



HAPPIEST HEALTH

Vol. 2, Issue 9 | March 2025
Price: ₹200

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THE WOMEN'S HEALTH ISSUE

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LIFE &
WELLNESS

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PAWS
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POSES



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One of the first things women must do is avoid using the 'I do not have time for it' excuse

DR MANJIRI BAKRE

54, founder-CEO, OncoStem Diagnostics



FITNESS FIRST

OMMITTED TO SELF

Dr Manjiri Bakre, 54, is the founder and CEO of OncoStem Diagnostics, a Bengaluru-based company that develops innovative prognostic tests to assess the aggressiveness of tumours. She finds exercise a tool to focus better. “In the last six to eight years, I have been very particular about exercising. And that’s what I do every day,” says Manjiri, adding

that she has done different forms of exercises over the years.

“I have tried running, Pilates, etc., but I like yoga the best. It has really improved my flexibility. When I was running, I realised that it kept me fit, but my flexibility was low.”

AVOID EXCUSES

When she set up her company in 2011, exercising took a slight back seat because she was dealing with “just too much work”.

“One of the first things women must do is avoid using the ‘I do not have time for it’ excuse,” she says. “My recommendation would be to wake up at least half an hour before your usual hour. If you do not have a large, open space or any equipment, that is okay. Find a form of exercise which is

simple and does not require them. Even a simple surya namaskar (a set of yoga asanas), can be done.”

POTION TO IMPROVE IMMUNITY

Manjiri’s typical day begins at 6 AM. Her morning routine kicks off each day with a glass of warm water mixed with a bit of salt and turmeric, followed by an hour-long yoga session. The yoga session, meanwhile, is combined with some weight training using free weights.

Manjiri recalls how her health awareness began at the time of her pregnancy. “I became especially conscious of my health then. Post-pregnancy, I did a variety of things – running and some calorie-burning exercises,” she says. Aerobic exercises and Zumba were also part of her post-pregnancy routine.

NO ICE-CREAM, FRIED SNACKS

Her breakfast includes a mix of protein powder and water, a dosa or an egg. Her lunch is mostly rice, quinoa, or dal and sabzi, and her dinner comprises chapatis, dal, sabzi, and salad.

She absolutely avoids ice cream, snacks, tea and coffee after returning home from the office.

APURVA PUROHIT

58, co-founder of Aazol

“If you want to be independent at [75] you must start working on it now

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MISSION
STRONG AT 75

D

LOSS OF BUILDING BLOCKS

Apurva Purohit is the co-founder of Aazol, a company that works with women-led self-help groups (SHGs) across Maharashtra and sources traditional homegrown food from them.

Apurva, 58, has worked in various media businesses — radio, print, digital—and was responsible for building and scaling up Radio City. She is also an independent director in multiple companies and authored two books: *Lady, You're not a Man – the Adventures of a Woman at Work*, and *Lady, You're the Boss*.

DIET AND FOOD AS MEDICINE

Apurva is strict about having a protein-rich breakfast. That could translate to paneer, tofu and eggs for breakfast.

Her transition—from working in the media to running a natural foods company—reflects her growing interest in healthy food. “The interest in food as medicine has gone up in the last few years. We are more educated about food now. I also started figuring out what is good, what is natural, what is preservative-free, chemical-free — all those kinds of things,” she says.

Her lunch includes a plate

of rice, dal, sabzi and a tall glass of buttermilk. She absolutely avoids sweets. “It helps that I do not really enjoy chocolates,” she says.

STRENGTH TRAINING

Post-menopause, Apurva's focus has shifted to strength training and stability. “It is important to understand that menopause is a phase of life where one undergoes bodily changes and it becomes crucial to manage these – be it through the right supplements, strength training, etc.,” says Apurva. “Post menopause, one's susceptibility to a fall or fracture is also high, so I'm now working on preventing those things from happening,” she adds.

Apurva has been diagnosed with osteopenia (loss of bone density), and this has made her aware of what her body needs. “We plough through most of our lives – later on, however, you start discovering things. For example, I did not take very good care of my diet, so now I have osteopenia.”

CALMING THE MIND

Apurva makes it a point to carve out time for calming activities every day. “I've picked up knitting, and drawing Zentangle – a type of mandala art,” says Apurva.

This go-getter plans to continue working for another 10 to 15 years. “People now say even 75 years is your working life. If you want to be independent at that age you must start working on it now,” signs off Apurva.



HEAL FROM WITHIN

A must-read for every woman

BY: DR VISHNUPRIYA WARRIER

When a mother snaps at her child, or a wife seems irritable, dismissing their emotions as mere mood swings is easy. But what if we ponder these: Does she need care? Does her body need balance?

Ayurveda offers a comprehensive approach and time-tested solutions for women's health challenges. It views the body as an interconnected system in which physical and emotional well-being are closely linked.

From menarche to menopause—a woman's body undergoes numerous hormonal changes. Dr Reshma MA, an ayurvedic gynaecologist and fertility specialist from Bengaluru, explains that traditionally, reproductive health was nurtured through disciplined routines. Today, irregular sleep, poor diet, and sedentary lifestyles have disrupted hormonal balance.

She notes that conditions like PCOD (polycystic ovarian disease), endometriosis, fibroids, and fallopian tubal blockages are becoming common and often lead to infertility. "To prevent such lifestyle-related imbalances, prioritising a woman's well-being from the beginning can usually help avoid these issues before they manifest," says Dr Reshma.

THE FIRST STEP: MENARCHE

When Srishti S, now 12, got her first period at 8, her mother, an ayurveda practitioner, guided her through natural remedies instead of painkillers. To calm *vata dosha* (air element), she gave warm, nourishing foods rich in iron, calcium and healthy fats, calming herbal baths, and suggested gentle exercise like yoga and rest.

Dr Reshma emphasises that a girl's menarche significantly influences her long-term reproductive health. "Earlier, PCOD was observed mainly in reproductive-age women, but now it is appearing as early as menarche," she explains. This often stems from poor care during the mother's pregnancy—issues like insulin resistance or unmanaged diabetes and poor eating habits.

During her 20s, Neha Sharma struggled with painful periods, acne, and irregular cycles. "Instead of pills to regulate my cycle, I turned to natural care," says the BBA student from Kolkata. Adjusting her diet with ayurvedic medicines and regular exercise helped Neha manage her healthy monthly cycle.

Dr Remya Pankajakshan, associate medical director at Rudraksha

HERBS FOR WOMEN'S HEALTH



WILD ASPARAGUS
supports reproductive health, balances hormones, and enhances fertility



ASHOKA
helps regulate menstrual cycles and reduces excessive bleeding



LODHI TREE
beneficial for PCOS, helps tone the uterus, manages vaginal discharge



GILUY
boosts immunity, reduces inflammation, and supports detoxification

Ayurvedic Holistic Centre, Thrissur, Kerala, explains that ayurveda manages conditions like PCOD and PCOS (polycystic ovary syndrome) through a customised approach combining diet, herbal medication, and lifestyle changes. "Primary lifestyle management focuses on creating steady routines in eating and sleeping. This helps to stabilise *dosha* and hormone levels, leading to improved uterine health," she says.

THE PATH TO MOTHERHOOD

Ayurveda recommends comprehensive preconception care for women planning pregnancy. "Both male and female bodies need to prepare even before conception," Dr Reshma explains. "We must ensure the body is cleansed and nourished to support a healthy pregnancy."

She adds that correcting hormonal imbalance is not just about taking medicines. "Ayurveda looks at the root cause—whether it is poor sleep, stress, diet or sedentary habits that cause hormonal change. By addressing these, we bring the body back into balance naturally."

