

How to Stay Physically and Mentally Healthy While COVID-19 Has You Stuck at Home

BY **JAMIE DUCHARME**

MARCH 18, 2020

Most health advice can be boiled down to simple behaviors, like eating a balanced diet, exercising and getting good sleep.

During a [pandemic](#) like COVID-19, these actions are especially crucial for maintaining you physical and mental well-being. But [social distancing](#) complicates things. How are you supposed to eat right when you're living on non-perishables? How can you work out when you're cooped up at home? How can you sleep when [you're anxious](#) about, well, everything?

This expert-backed guide is a good place to start. Here's how to stay healthy (and calm) while [social distancing](#) during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Keep up to date with our daily coronavirus newsletter by clicking [here](#).

Nutrition

Carmen Byker Shanks, an associate professor of food, nutrition and sustainable food systems at Montana State University, says it's key to have a plan before you stock up on groceries — both to ensure you pick up the right things, and to avoid panic-buying and wiping out community supplies. (Remember: it's good to have a robust supply at home, but stores are still open.) Take inventory of what's already in your pantry, and then plan around these items to create meals consisting of a starch, a protein and produce. While most people are going straight for grains and canned goods right now, Byker Shanks says it's actually a good time to buy fresh produce. “Buy those fruits and vegetables, cut them up and put them in your freezer, because they can be used for months to come,” she recommends. Sturdy veggies and starches — like broccoli, Brussels sprouts and sweet potatoes — also keep for a long time outside the freezer. If you do buy canned, dried or frozen goods, choose those low in saturated fat, salt and added sugars. Look for foods with less than less than five grams of added sugar per serving, less than 200 milligrams of salt per serving and less than 1.5 grams of saturated fat per serving, Byker Shanks recommends.

Byker Shanks adds that boredom and [stress eating](#) is a common reaction right now. Your best defense against it, she says, is to admit that it's happening, and try to productively channel those feeling elsewhere, whether by venting to a good friend, writing down your feelings or diving into a good book.

Fitness

You may not be able [to go to the gym](#), but it's okay to walk, run or bike outside, so long as you keep a safe distance — ideally about six feet — from other people, says Dr. Jennifer Lee, a clinical assistant professor of family medicine and community health at

Penn Medicine. Many gyms and fitness instructors are also offering virtual classes right now, she adds.

If you're working out at home, Boston-based personal trainer and fitness instructor Amanda Brabec suggests getting creative with things you already own. Use wine bottles for weights, dish towels for sliders (for exercises like lunges and mountain climbers) or a sturdy chair for step-ups. There are also plenty of [no-equipment-required](#) exercises — like squats, burpees, sit-ups, planks, push-ups and mountain climbers — you can do in even a small space. Brabec recommends choosing five exercises, doing each for a minute, then repeating the circuit three to five times.

And take comfort in the fact that physical activity doesn't have to mean a gym-style workout. [Plenty of research shows](#) that everyday activities like walking, gardening and cleaning slash your risk of premature death and improve your overall health—so any amount of movement you can squeeze in counts.

Stress and Sleep

Managing stress and anxiety is crucial for getting enough sleep—and getting enough sleep is crucial for just about every other aspect of your health.

Yoga and meditation are great tools for managing stress, and they can be done in a small space; check to see if your local studio is streaming guided classes. You can also turn to apps like [Headspace](#) and [Talkspace](#) for virtual mindfulness training and therapy, respectively.

Jamie Gold, a wellness design consultant and author of the [upcoming book](#) *Wellness by Design*, also suggests setting aside a specific area in your home that's free of technology, except maybe a speaker for music. She recommends stocking this area with things that calm you, like your favorite blankets and pillows, a scented candle and house plants. (The research isn't conclusive, but some studies suggest plants can help [purify indoor air](#)—if nothing else, they can [help boost your mood](#), Gold says.)

“Over-exposure to news, over-exposure to chaos, creates a lot of anxiety,” Gold says. “If you can create a quiet space to reflect, to journal, it helps to calm you.” She also recommends, to the extent possible, designating specific areas for work and fitness, to mentally separate the parts of your day.

Balance that quiet time with responsible social interaction, Lee says, since [loneliness](#) can compound mental and physical health issues. “Using FaceTime and the phone and [video chats](#) ... [can help you] feel not quite so alone when you're at home,” Lee says.

Cleaning

[Research suggests](#) SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, can live on plastic and stainless steel surfaces for 72 hours, cardboard for 24 hours and copper for four hours. While the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has said surface contamination doesn't seem to be the primary way the virus spreads (instead, it's through respiratory droplets expelled by a sick person), it can't hurt to wipe down high-touch objects like door knobs, railings and faucets, in addition to regular household upkeep. Most [household cleaners](#) haven't been specifically tested against SARS-CoV-2, but they work against other coronaviruses and are presumed to be effective against this one, experts say.



SPOTLIGHT STORY

In the Wake of the Coronavirus, Here's Why Americans Are Hoarding Toilet Paper

Our panic buying represents one thing we can control

Lee also recommends washing your hand towels frequently, and removing your shoes and coats as soon as you return from any trips outside. But unless somebody in your household is actively sick, she says, there's no need to clean obsessively—especially if you're practicing social distancing and [washing your hands](#) regularly.

Gold adds that decluttering is crucial, especially if you live in a small space. “That’s going to make your space feel larger and more comfortable, and you’re going to have fewer things to touch and transmit germs,” she says.

Health care

Lee recommends postponing non-essential medical appointments, such as annual physicals and dental cleanings, and using [telemedicine](#) for pre-scheduled appointments that need to happen now. If you have a pressing medical need, you can and should still seek care. But if you think you may have COVID-19, call your doctor’s office or hospital before arriving, as they may direct you to follow certain containment procedures.

“I don’t think you can be too cautious,” Lee says. “The more people can call ahead to pre-complete that triage protocol, the safer everyone is going to be.”

Please send any tips, leads, and stories to virus@time.com.