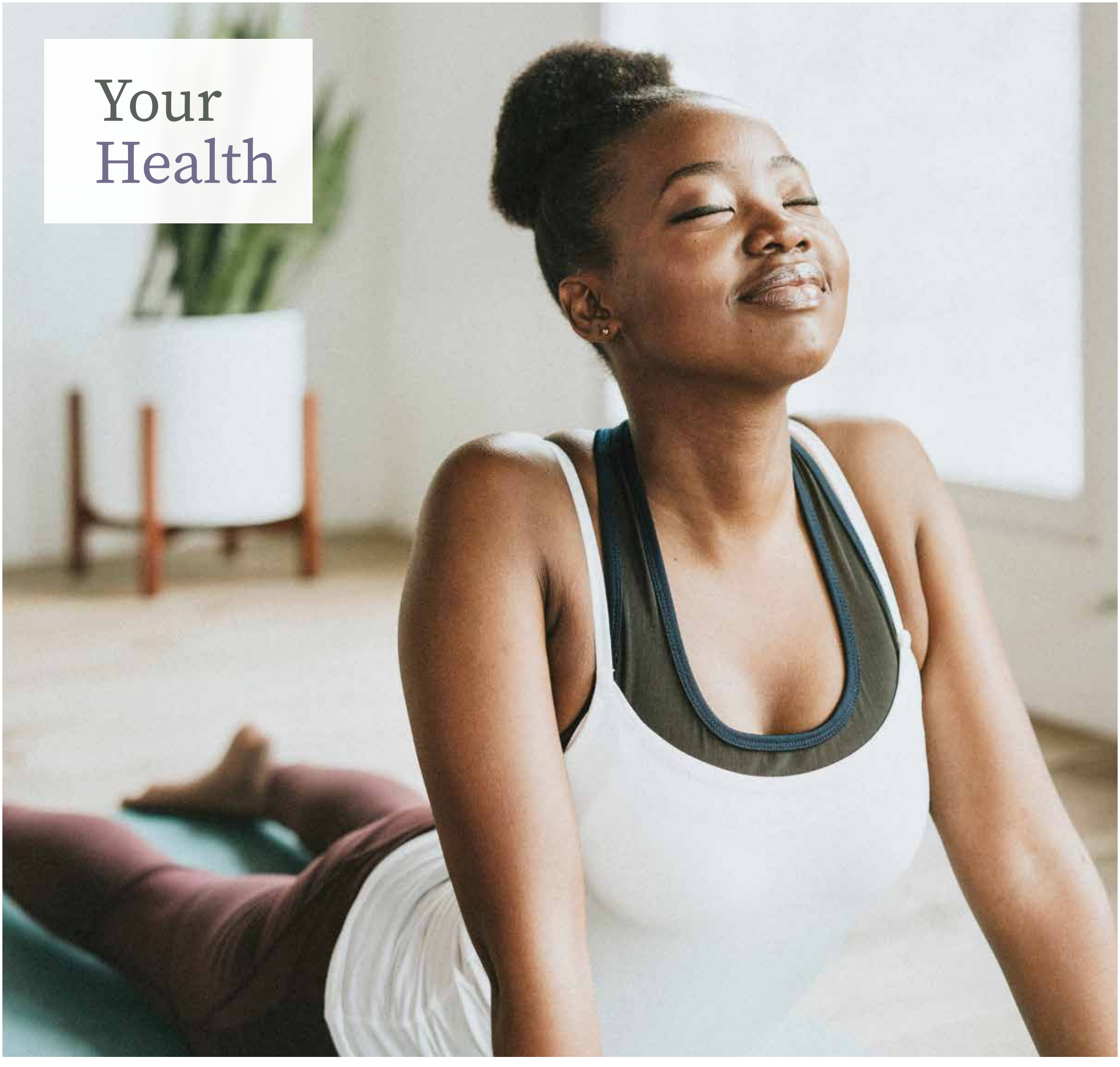
Your Health



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AI in the Exam Room

A patient goes in for a routine checkup. The doctor isn't typing at a keyboard but simply talking, with a phone or tablet quietly listening nearby.