A significant treatment in reproductive health is *uttara vasti*. "It is a unique treatment method used in ayurveda for women facing infertility, recurrent miscarriages, tubal blockages or menstrual irregularities," explains Dr Reshma.

A 2016 study published in the *Journal of Ayurvedic and Herbal Medicine* states that *uttara vasti* therapy helps manage various reproductive issues.

In today's world, where stress, pollution, and poor diet are common, regular detoxification is essential to prevent different health conditions and maintain vitality, Dr Reshma adds.

PREGNANCY AND POST-PARTUM CARE

During pregnancy, ayurveda offers *garbhini paricharya*, a holistic prenatal care system, which includes *sattvic* foods, herbal milk preparations, and self-massage to prevent stretch marks and support emotional well-being.

Ayurvedic experts have a monthly food regimen for pregnant women that helps keep the mother and the growing foetus healthy. It focuses on both physical growth and mental wellness. There are therapies like *anuvasanavasti* (rectal administration of medicated oils) and *kashayavasti* (rectal administration of a herbal decoction) to prepare the body for an easy delivery.

The system extends to post-partum care through *sutika paricharya*, a recovery programme that includes herbal

decoctions, medicated baths, abdominal binding, lactation herbs, rejuvenation, and ghee-infused foods to restore strength.

THE MENOPAUSAL TRANSITION

At 45, Priya Vaibhav began experiencing night sweats, hot flashes, and emotional turbulence. “I felt invisible, and people dismissed my struggles as ageing, but I didn't feel like myself,” she says.

“As oestrogen declines during the menopausal period, *vata* becomes dominant, leading to dryness, hot flashes, sleep disturbances, anxiety, and mood swings,” explains Dr Anakha Kannan, *panchakarma* specialist, Aluva, Kerala. “Ayurveda counters this with *shirodhara* (oil dripping therapy), *abhyanga* or massage, and herbs like *shatavari*, tulsi, *ashwagandha*, and ghee to nourish tissues.” Besides these, meditation and self-care practices are also recommended.

Modern research supports these traditional approaches. A 2024 study published in *Cureus* highlighted *shatavari*'s promising results in balancing oestrogen levels and improving menopausal symptoms.

THE FOUR PILLARS

Sleep rhythm: “Sleeping from 12 AM to 8 AM, which has become the new norm, is not the same as sleeping from 10 PM to 5 AM,” Dr Reshma says, emphasising the latter for hormonal balance in women.

Proper nutrition: A diet rich in specific seeds (chia and flax) and spices (jeera and fenugreek) supports hormonal balance. Metabolism is the foundation of good health, and meal timing—especially an early dinner—is essential.

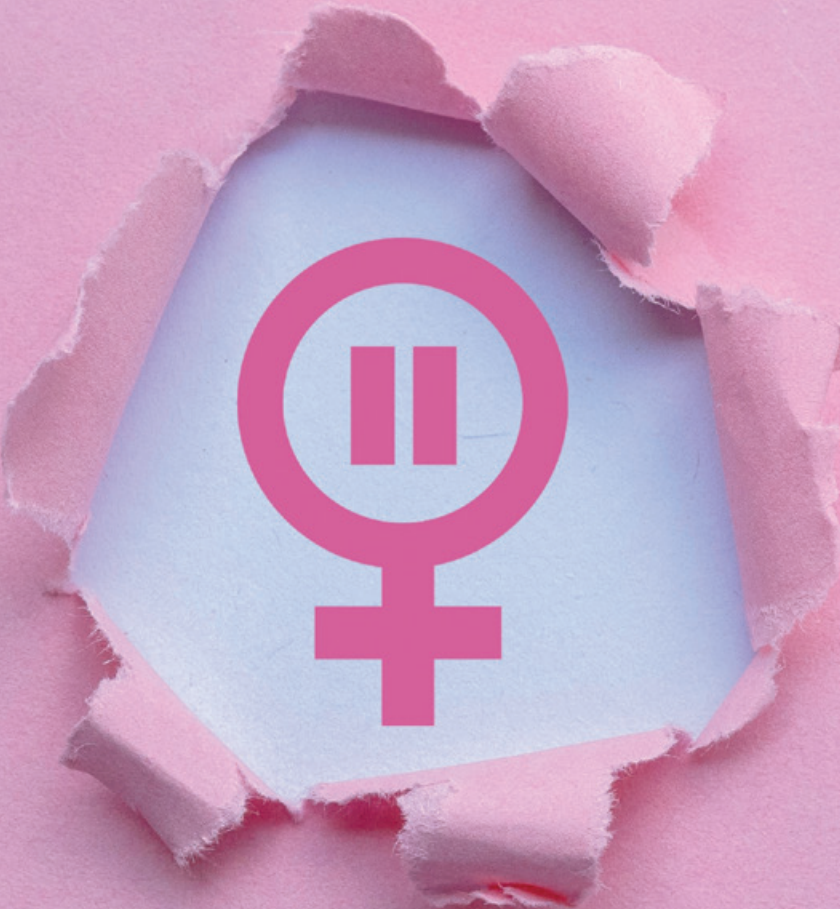
Regular movement: At least 30 minutes of daily physical activity is essential for maintaining hormonal health and overall well-being.

Stress management: Regular practice of yoga, *pranayama* and meditation helps maintain emotional balance and reproductive health.

INTEGRATING CARE APPROACHES

Modern healthcare increasingly recognises the value of ayurvedic approaches. Ayurvedic physicians now collaborate with gynaecologists to provide comprehensive care, particularly in cases requiring IVF and delivery. Scientific reviews have validated therapies like *panchakarma* and *uttara vasti* in managing reproductive health.

Through this holistic approach, women can find natural, sustainable solutions for their health challenges at every stage of life, embracing the journey from menarche to menopause with vitality. By understanding and addressing the root causes of imbalances, ayurveda offers a path to wellness that takes care of the unique needs of women.



During menarche,
nourish with
iron-rich foods
and raisins,
avoid cold foods, and regulate
cycles with herbs like ginger, cumin,
sesame, *ajwain* and peppermint

AYURVEDIC RECIPES DURING MENSTRUATION



SAFFRON AND TURMERIC MILK
Soothes cramps, reduces inflammation and calms the mind



SESAME AND JAGGERY SWEET TREAT
Regulates menstrual cycle and helps in hormonal balance



GINGER AND FENNEL TEA
Aids digestion, reduces bloating and cramps and balances hormones



WARM PALAK KHICHDI
Balances all doshas, easily digestible, packed with iron and protein

“

Ayurveda looks at the root cause—whether it is poor sleep, stress, diet or sedentary habits that cause hormonal change. By addressing these, we bring the body back into balance naturally

—Dr Reshma MA,
ayurvedic gynaecologist and
fertility specialist,
Bengaluru

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MENOPAUSE: JUST TALK IT OUT

Menopause is still a hush-hush topic. Talking about it and its effects openly is crucial for normalising an inevitable and significant turn in a woman's life

BY: PRAGNA L KRUPA

Month after month, most women wish to put a full stop to it, because it is either painful, physically restricting or a plain social nuisance.

However, it is a different journey when the period to periods, or menopause, happens. Managing work, family and personal time can be overwhelming when a woman reaches it, marked by a decline in oestrogen levels.

Madhu Kapoor, now 59, was then working with the UK government

in London. In her early 40s, she started experiencing perimenopause (unknowingly) – the duration before menopause – and the symptoms lasted 10-12 years (including post menopause). One symptom was insomnia, which made her wake up irritable and sad, impacted her mental health and slowly burnt her out.

