65," says John van Bockxmeer, MD, a family medicine physician at Columbia University Irving Medical Center in New York City.

But you don't have to live with the discomfort. Home remedies and over-the-counter treatments can usually help. When they can't, your doctor may have prescription therapies that are more effective.

Dry Mouth

Age is the most common predictor of a dry mouth, according to a 2024 *Scientific Reports* study, and often stems from simply not drinking enough fluids. "Your sense of thirst can change as you get older, so it's important to make an effort to stay hydrated," says Richard Marottoli, MD, a geriatrician at Yale Medicine in New Haven, Conn. He recommends sipping 8 cups of non-caffeinated, nonalcoholic liquids (soups and juicy fruits help) daily. You can also chew gum or suck on OTC dry mouth lozenges to stimulate saliva production.

Medication side effects are another leading cause of dry mouth in older adults, says van Bockxmeer. Prescription drugs such as certain antidepressants and blood pressure medications can lead to the problem. Certain OTC antihistamines and decongestants may also dry out your mouth, along with your nose. If you suspect your meds are at fault, talk with your doctor about alternatives. And if you smoke,



work toward quitting. Tobacco is a significant cause of dry mouth.

Then there are medical conditions that can contribute. For instance, thyroid disease and the autoimmune disease Sjögren's syndrome may cause dry mouth, as can type 2 diabetes (the frequent urination associated with the condition can pull moisture from your body). Thyroid-replacement meds can help with hypothyroidism, and for Sjögren's, artificial saliva or drugs to stimulate saliva production can keep your mouth moist. For diabetes, tight blood sugar management can prevent constant thirst.

Dry Eyes

Two habits—straining your eyes to look at a screen and wearing contact lenses for long periods—can make your eyes feel dry and gritty, says van Bockxmeer. If you can't cut back on screen time, try increasing the font size. Alternate contacts with eyeglasses.

You can also try OTC artificial tears to lubricate your eyes. Eating more omega-3 fatty acids, found in oily fish

like salmon, can help improve general eye moisture, too.

And be aware that the very same medications that cause dry mouth can dry out your eyes as well; so can Sjögren's syndrome and thyroid problems. Blepharitis, which is an inflammation of the eyelids, can cause dryness, crusting, and itchiness. Regularly applying a warm compress to the area and gently cleaning it with baby shampoo can reduce discomfort. Your doctor may recommend steroid eye drops, too.

If your dry eyes are accompanied by eye pain or any changes in your vision, which can signify a more serious problem, Marottoli recommends that you consult with an ophthalmologist.

Vaginal Dryness

This can be uncomfortable—even painful during sex—and itchy, and can also increase the risk of urinary tract infections. Dehydration can contribute, but the absence of estrogen after menopause is a more likely origin. "Menopause-related hormonal changes are probably the most common cause of vaginal dryness in older women," says Marottoli.

Medical conditions—like Sjögren's or thyroid disease—may also be at play in some cases. They cause dryness in other parts of the body, too.

Regular use of an OTC vaginal moisturizer may keep the area more moist and comfortable. Topical lubricants, such as silicone- or water-based gels, may help with pain during intercourse, Marottoli says.



LEARN

For tips on soothing dry skin, go to CR.org/dryskin.

Make Cleaning Much Easier

Tidy things up quickly with these smart tools

CLEANING TASKS can take a lot of effort in ways that can be hard on your joints and muscles. Fortunately, there are now robots that can do the vacuuming for you, mops that save you the trouble of filling up a heavy bucket of water, and sponges

that cut down on the scrubbing needed to get pots grime-free.

In fact, Consumer Reports experts have tested a wide variety of tools and products and have plenty of advice to offer about how to make cleaning painless.

1 KEEP YOUR BALANCE

Whatever household chores you have ahead of you, protect yourself from slips and trips. Getting regular exercise, including strength training, can not only help you stay up to the challenge of various tasks but also help you improve your balance and avoid falls. It's also wise to wear sturdy shoes with nonskid soles, light the space you'll be cleaning brightly, and keep high-traffic areas free of tripping hazards such as stray cords, loose rugs, and clutter.

2 KEEP HELPFUL TOOLS HANDY

A long-handled grabber can be useful for picking up items on the floor without having to bend down. Microfiber dusters with extendable handles will allow you to dust the top of your ceiling fan blades or objects on high shelves without needing a step stool.

3 OUTSOURCE YOUR VACUUMING

While an upright or canister vacuum is still a necessity for deep cleaning (particularly for rugs and carpeting),



a robotic vacuum can do lighter floor cleanups for you. Many can be programmed to sweep at the same time every day. CR tests robotic vacuums for dust- and

crumb-removing prowess, how well they navigate, and how easy they are to use. Members can find more on them at CR.org/robovacs.

CR'S EXPERTS

Tyler Ivestor tests robotic vacuums.

Larry Ciupo leads steam mop testing.

4 MAKE MOPPING A CINCH

If mopping feels like an ordeal, consider an electric steam mop. With these, hot water from the mop's tank creates steam, which gets floors clean with less effort. Members can find ratings at CR.org/steammps.

5 USE THE RIGHT SCRUBBERS

A good sponge can significantly cut down on scrubbing. For dishes, our evaluators liked the Skura Style Skrubby Sponge for its flexibility and ability to easily dispatch tough grime. For grimy grout and food spills on stovetops, try a melamine foam sponge (aka a Magic Eraser). These abrasive sponges can take on tough stains and scum. Our evaluators' favorite? The Moxie Extra Strength Eraser Pads.

FOR FLOORS

✓ **iRobot Roomba Combo i5 Vacuum Cleaner** \$350

72

OVERALL SCORE



✓ **Bissell Symphony 1543A Steam Mop** \$225

83

OVERALL SCORE



On Your Mind

I have prediabetes. Should I be using a continuous glucose monitor?

Probably not. A continuous glucose monitor (CGM), a small, wearable device, can help people diagnosed with diabetes manage their medication effectiveness and avoid dangerously low blood sugar. If you have prediabetes, however, you don't need to monitor your blood sugar regularly. But you should see your doctor annually for a fasting blood sugar test or an A1C test, which measures

blood-sugar levels over the prior few months, says endocrinologist Scott Isaacs, MD, an adjunct assistant professor of medicine at Emory University in Atlanta and president of the American Association of Clinical Endocrinology. That helps your doctor monitor your risk of full-blown diabetes. Healthy eating, regular physical activity, and weight control reduce that risk, says Isaacs.



What exercises can help if I have joint pain and stiffness?

Low-impact aerobic exercise like walking, swimming, or riding a stationary bike, and strength training, balance, and flexibility routines can ease joint aches and improve flexibility. Gently exercising the muscles around an achy joint is particularly beneficial. Whatever you choose, start slowly and don't overdo it, the National Institute on Aging recommends. Go to the Arthritis Foundation website (arthritis.org) for specifics.

INSIDE • WILL WARM MILK HELP YOU SLEEP BETTER?

See page 6 for the lowdown on which foods are slumber-friendly.