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This is the promise of AI-powered scribe technology.

Artificial intelligence is increasingly becoming part of the health care experience, from note-taking to appointment scheduling and administrative tasks.

Scribe technology can save time for health professionals and potentially give patients more attention during visits — but it also raises questions about privacy, accuracy and the human role in health care.

Ambient AI scribes are one of the fastest-adopted physician-facing technologies in recent memory. By 2026, roughly 70% of physicians in the University of California San Francisco health system were using AI scribes daily, according to MedicalEconomics.com.

WHAT'S ACTUALLY HAPPENING

In a health-care setting, an AI-powered device listens to the patient-provider conversation and drafts clinical notes that the doctor reviews and signs off on. It doesn't diagnose or recommend treatment.

WHAT IT MEANS

The benefits for patients can include more eye contact and attention during visits — since doctors aren't typing — and the ability to review the AI-generated summary afterward, similar to reading doctors' notes.

It can also save time for doctors, although real-world results are more modest than marketing suggests. A large study of 1,800 clinicians found scribe use saved about 16 minutes of documentation time per eight hours of patient care, says StatNews.com.

QUESTIONS TO ASK AT YOUR NEXT VISIT

Don't be alarmed by a phone on the exam table. Ask your provider how this technology is being used to improve, not replace, your care.

While AI can assist your care team, AI-generated information should always be reviewed by a human professional. Ask your providers whether conversations are recorded, how your information is stored and protected and how to opt out if you prefer.

The goal isn't to replace the personal side of health care with technology. At its best, automation can take some of the paperwork off a provider's desk — and put more time back into the conversation with the patient.

When Is Remote Care Effective?

Telehealth and virtual care have become useful options for many routine health needs, but they're not appropriate for every situation.

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Telehealth has become mainstream rather than a pandemic-era stopgap. Roughly 76% of U.S. hospitals now connect doctors and patients remotely, up from 35% a decade ago, according to PracticeEHR.com. For some conditions, research shows telehealth performs comparably to in-person care, according the National Institutes for Health.

It's important to understand when remote care makes sense, when an in-person visit is necessary and how health care providers are making virtual services available.

WHAT IS REMOTE CARE?

Remote care, or telehealth/telemedicine, is health care delivered through video, phone or secure online platforms. Remote care can include virtual appointments, follow-up visits, medication management and communication with providers.

Some forms of remote monitoring use devices to allow providers to track information such as blood pressure or blood glucose from a patient's home.

Remote care can eliminate travel time and make health care more accessible for people with transportation, mobility or scheduling challenges.

WHEN REMOTE CARE WORKS WELL

Virtual care may be particularly convenient and effective for follow-up appointments for an established condition, medication questions or management, discussing test results, minor illnesses or symptoms that don't require a physical examination, mental health counseling and therapy, routine consultations, some dermatology concerns when photos or video provide enough information and for post-procedure check-ins.

WHEN YOU NEED TO BE SEEN IN PERSON

Some conditions require hands-on evaluation, testing or treatment. This includes chest pain or difficulty breathing; serious injuries; severe abdominal pain; symptoms requiring blood work, imaging or other diagnostic testing; physical examinations; vaccinations, injections; or procedures and conditions that are worsening or difficult to evaluate remotely.

Emergency symptoms should not be handled through a routine telehealth appointment. Use emergency services when appropriate.

HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM A VIRTUAL VISIT

Before beginning your telehealth appointment, make sure your device, internet connection and patient-portal login are working. Find a quiet, private location. Have medications and relevant health information nearby. Write down symptoms and questions. Describe changes in symptoms clearly. Finally, ask what happens if the provider determines an in-person examination is necessary.

Digital literacy and technology access remain real barriers for some patients, particularly older adults, according to RiseHealth.org. Look to local libraries and senior centers for digital literacy resources.

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What Can Your DNA Tell You?