“I got severe night sweats and would wake up at 2 AM with drenched clothes. I had to struggle throughout the night to fall asleep again. I started experiencing

anxiety, joint pain, mood swings and migraines that lasted a day or two,” Madhu recalls while speaking with **Happiest Health**.

She resigned from her job when the symptoms started taking a toll on her mental health. Later, she launched her workplace menopause consultancy service platform, ‘M for Menopause’, to help women pass through their menopause.

Gynaecologists say menopause is marked by three phases:

***Perimenopause:** changes in hormones and menstrual irregularity

***Menopause:** absence of menstrual bleeding for one year

***Post-menopause:** from menopause onwards.

“Every menopause experience is unique and different,” says Dr Veena R, obstetrician and gynaecologist, Prashanth Hospitals, Chennai. “While the average age of menopause is around 50 years, one can also have it before 40, when it is called premature menopause,” she explains.

Madhu knew that her body was changing but could not understand why. “I didn’t think the symptoms could start so early. None of the women in my family or in my circle spoke about it for me to be prepared for it. Over the years, the strong independent woman in me was [gone.] I was suffering in silence,” she says.

Perimenopause starts with irregular periods and can be either longer or shorter, or with a heavy or decreased flow. Other symptoms are altered mood swings, low sexual drive, sleep disorders, urinary incontinence, vaginal dryness, hot flashes and night sweats.

“Perimenopausal symptoms could last from 2-8 years and could differ from person to person,” says Dr Yasmin Imdad, senior consultant of obstetrics and gynaecology, Kinder Hospitals, Bengaluru.

AN EARLY END

For Shanthi, now 55, an airline employee from Bengaluru, menopause happened suddenly at 39 years. Not aware of menopause or its symptoms, she waited for her period every day.

“It just stopped. There were no signs, irregular periods or symptoms,” she tells **Happiest Health**. “Most women in my family had early menopause but I was not prepared for it. I [presumed I would] get it in my mid-40s, and when it happened, it took me a while to accept it. I waited for three months and finally came to terms with it.”

Having an autoimmune condition such as a thyroid gland irregularity or diabetes can possibly lead to early menopause, says Dr Yasmin adding that women with a family history, those who have had IVF pregnancies and those who have not given birth to a live child, are also more likely to have an early menopause.

The decrease in hormones during and after menopause starts affecting the neurotransmitters. “This can alter a woman’s mood and cause sadness, anxiety, irritability, decreased sleep, depression and stress,” says Dr Veena.

Treatment options are not ‘one size fits all’ and have to be tailored. Dr Veena



I didn’t think the symptoms could start so early. None of the women in my family spoke about it for me to be prepared for it

—MADHU KAPOOR,
founder, workplace menopause
consultancy service platform,
‘M for Menopause’

says most women are given vitamin D and calcium supplements to maintain their bone health. “Some women may need counselling and antidepressants for short-term management,” she adds.

LIFESTYLE CHANGES

“When medicines do not help in managing the symptoms, we opt for HRT or hormone replacement therapy as the last option,” says Dr Yasmin.

During menopause, the female hormones oestrogen and progesterone fall low. Some women are prescribed these hormones as supplements for a few years. In Madhu’s case, she learnt in 2016, six years after struggling with unknown symptoms, that she was in the perimenopause phase. She started HRT the following year along with making a few lifestyle modifications, which included changing her diet, exercising and changing her mindset to manage the symptoms.

How do menopausal women handle the change? Gynaecologists say other than lifestyle modifications, stress management, relaxation, self-care and getting regular medical check-ups help.

Dr Yasmin stresses the importance of seeking help. She says that if a woman in her late 30s or 40s is experiencing a change in her menstrual cycle, she can undergo specific blood tests that can confirm whether she is nearing menopause. It helps her prepare herself for the change of life.

MANAGE MENOPAUSE



Do yoga, exercise regularly



Focus on self-care and mental well-being



Have calcium and vitamin D supplements on prescription



Consume healthy and nutritious food

Happiest



PG. 70

**LIFE IN
A MUD HOUSE**

PG. 82

**UNCORK THE
INNER STORM**

PG. 88

**SAWDUST
AND SMILES**

**“The mind
can juggle up
to 80,000
thoughts
daily”**

—Padma Srinivas
founder and wellness
specialist, Malhar Yoga,
Bengaluru

PAUSE AND MEDITATE

Even the busiest schedules can
accommodate a mindful pause

BY: DR ANANYA KRISHNAN

Right now, as you read these lines, your mind is alive, sorting through thoughts of the present, the past, and the future in rapid toggle sequence, if not all at once. Why did I say that in the meeting? It is cold today. What do I eat for lunch? Where do I go for the weekend?

The mind is as restless as it is vast. It calls for something that can keep us anchored and focused, something that can make life more meaningful in the larger scheme of things. Perhaps no other tool is as powerful as meditation in achieving this.

THOUGHT CATALOGUE

Padma Srinivas, founder and wellness specialist at Malhar Yoga, Bengaluru, highlights, “The mind can juggle up to 80,000 thoughts daily. While some thoughts evoke happiness, others can lead to sadness, overthinking and anxiety.”

A study published in the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* indicates that rumination, which involves repetitive negative thinking, is a major risk factor for depression, anxiety and other mental health problems.

While we know no good can come from such rumination, we might be unsure how to put an end to it. A study published in the *World Journal of Clinical Sciences* suggests that fear of missing out (FOMO), the anxiety which people feel about missing out on social experiences, is linked to distractibility, decline in productivity, sleep disturbances, social anxiety, clinical depression and decline in academic performance.

Dimple Khanuja, founder and *pranayama* expert at Bliss of Breath in Gurugram, says, “Practising meditation enables us to live a productive and peaceful life while reversing this pervasive culture of fear and anxiety.”

Meditation helps us loosen the grip of this attachment by teaching us to let thoughts and emotions flow without judgement. It is a useful tool for stilling the mind and reducing the fear of loss.

MEDITATION SHAPES YOU

Abishek Iyappan, head consultant at Para Learning (a platform empowering learning and personal development) in Bengaluru, has been practising meditation since a very young age. Despite his busy life, he treats meditation as a vital part of his routine.

Throughout his life, Iyappan was introduced to different forms of meditation by his family and gurus. One significant practice he learned is *japa*, which involves repeating a mantra. This technique enhances concentration and

PADMA GUIDES US STEP BY STEP

Find a quiet place to sit for about 10 minutes without sensory distractions

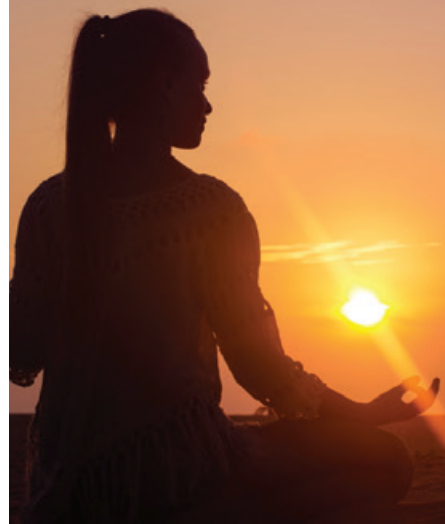
Put your hands in the chin *mudra* (thumb and index finger touch each other), on your knee, palms facing upwards

Close your eyes and focus on your breath

Take a deep breath and breathe out for longer

As you inhale, expand the entire body to fill in your body with good energy, and as you exhale, contract the whole belly to let out negative energy

Allow random thoughts to come and go; try not to get attached to any of them in those three or four minutes of silence



helps train the mind to focus on a single line of thought.