Genetic information can provide clues about an individual's health — but it is not a crystal ball. You should understand what testing can — and cannot — tell you before submitting a sample.

WHAT IS GENETIC TESTING

Genetic tests examine DNA for changes that may be associated with particular inherited conditions, traits or health risks. There are two types of services available: clinical genetic testing, ordered through a health-care professional, and direct-to-consumer testing, which people can purchase themselves.

WHY PEOPLE GET TESTED

Common reasons for genetic testing include investigating a suspected inherited condition, understanding whether someone carries a genetic variant that could affect their children, assessing inherited cancer or other disease risks, determining whether a medication may work differently based on the patient's genetics and discovering ancestry and trait information.

PUT THE RESULTS IN PERSPECTIVE

Some genetic variants significantly increase the likelihood of developing a condition. Others have a much smaller effect. Some variants have uncertain significance, meaning scientists don't yet know what they mean.

A negative test doesn't necessarily eliminate all risk, just as a positive result doesn't mean you'll develop a disease. Family history, lifestyle, environment and other factors also influence health.

Discuss medically significant results with a qualified health professional rather than interpreting them alone.

PRIVACY MATTERS

DNA is uniquely personal information. Investigate who owns or controls your genetic data.

Read privacy policies carefully before testing. Look for the answers to these questions:

- How does the company store and protect samples and information?
- Can your information be used for research?
- Will the data be shared with third parties?
- What happens if the company is sold or changes its policies?

Healthy Snack Ideas

The mid-afternoon energy slump comes for us all. Before you reach for vending machine junk food, however, consider healthier options.

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Registered dietitians increasingly frame smart snacking as a tool for steady energy, not a diet mistake to avoid. Healthy snacking doesn't have to mean giving up flavor or convenience. With a little planning, snacks can provide energy, curb hunger and add important nutrients to the day.

RETHINK WHAT A SNACK CAN BE

Snacks can be part of a balanced eating pattern rather than something to feel guilty about. Focus on foods that combine protein, fiber and healthy fats to help you feel satisfied.

Tailor your snack choices to your individual nutritional needs.

The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics-affiliated experts recommend combining at least two food groups per snack. Pair a protein or fiber source with a carbohydrate to avoid blood-sugar spikes and crashes. Think hummus with veggies, or an apple with nut butter.

EASY HEALTHY SNACK IDEAS

Simple foods often make the best snacks and don't require elaborate recipes. Here are some ideas:

Protein-Rich

- Greek yogurt with berries
- Hard-boiled eggs
- Cottage cheese with fruit
- Hummus with vegetables
- Nuts or seeds

Fruit- and Vegetable-Based

- Apple slices with peanut or almond butter
- Fresh berries
- Carrots, cucumbers or bell peppers with hummus
- Celery with nut butter
- Homemade trail mix featuring dried fruit and unsalted nuts

Whole-Grain Options

- Whole-grain crackers with cheese
- Air-popped popcorn
- Whole-grain toast with avocado
- Oatmeal topped with fruit and nuts

MAKE HEALTHY SNACKING MORE CONVENIENT

Healthy snacking is about small, sustainable choices, not perfection. Experiment with combinations you enjoy and make nutritious foods convenient.

Prepare snacks ahead of time to stay on track with your healthy eating goals. Wash and portion fruits and vegetables when you bring them home. Keep nutritious options visible and easy to grab. Pack snacks for work, school, errands and road trips. Consider making a weekly "snack box" with several ready-to-eat choices.

SHOP LOCAL, SNACK SMART

Check local farmers markets, produce stands, bakeries, grocery stores, specialty food shops and independent health-food retailers for fresh ingredients and locally made snacks. Independent grocers and specialty shops may offer nutritious, locally produced options.

Consult with a local dietitian or nutrition professional for individualized guidance that can make healthy eating right for you. Check with local fitness centers and wellness businesses to see whether they offer nutrition education.

Reading Your Doctor's Notes

Patients logging into their portal after an appointment these days may notice a "Visit Notes" tab they've never clicked before.