At the age of 17, Iyappan pursued street theatre, which introduced him to *kalarippayattu*, an Indian martial art that originated in Kerala. “This practice majorly involved careful breathwork which synced with every body movement,” he explains. It also requires intense focus on directing energy to various body parts, which

Iyappan believes is an effective form of meditation in itself.

REWARDS OF A MINDFUL LIFE

Iyappan says, “Meditation has been a blessing in my life. It has helped me understand myself better. I have seen how my body and mind react when I don’t practise—I feel weak, tired, and irritable.”

By the age of 29, Iyappan had already founded his own company and created employment opportunities for others. He says that regularly practising meditation has helped him in life. Today, he also includes meditation in his behaviour transformation workshops.

TIPS FOR BUSY BEES

For those looking to incorporate meditation into their hectic schedules, Iyappan offers practical advice: “After bathing, wear loose and comfortable clothing. Sit for fifteen minutes. Prioritising this time can make all the difference.”

He encourages experimenting with different meditation styles, such as guided sessions, dynamic practices, or mantra repetition, to find what resonates best.

If you cannot bring yourself to just sit, try breathwork. Dimple says, “*Pranayama* can be a tool to reach a meditative state. So, inhale peace and exhale [spread] happiness.”

THE MAGIC OF MEDITATING

Manju Bhasin, an entrepreneur from Dehradun, recalls meditating by the River *Ganga* at a young age, finding clarity and peace amidst the serene environment. As her life grew more demanding, she embraced techniques like *sudarshan kriya*—a combination of rhythmic breathing and deep meditation—to maintain balance and calm her mind.

“There have been many examples, when at a particular moment the task looked impossible but after meditating, things happened magically.”

She credits her regular 20–30-minute meditation practice for empowering her work and personal life. She believes it sharpens her mind and enhances her ability to handle stress.

It is her source of clarity and creativity. In one instance, meditation inspired Manju to design unique soaps.

While meditation offers profound benefits when practised daily, it has the potential to bring positive changes even with just a five-minute practice.

So, go on, pause and meditate.



Toddlers are adorable! They clap their hands, shake their heads, stick out their tongues – their antics are sheer joy for us. They observe us closely, copy our actions, react and respond just the way we do. What we might not know is that these actions are not random. Their baby brains are hard-wired with ‘mirror neurons’.

Mirror neurons are part of a deep-rooted neurological process. They create an internal “how-to” map that triggers mimicry, helping them understand the world around them and learn from it.

“Mirror neurons help us transform visual information into knowledge. They are fundamental in our ability to form emotional connections with others,” explains Dr Anil Ramakrishna, senior consultant – Neurology at Sparsh Hospital, Bengaluru.

THE COPYCAT BRAIN

Mirror neurons are found in several areas responsible for movement and sensation, creating a neural network for understanding information from observing others in the environment.

Forty-year-old Kanakaraj B, from Vellore in Tamil Nadu, has become an

The magic of mirror neurons

The brain’s copycat cells play a major role in developing our social intelligence

BY: NIVEDITHA S



“The most critical periods for mirror neuron formation and integration occur in infancy and early childhood”

—Dr Anil Ramakrishna
senior consultant – Neurology,
Sparsh Hospital, Bengaluru

accomplished cook just by observing the chef at the hotel where he worked. Twenty years ago, he moved to Bengaluru to work as a busboy at the hotel. Intrigued by the chef's ability to cook effortlessly, Kanakaraj began closely observing his ways and methods and soon enough, picked up the tricks of the trade.

Kanakaraj is now a popular cook at a garment factory, making three meals a day for 1,500 people. He has also mastered the art of making sweets, just by observing, which earns him extra money during festivals. “I just watched him do it and learnt. I can make sweets up to 30kg single-handedly,” he declares, proudly. This remarkable ability to mimic something just by observation is the work of mirror neurons.

WHEN DO MIRROR NEURONS FORM?

Mirror neurons develop before birth. The initial neural foundations emerge during the baby's development in the uterus, with basic neuronal connections forming between the brain's action planner, the premotor cortex, and the brain's map maker, the parietal cortex. According to a study in the *Journal of Natural Science, Biology and Medicine*, the mirror neuron system develops before 12 months of age, and this system may help infants understand other people's actions.

“The most critical periods for mirror neuron formation and integration occur in infancy and early childhood (0–6 years), when imitation, joint attention, and social skills emerge and are refined,” elaborates Dr Ramakrishna.

Driven by genetic predisposition and environmental experiences, mirror neurons transform from rudimentary connections to sophisticated brain mechanisms that support empathy, social understanding, and learning through observation.

WHY DO MIRROR NEURONS MATTER?

A part of the brain that processes complex cognitive tasks and helps us learn languages, remember and show

emotional responses is rich in mirror neurons. “These neurons are thought to play a role in understanding others' emotions, intentions, and actions, contributing to social cognition and empathy,” says Dr Ramakrishna.

Impaired mirror neuron functions can contribute to autism spectrum disorder, schizophrenia, and borderline personality disorder. People with these conditions cannot learn from social cues. They have cognitive challenges, they feel mentally isolated and tend to exhibit repetitive actions (stims) and temper tantrums. They could even struggle with feeling empathy.

“In autism spectrum disorder, therapies like applied behaviour analysis and video modelling [a technique where the child is shown an audiovisual and encouraged to mimic the action] can target imitation and action-observation deficits,” Dr Ramakrishna

explains. He adds that the mirror neuron system also plays a role in schizophrenia, Tourette syndrome, borderline personality disorder and social anxiety disorder.

LEARNING AND ADAPTING

Traditionally, scientists believed that mirror neurons had rigid pre-formed networks. However, a 2013 study in the journal *Trends in Cognitive Neuroscience* argued that mirror neurons are dynamic systems influenced by environmental factors and social and economic demands.

They coined the term ‘evo-devo’ or evolutionary developmental biological factors actively adapting to an individual's specific environmental and social context, as happened to Murugathas, who hails from Villupuram, Tamil Nadu. Traditionally a potter, Murugathas steered away from the learnt skill and picked up another—painting. He says, “I no longer wanted to make pots. So, now I am into painting. However, I still sell pots made by others.”

Mirror neurons are like adaptive learning circuits programmed by early-life interactions rather than pre-set, unchangeable neural networks. This perspective opens exciting possibilities for understanding how brain development is influenced by experience, particularly through social interaction.

A 2022 study published in *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* found further evidence. Turns out, neurons' adaptability changes according to social cues and evolution. Perhaps, the future could see further adaptability in mirror neuron networks, with AI and robots influencing how we learn things.



Kanakaraj B
preparing meals at
the garment factory

HOW TO TRAIN YOUR MIRROR NEURONS



Programmes that teach emotional recognition and contextual understanding can help strengthen mirror neurons

Engaging in arts and crafts, painting, and cooking all help



Rich, responsive, and reciprocal social interactions strengthen mirror neurons



PAIN RELIEF'S HIDDEN COST

Over-the-counter painkillers offer quick relief, but may be disrupting your gut microbiome, potentially leading to a range of health problems

BY: ANIRUDH VASHISHT, PhD

Many of us reach for over-the-counter pain relievers like ibuprofen and aspirin for quick relief from pains and fever. While effective in the short term, a growing body of research suggests that

regular use of these readily available medications may have unintended consequences for our gut microbiome – the complex community of trillions of bacteria and other microorganisms that reside in our digestive tract and play a

crucial role in overall health.

"Overuse of painkillers disrupts the delicate balance between beneficial and harmful bacteria within our gut, a condition known as dysbiosis," explains Dr Saurabh Agrawal, a gastroenterologist at Apollo Hospitals in Navi Mumbai, adding that this imbalance can have detrimental effects both within the gut and throughout the body.

Sapna Kalra, a 38-year-old human resource manager in New Delhi, experienced these effects firsthand. Long hours spent at her desk led to chronic neck pain. While over-the-counter painkillers provided temporary relief, the pain returned when she stopped taking them.

The consistent use of painkillers eventually led to a new set of problems. "I had stomach pain, a burning sensation in my chest and frequently upset stomach," she says. Things got so bad that it started affecting her sleep, work and overall quality of life.

Sapna's doctor confirmed her suspicion: the long-term use of painkillers was the likely culprit behind her gut issues. Experts like Dr Agrawal caution against the non-judicious use of these medications. They should be used as needed, not regularly for mild pain.

A DELICATE ECOSYSTEM

The gut microbiome plays a vital role in digestion, immunity, and even mental health. These microorganisms produce metabolites that strengthen the gut lining and have beneficial effects on other parts of the body. However, chronic painkiller use can significantly disrupt this delicate ecosystem.

"Painkillers have a direct antimicrobial effect, altering the membrane integrity, enzymatic pathways, and metabolism of gut microbes, which can lead to their death," says Dr Agrawal.

Indirectly, they can injure the gut lining, increasing the permeability of the intestinal wall. This triggers inflammation and creates an unfavourable environment for beneficial gut bacteria.

Painkillers can also alter the metabolism of bile acids, which play a role in regulating the growth of gut microbes. The result, Dr Agrawal explains, is "a reduction in beneficial bacteria like *Faecalibacterium* and *Bifidobacterium* and an increase in

harmful bacteria like *Enterobacteriaceae* and *E. coli*.”

THE CONSEQUENCES OF DYSBIOSIS

Dysbiosis, the imbalance in the gut microbiome, can lead to a variety of health issues. “It can cause ulcers in the stomach and small intestine, which can even bleed,” says Dr Harsh Shah, a gastroenterologist at Apollo Hospital in Gujarat. Elderly individuals who regularly take painkillers for health conditions are particularly susceptible to ulcer formation.

Beyond ulcers, dysbiosis can contribute to chronic low-grade inflammation in the gut, leading to functional gut disorders such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), heartburn and abdominal pain. Sapna experienced many of these symptoms, which significantly impacted her daily life.

Disruption of the gut microbiome can also affect the immune system. “A heightened immune response results in collateral damage of the gut lining and exacerbates other underlying conditions like inflammatory bowel disease (IBD),” says Dr Shah.

The impact of dysbiosis also extends beyond the gut. The gut-brain axis, a complex communication network between the gut and the brain, can be disrupted, potentially contributing to anxiety, depression and other mental health issues. Increased gut permeability can also allow harmful bacteria to enter the bloodstream, potentially reaching the liver and causing inflammation, which can worsen pre-existing liver problems.

REBUILDING YOUR GUT HEALTH

Managing dysbiosis often involves a multi-pronged approach. “We should avoid using painkillers as a quick fix



“
**Overuse of
painkillers disrupts
the delicate balance
between beneficial
and harmful
bacteria within
our gut, a condition
known as dysbiosis**

—Dr Saurabh Agrawal,
gastroenterologist,
Apollo Hospital, Navi Mumbai

for pain and fever,” advises Dr Agrawal. For fever, alternative methods like cold sponging should be tried first. Topical pain relievers, such as gels and sprays, can be helpful for localised pain. If these methods do not provide relief, oral painkillers can be used only as directed by a doctor.

Sapna's doctor recommended a multi-faceted approach to address her gut issues and neck pain. She was referred to a physical therapist, who designed a programme of neck exercises. “Regular exercise strengthened my neck muscles and reduced the pain,” Sapna says. Her doctor also recommended dietary changes to support her gut health.

Consuming a diet rich in both prebiotics (non-digestible fibres that feed beneficial gut bacteria) and probiotics (live microorganisms found in certain foods) is crucial for restoring a healthy gut microbiome. Good sources of prebiotics include fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Probiotics can be found in fermented foods like yoghurt, kimchi, sauerkraut, and kefir.

Like Sapna, who now incorporates natural fermented foods and fibre into her diet, individuals will often see significant improvements in their gut health by making simple dietary changes. This, along with a proactive approach to pain management, can protect one's health and well-being.



PAGE TO PILLOW

Making books your bedtime companion can help you fall asleep faster and wake up more refreshed

BY: ASIK BANERJEE

Remember the childhood joy of snuggling into bed, eyes drooping as a bedtime story transported you into an enchanting world?

Back then, books were not just stories but a sleep switch, easing the mind into a dreamy state.

Here's the thing: what worked in childhood works just as well in adulthood.

A growing body of research suggests that reading before bed is one of the simplest yet most powerful tools to improve sleep quality.

THE SCIENCE OF READING YOURSELF TO SLEEP

A 2021 study published in the journal *Biomed Central* found that people who read a book before bed experienced better sleep quality than those who did not. Another study in 2023 in the journal *Aging & Mental Health* discovered that reading positive stories before bed improved sleep onset and enhanced overall bedtime and wake-up consistency in young and older adults alike.

So, what happens in your brain when you read? Dr Basavaraj S Kumbar, consultant internal medicine, Aster

Whitefield Hospital, Bengaluru, explains that the brain is constantly on high alert in today's hyperconnected world. Scrolling through notifications, replying to messages, or watching TV before bed keeps the mind overstimulated. Reading, on the other hand, provides a structured mental slowdown that signals the body to relax.

WHY BOOKS WORK BETTER THAN SCREENS

We all know that blue light emitted by screens is a notorious sleep disruptor. It suppresses melatonin, the hormone



that tells your body it is time to rest. But there is more to it. Dr Kumbar stresses that reading a physical book is far less mentally stimulating than watching a show or endlessly scrolling through social media.

"A book does not flash notifications or autoplay the next episode. It encourages a sense of mindfulness and tranquillity, allowing the brain to transition smoothly into sleep mode," he says.

READING IMPROVES SLEEP

Tasneem Nakhoda, a psychotherapist at Tattva Happiness Matters, Bengaluru, calls bedtime reading an underrated self-care ritual. "Reading lets you temporarily escape reality, detach from stress, and rewire your thoughts in a positive direction," she says.

Ahmedabad-based businessman Ojas Mehta, 52, swears by this habit. "I have been reading at night since childhood, thanks to my father's vast book collection. It is my way of unwinding. It brings me positivity and lowers my stress levels. For me, reading at night is meditation," he shares.

MAKING READING A SLEEP RITUAL

Want to turn bedtime reading into a reliable sleep aid? Here's how:

- **Choose the right book:** Opt for something enjoyable but not too thrilling. Light fiction, poetry, or personal essays work well.
- **Set a page limit:** It's great to get lost in a book, except when it's 3 AM. Set a goal (like 10-15 pages) to avoid sleep procrastination.
- **Go analogue:** Whenever possible, read a physical book.
- **Create a cosy reading spot:** Keep a book by your bedside and make reading a part of your wind-down routine.

DO AUDIOBOOKS AND E-BOOKS WORK?


With digital options available, many people wonder if audiobooks or e-books have the same effect. Dr Kumbar suggests that audiobooks can be a great alternative, as listening to a soothing voice can also induce relaxation.

However, he warns that e-books can be tricky due to blue light exposure. "If you must read on a screen, switch to a night mode with warmer tones to minimise disruption," he advises.

In a world where sleep struggles are on the rise, a simple, old-school habit like bedtime reading might just be the secret weapon we need. So, tonight, instead of reaching for your phone, pick up a book. Your brain – and your dreams – will thank you.