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The national OpenNotes movement has led to more than 40 million patients across roughly 200 U.S. health systems now being able to read the full notes their clinicians write, according to OpenNotes.org.

These notes are different from the brief "after-visit summary" most patients already see. They're the clinician's full narrative, including symptoms discussed, assessments and reasoning behind a treatment plan. Research shows patients who read their notes are more likely to follow medication and treatment plans, catch documentation errors and follow through on referrals and tests, OpenNotes.org says.

YOUR MEDICAL RECORD IS YOURS

Patients generally have the right to access their health information through their health-care provider or patient portal. Modern electronic health records make it easier than ever to review visit summaries, diagnoses, medications and test results. Review your records rather than simply filing them away.

LEARN THE LANGUAGE

Medical records can be filled with unfamiliar abbreviations, medical terminology and test results. Understanding what your doctor writes can help you become a more informed participant in your care — and knowing where to find reliable help can make medical information less intimidating.

Medical terminology can vary by provider, and patients shouldn't assume an unfamiliar word or abbreviation represents a new diagnosis. Here's a guide to decoding the alphabet soup.

DX: diagnosis
RX: prescription or treatment
HX: medical history
BP: blood pressure
HR: heart rate
RR: respiratory rate
BID: twice daily
PRN: as needed
WNL: within normal limits
SOB: shortness of breath

DON'T DIAGNOSE YOURSELF

A medical note is written primarily for communication among health-care professionals, so it may contain shorthand or clinical observations that aren't intended as patient-friendly explanations.

A diagnosis listed in a note may be a suspected condition, historical condition or reason for evaluation, rather than a confirmed disease.

Test results also need context; a number outside a reference range doesn't automatically mean something is wrong.

Ask your physician or another qualified health professional rather than relying on internet searches to interpret concerning findings.

ASK QUESTIONS

You don't need to speak "doctor" to take an active role in your health care. If something in your record doesn't make sense, asking questions is part of being an informed patient.

After reading through your visit notes, ask some simple questions at your next visit to help understand your larger health picture. Here are some suggestions:

- "What does this diagnosis mean?"
- "Is this confirmed or something you're considering?"
- "What do these test results mean for me?"
- "Has anything changed since my last visit?"
- "What should I watch for?"
- "What is the next step?"

Write questions down before appointments and take notes during the conversation.

Meal Prep Like a Pro

Meal prepping can do more than just simplify your daily routines. Research links meal planning to healthier diets.

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One study found meal planning is associated with a 21% reduction in the likelihood of women becoming obese, and a 19% reduction for men, according to Today.com.

Meal prep doesn't have to mean spending an entire Sunday cooking dozens of meals. With a little planning and the right strategies, preparing ingredients and meals ahead of time can make healthy eating easier, reduce food waste and save money.

Nutrition should be the heart of your meal prepping plan. For best results, consult with a local dietitian or nutrition professional to find out what your nutritional needs are and get suggestions on food choices that are best for you.

START WITH A PLAN

Choose three to five meals or meal components for the week. Check the refrigerator, freezer and pantry before shopping, and build a grocery list around what you already have. Think in terms of ingredients that can do double duty. Roasted vegetables for dinner can become a lunch bowl, for example. Avoid overplanning; start with a manageable number of meals.

PREP INGREDIENTS, NOT JUST MEALS

Meal prep doesn't necessarily mean cooking complete meals in individual containers. Here's how you can maximize your options.

- Pick 2 proteins, such as chicken and beef.
- Prepare 2 vegetables, such as broccoli and carrots.
- Cook 1 grain, such as brown rice or quinoa.
- Wash/chop fruits such as apples or berries.
- Make 1 versatile sauce or dressing, such as sesame-ginger dressing or honey Dijon sauce.
- Portion everything into containers.
- Portion snacks for quick, grab-and-go energy.

This "mix-and-match" approach provides variety without requiring a different recipe every night.

MASTER THE MEAL-PREP BASICS

Choose recipes wisely. Look for meals that keep well and reheat successfully.