READING BEFORE BED IS A GAME-CHANGER

1



HOW READING HELPS SLEEP

- Lowers stress levels
- Reduces screen time
- Triggers relaxation response
- Enhances cognitive engagement


2



BEST TYPES OF BOOKS FOR SLEEP

- Light fiction
- Personal essays
- Poetry
- Self-improvement books

3



SCREEN VS. PRINT:

- **Print books:** No blue light, fosters mindfulness
- **E-books:** Use night mode, limit exposure
- **Audiobooks:** Great alternative

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LIFE IN A MUD HOUSE

All about two sustainable homes that care for their residents
and the environment around them

BY: NAMRATA SINDWANI
PHOTOGRAPHS: SOURCED



Reva and Ranjan's mud house in Bengaluru

For five years they have chosen to be off the grid and do not regret it. Their humble-looking, solar-powered mud house in a commercially bustling area in south-eastern Bengaluru is without electric lights, refrigerator, washing machine, gas stove or any other convenience that we take for granted in our daily lives.

Bengaluru-based Reva Jhingan and her husband Ranjan, who like to be

called by their first names, say they took this extreme step to keep their carbon footprint as low as possible. Their company Primalise works with businesses and social organisations in remodelling themselves.

Their dwelling choice is at odds with a consumerist world that is constantly urging us to buy, spend and discard 'more and more', influencing our minds to hoard everything we do not need: a

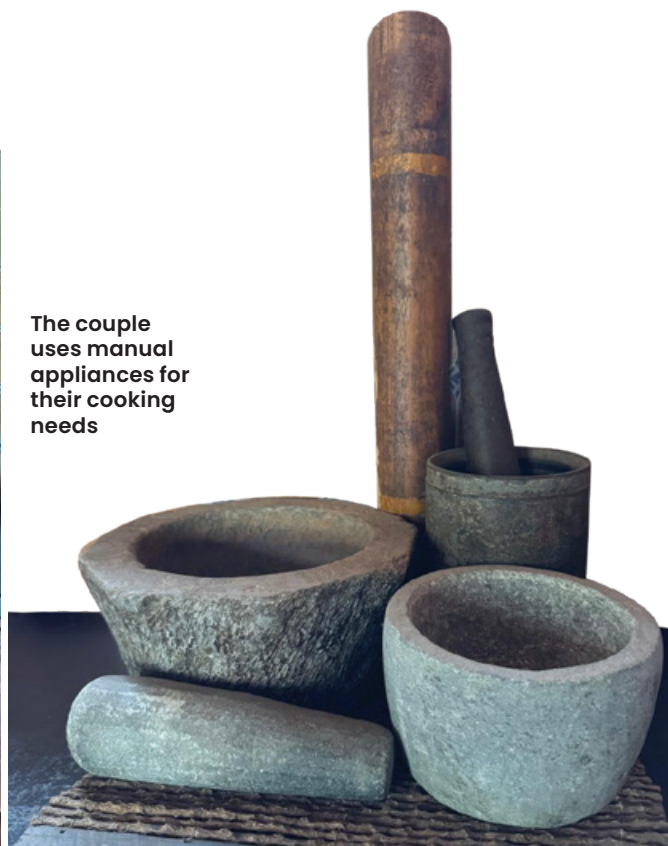
bigger house, multiple cars, electronic devices, travels, food, fancy clothes, you name them.

Imagine waking up in a home of 700 sq ft. Sunlight seeps in gently through big windows, while a soft breeze wafts in grazing thick trees. A few chickens are heard clucking in the backyard. Not a holiday home but the couple's abode, simple and earthy.

The sturdy building has efficiently



The couple uses manual appliances for their cooking needs



“Building materials have varying carbon footprints, so using locally available resources such as soil from the site can help reduce energy consumption”

—Guruprasad Rane,
architect and co-founder, Bhoomija Creations, Kerala

made use of resources. The roof is laid with red Mangalore clay tiles, known for their ventilating virtues. The tiles are also resistant to fire, heavy rains and strong winds while absorbing external heat. Mud, the material used to build the house, is itself a good insulator keeping the home cool in summer and warm in winter. This feature keeps fans and air conditioners out of the house.

“We wake up with the sun and start to wind our day up as the sun sets,” says Reva, who wears her 50-odd years lightly, adding that living there has improved their circadian rhythm or sleep cycle. They both believe that the absence of gadgets such as a television set and lights mean no dependence on them. As night falls, the dull light from the vegetable

oil lamps, she says, is soothing—“It automatically gets the body ready for bed.”

Apart from solar cookers, there is a firewood *chulha* to cook on days that are not sunny. The ash from it is their cleaning agent to treat soiled water. The residual wood is thrown in the backyard. Leftover food is stored in a mud pot dug in the soil: it seems it stays fresh for a couple of days.

Even as they started building the house, Reva says they ensured that enough rainwater would fall on the roof to be harvested and used throughout the year. The mud house was built with steel where necessary for a longer lifespan and load-bearing capacity of the structure.

About their water supply, Reva

explains that their system allows them to use only the amount of water required without wastage. “We draw water using a hand pump connected to an underground rainwater harvesting system. This is done for every chore requiring water.” Otherwise, a standard toilet, Reva adds, a lot of water every time we flush.

Reva says their home is an extension of themselves; what was important was to be close to the natural environment.

WELLNESS SPINOFFS

“Everything is seamlessly integrated—our routines keep us engaged, grounded and at peace,” Reva explains. Who needs a gym when the chores give them their natural exercise! The food made in solar

cookers makes the taste secondary. What truly matters, she says, is sitting together, being grateful for the meal and embracing the simplicity.

Almost everything that is there is visible in this home. “We started living with basic necessities and gradually added items as per our need,” Reva says. The furniture and cooking utensils are minimal and uncluttered, fittings such as electrical wiring (mostly to charge their work laptops) and plumbing are kept simple such that they do not require an outsider to fix minor inconveniences. The shelf for clothes, personal items and cooking utensils is minimalist.

In their mini jungle of a yard, permaculture is the philosophy wherein they harvest what grows naturally -- *chaya* or wild tree spinach, for example. Over the years, different varieties of fruits and vegetables have started to grow depending on the season. Occasionally, they buy items from a nearby farmers’ market.

Apart from harvesting rainwater and treating and reusing soiled water for gardening or washing, they often - ‘solar disinfect’ or sun-dry unsoiled clothes to reduce water usage. Wash when necessary is the motto. Biodegradable waste is composted and goes back into the soil.

FAMILY PRACTICES

An average Indian household is estimated to produce a carbon footprint of 6,505 kg/CO₂ equivalent every year, according to a 2023 assessment by the Institute of Social and Economic Change, Bengaluru. In 2024 a report by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology also said the real estate sector generates 39 per cent of carbon emissions worldwide.

Until a few decades ago, housing was eco-friendly, but globalisation shifted the

trends. Now, more people are seeking homes away from the cities, promoting a return to sustainable practices. However, the real estate sector faces another unique sustainability challenge.

Mud structures such as Reva’s and Ranjan’s are feasible for low-rise buildings but are unsustainable for high-rises.

Over the years, people’s changed lifestyles have drastically increased the individual carbon footprint. Guruprasad Rane, architect and co-founder of Bhoomija Creations, Kerala, says there are times when a single family of four or five members asks for a four-bedroom home much larger than what it really needs. He suggests families can create a multipurpose area instead of a rarely used guest room, reducing both building

materials and opting for locally available resources is the key,” Rane emphasises. Materials used at a different location can destabilise the natural ecosystem of that area. Additional transport costs entirely defeat the purpose of sustainability.

His view is that reducing our carbon footprint early on during construction is important, even though achieving complete sustainability is difficult. Renewable energy sources cannot match the efficiency of conventional or non-renewable sources.

COST AND LOCATION

Until a few decades ago, housing was eco-friendly, but globalisation shifted the trends. Now, more people are seeking homes away from the cities, promoting a return to sustainable practices. However, the real estate sector faces another unique sustainability challenge.

At present, building sustainable homes is expensive particularly due to the skilled labour required to create the structures, Rane points out. Procuring soil and raw materials becomes inexpensive when extracted from the site itself. Installing rainwater harvesting systems or solar panels also adds to the total cost, but it is cost-effective in the long run.

Sustainability can remain an empty jargon unless we make it a part of our daily lives. People in metropolitan areas may find a lifestyle like Reva and Ranjan’s impossible. But they can minimise carbon emissions in other ways. Small changes in our ways can help address environmental problems, creating ripple effects that lead to bigger and better effects.

The key, according to experts, is to seriously practise the three Rs of sustainability: reduce, reuse and recycle.



and running costs.

“Building materials have varying carbon footprints, so using locally available resources such as soil from the site can help reduce energy consumption,” Rane says. High-energy materials such as aluminium, cement and glass increase construction and functional costs. Rane also suggests that reusing materials such as scrap steel, reclaimed wood, and old tiles can significantly cut environmental impact.

“Avoiding commercialised ‘sustainable’

SMALL SUSTAINABLE EFFORTS IN AN URBAN HOUSEHOLD

Install a compost bin if you have a garden



Buy groceries loose to reduce single-use plastic



Refill empty glass jars for shampoo, cleaning liquids etc



Carry a cloth bag when you go out



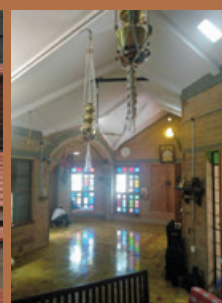
Occasionally sun-dry clothes that are not soiled



A LABOUR OF LOVE



The Chockalingam family built this sustainable home 20 years ago in Bengaluru



Amid the rapid urbanisation of the early 2000s, the Chockalingam family of Bengaluru decided to build a home that is in harmony with nature near Bannerghatta Road in the south of the city.

Family members put their heads together in the design process to ensure the home meets everyone's needs and dreams: an open courtyard, a spacious balcony and most importantly, eco-friendly features.

Their priorities were self-sufficiency, sustainable solar energy, open spaces and natural colours but this environmental gain was fraught with a lot of pain and became a test of patience.

Chockalingam Muthiah says, "Building such a home was a challenge

two decades ago when solar technology was in its infancy." Some of the family members had to source materials from various suppliers and assemble the system themselves. Initially, power generation was insufficient, limiting the use of the refrigerator and making youngsters study under rechargeable lanterns. The construction process was labour-intensive, required skilled artisans and took over two years to complete.

At first, they installed solar panels that generated 1.5 kW of power and later upgraded them to 2.2 kW. This system now powers the induction cooktop, washing machine and refrigerator.

Water conservation was another cornerstone of their sustainability dream. The 20,000-litre rainwater storage system now meets 60-70 per cent of their annual

water needs. Grey or recycled water is reused in the garden, and black water is treated through a bio-stabiliser. The home is encircled by 14 trees that keep it naturally cool and also supply homegrown fruits and vegetables.

Once the structure was built, natural paints were not readily available at the time. Chockalingam explains, "We created our choice of paint with linseed oil and natural colours. However, it would take longer drying time."

Today, the Chockalingam home proudly stands as a testament to sustainable living. It demonstrates that with determination and thoughtful design, it is possible to create a home that is eco-friendly and comfortable.



GIVE YOUR HEART A LEG DAY

Regular exercise and physical activity will help keep your calf muscles fit and ensure better blood circulation

BY: NEHA JAIN

Would you believe it if you were told you have a second heart? Yes, it is true. Besides the one in our ribcage, we do have another “heart”—not in shape, but in function. This heart is essential in ensuring proper blood circulation, just as the first.

Our heart pumps oxygen-rich blood from our lungs to our whole body. But getting that used blood back up to our heart is tricky because it must fight against gravity. That is where our calf muscles come in—they act like pumps to push this blood upward through our legs, back to our heart and lungs. There, the blood gets fresh oxygen, and the cycle starts again.

This is why our calf muscles are often called the second heart. They are crucial in promoting healthy blood circulation, helping lower blood pressure, and reducing the risk of blood clots.

“The calf muscles are crucial for venous return, the process of blood flowing back to the heart,” says Dr Shyam Sunder K R, senior consultant - Interventional Cardiology, Aster RV Hospital Bengaluru.

A TWO-WAY LINK

There are three types of muscles in our calves: gastrocnemius, soleus, and plantaris. Gastrocnemius is the largest calf muscle, and plantaris is the smallest. Because they work against gravity to push

blood back towards the upper body, these leg muscles are also called anti-gravitational muscles.

There is a direct correlation between the stress and strain exerted on our heart and weak calf muscles. People leading sedentary lives tend to have weak calf muscles, which makes it harder for their hearts to ensure proper blood circulation. This excess strain often results in the early onset of cardiac complications.

"Healthy calf muscles enhance blood circulation, reducing the risk of conditions like deep vein thrombosis (DVT), varicose veins and oedema," says Dr Sunder. "By aiding venous return, the calf muscles lower the effort required by the heart to circulate blood, especially during physical activity and reducing the strain on the heart."

Dr Chirag D, consultant in interventional cardiology at Aster Hospital Bengaluru, points out that impaired blood circulation due to weak calf muscles is the major reason for blood clot formation in the veins. When the blood clot obstructs blood flow to the lungs, it could even lead to pulmonary embolism.

EXERCISING THE SECOND HEART

Whenever we exert pressure on our calf muscles, it squeezes the veins in our lower legs to send the blood from our lower body upwards towards our lungs and heart. This is referred to as the calf muscle pump. The veins in the leg also have valves that prevent the blood from flowing backwards.

"When our calf muscles contract (during walking, running or exercising), they compress the deep veins in the legs,

Healthy calf muscles enhance blood circulation, reducing the risk of conditions like deep vein thrombosis (DVT), varicose veins and oedema

—Dr Shyam Sunder K R,
senior consultant –
Interventional Cardiology,
Aster RV Hospital
Bengaluru

effectively pumping blood against gravity towards the heart," adds Dr Sunder.

Inactive people who do not exercise their calf muscles face a higher risk of cardiovascular problems, including high blood pressure.

Anju Singh, 54, a homemaker from Allahabad, struggled with fluctuating blood pressure for years. While she followed dietary recommendations like reducing salt intake, she saw the most improvement after adding a daily 60-minute walk to her routine.

"Regular walking combined with my simple, homemade diet has helped normalise my blood pressure," says Anju.

Lower leg workouts, especially those

focused on the calves and thighs, dilate the veins, making blood flow easier. This is especially helpful for people with hypertension caused by blocked arteries in their legs.

"Moving your calf muscles regularly prevents blood from pooling and reduces the risk of clots," explains Rohit Kumar, a New Delhi-based fitness trainer and exercise science educator. "It also improves overall heart health, which helps lower blood pressure."

Kumar recommends incorporating dynamic movements, like brisk walking, jogging, and climbing stairs, into one's daily routine to engage the calf muscles and improve their function and endurance.

"Calf stretches and yoga improve flexibility and mobility," he says. Kumar suggests gradually adding resistance training, either using dumbbells or gym equipment, for better results.

"After exercising, eat a high-protein diet to help muscle growth," he adds.