Cook in batches. Prepare larger quantities of versatile staples.

Use proper containers. Choose leakproof containers in several sizes.

Label everything. Include the date and contents.

Think about food safety. Refrigerate perishable foods promptly and follow USDA guidance for safe storage and reheating.

Freeze strategically. Freeze portions that won't be eaten within several days rather than letting food go to waste.

PREP LOCAL

Look to local businesses for help getting started on your meal prep journey. Shop local farmers markets and farm stands for seasonal produce. Visit independent grocery stores and specialty food shops for fresh ingredients and prepared staples. Look to local butchers or fish markets for conveniently portioned proteins. Local restaurants and meal-preparation businesses may offer healthy prepared meals for especially busy weeks. Consider local kitchen stores for quality storage containers and meal-prep tools.

AVOID MEAL-PREP BURNOUT

Don't try to prepare every meal for seven days. This could lead to burnout before you even really get started. Start small. Prepping just two or three days' worth counts as a win. Figure leftovers into your plan, and account for nights when you might grab takeout or eat out.

Change recipes and ingredients with the seasons, so you'll have new flavors to freshen up your routine.

Remember that consistency matters more than perfection. Contrary to popular belief, you don't need an Instagram-worthy fridge of matching containers. And don't be afraid of a shortcut. Frozen and canned staples like beans and edamame are time-savers.

What Is Integrative Medicine?

Integrative medicine combines conventional medical care with complementary approaches that have scientific evidence behind them, with an emphasis on treating the whole person rather than just symptoms.

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The goal isn't to replace standard medicine with alternative treatments, but to coordinate different approaches around the patient's individual needs, preferences and overall well-being.

The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, the federal government's lead research agency on the topic, defines integrative health as bringing conventional and complementary approaches together in a coordinated way.

WHAT DOES "INTEGRATIVE" MEAN?

When pursuing integrative health care, it's important to understand the difference between the terms complementary and alternative.

Complementary approaches are used alongside conventional medicine; alternative approaches are used instead of it. Integrative care combines these approaches in a coordinated treatment plan.

Integrative medicine relies on the "whole person" concept — considering physical, behavioral, social and environmental factors rather than focusing exclusively on a disease or symptom, says the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health.

WHAT MIGHT INTEGRATIVE CARE INCLUDE

Integrative care combines components of health care that you're probably already familiar with. This can include conventional medications and medical treatments, nutrition and lifestyle counseling, physical activity, acupuncture, moxibustion, massage therapy, yoga, tai chi or other movement practices, meditation and mindfulness, as well as dietary supplements or herbal products.

Not every approach is appropriate for every person or condition, and evidence varies among therapies. Integrative medicine should be based on informed decisions and appropriate medical guidance rather than simply choosing whatever is labeled "natural."

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS?

Integrative medicine is becoming popular because of its comprehensive approach to health and wellness that pays greater attention to lifestyle and prevention. This model provides additional options for managing symptoms such as pain or stress and better coordination among different health professionals. Research has shown it can even encourage patients to play an active role in their health.

NCCIH-backed research has found real evidence for some approaches, including acupuncture and meditation for pain management, integrative programs for military veterans managing chronic pain, and symptom relief for cancer patients. Not every complementary therapy is backed by strong evidence, however. Research is ongoing into which approaches work for whom and under what circumstances.

SAFETY COMES FIRST

"Natural" doesn't automatically mean safe. Some supplements can interact with prescription or over-the-counter medications. Patients should tell all their health-care providers about complementary therapies they use.

Never use an unproven treatment to postpone or replace necessary conventional medical care. Look for practitioners with appropriate education, training, licensing and certification in their fields, and ask whether the practitioner is willing to coordinate care with your physician.

LOOK LOCAL FOR INTEGRATIVE CARE

Ask local hospitals, physician practices and health systems whether they offer integrative services or can recommend qualified practitioners. Local businesses and professionals — such as licensed massage therapists, acupuncturists, yoga instructors, nutrition professionals and wellness providers — may offer complementary services.