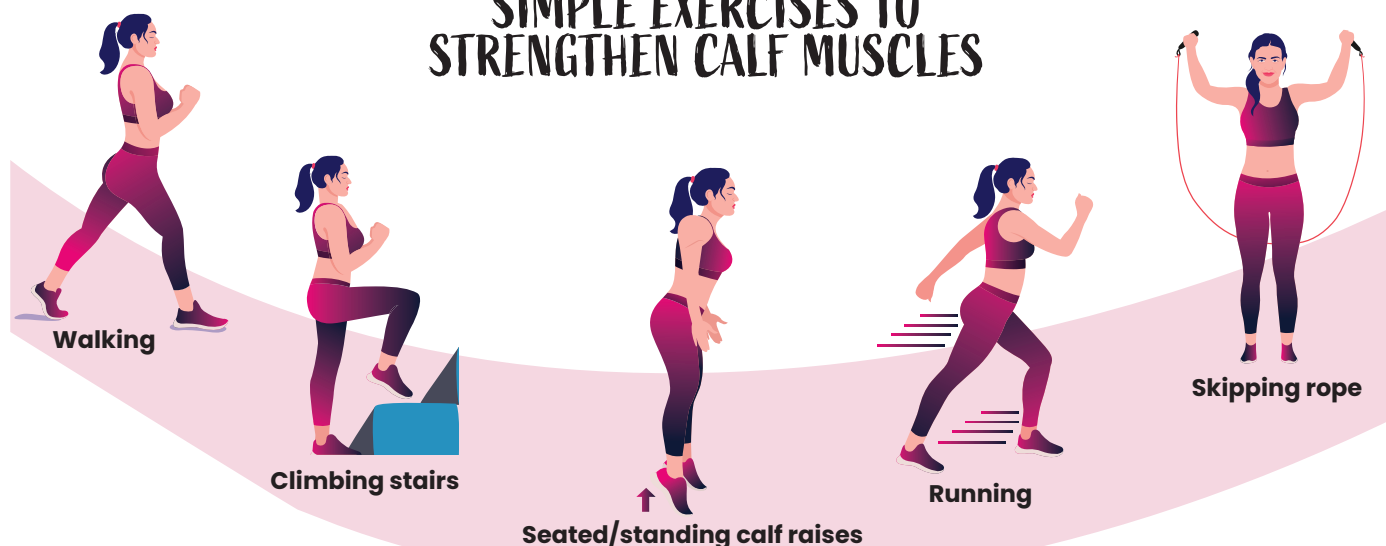
PRECAUTIONS

If you have heart-related complications, you should not exercise without medical supervision. Moreover, if you experience heart problems during exercise, stop immediately and consult a doctor.

"Once you get medical clearance to exercise, follow any exercise guidelines your doctor gives. When restarting take the help of a well-qualified fitness professional," adds Kumar.

When training the same muscle group, wait at least 48 hours between sessions. "If you're still significantly sore after 48 hours, give your muscles more rest," says Kumar. "Good hydration and a protein-rich diet help reduce recovery time."

SIMPLE EXERCISES TO STRENGTHEN CALF MUSCLES



DIGESTIVE HEALTH

We have all been there: the familiar bloat, the uncomfortable indigestion, the fiery acid reflux. Often dismissed as the aftermath of a spicy meal or too much coffee, these common digestive complaints might actually be trying to tell us something more profound about our health, specifically our heart health.

Mounting evidence suggests that gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), frequently downplayed as heartburn, is more closely connected to cardiovascular health than many realise. Epidemiological studies indicate that individuals with GERD face a nearly 30 per cent increased risk of heart attack compared to those without the condition. Research also points to a potential link between GERD and high blood pressure, raising concerns about the

seemingly benign nature of chronic heartburn.

These are not just abstract statistics. Personal experiences illustrate how GERD symptoms can extend far beyond simple digestive discomfort. Arvin Radovan from the Philippines developed GERD in 2024. He not only experienced classic symptoms such as heartburn and a sour taste but also unsettling palpitations, breathlessness, and even panic attacks. “I also got high BP post-GERD,” he notes, highlighting the unexpected reach of this condition.

Sao Paulo resident Leonice Neris Da Cruz had a similar experience. “I used to deal with GERD for years and assumed it was just a stomach issue. Later, I was shocked to learn that I had high blood pressure and high cholesterol.” Her chest tightness and alarming episodes prompted further testing, revealing a connection she had never considered.

WHY GUT FEELINGS CAN BE HEART SIGNALS

This surprising overlap is not entirely unexpected from a biological perspective. Dr Ashish Kishore Saxena, an internal medicine specialist who runs Dr Saxena Medicentre in Ludhiana, explains, “The base of the heart sits near the upper part of the stomach. This is why angina (chest pain associated with

heart disease) can sometimes be felt in the upper abdomen, leading to confusion with acidity.”

The anatomical proximity of the heart and stomach means pain signals can be easily misinterpreted.

Adding another layer of complexity is diabetes. Dr Saxena points out that nerve damage from diabetes can mask typical heart attack symptoms. “Diabetes can damage the nerves that signal classic chest pain, leading to silent heart attacks. In such cases,” he explains, “people may only feel burning in the upper abdomen, breathlessness or sweating—symptoms eerily similar to GERD.”

THE BODY'S (MIS) INFORMATION SUPERHIGHWAY

The vagus nerve is a key player in this gut-heart communication. It is the body's major communication pathway linking the brain to vital organs, including the heart, lungs and digestive system. As part of the autonomic nervous system, it regulates essential functions like heart rate, blood pressure, digestion and breathing.

Chronic irritation and inflammation from GERD can overstimulate the vagus nerve, disrupting its delicate balance. This can trigger not only

GUT FEELING, HEART WARNING

Is it really “just heartburn”?

Don't brush it off

BY: CHANDANDEEP KAUR, PhD

KEY SIGNS YOU SHOULDN'T IGNORE

- Chest discomfort that worsens with physical activity
- Pain radiating to the left arm, jaw, or upper back
- Unusual GERD symptoms such as sweating, breathlessness or dizziness
- Belching along with chest discomfort
- Persistent burning that is not relieved by antacids
- Discomfort after eating oily or spicy foods that does not improve with antacids

WHAT TESTS CAN HELP?

- ECG (Electrocardiogram) is a quick and essential test to detect heart rhythm and electrical activity issues
- ECHO (Echocardiogram) is an ultrasound of the heart to assess its structure and function
- Cardiac enzymes (CPK-MB, Troponin I/T) in the blood can be tested to detect heart muscle damage
- Treadmill Test (TMT) evaluates the heart's performance under stress
- An angiography is used in severe cases to detect blocked arteries

classic heartburn but also palpitations, dizziness, breathing difficulties and panic attacks—symptoms that alarmingly mimic heart problems.

Even seemingly harmless symptoms like belching can be deceptive. While usually just a result of swallowed air, Dr Ashish Kumar Jha, director of Gastroenterology at Medanta Super Speciality Hospital, Patna, explains that belching, especially when accompanied by chest discomfort, breathlessness or sweating, can sometimes signal a heart issue. “This happens because the vagus nerve, when affected during a cardiac event, can trigger belching that’s easily mistaken for a digestive issue,” he clarifies.

Vagus nerve overstimulation can also contribute to endothelial dysfunction—where the inner lining of blood vessels loses its ability to relax properly. This can contribute to increased blood pressure, further complicating the effort to distinguish between heart and digestive problems.

Dr Jha emphasises the frequent diagnostic confusion, noting, “Patients frequently come in thinking they have gas, but it is actually a cardiac event presenting like GERD.” Conversely, he adds that heart problems, particularly reduced blood flow to the lower part of the heart—ischemia, can also trigger sensations easily mistaken for heartburn.

While emerging research highlights a connection between GERD and heart conditions, Dr Laetitia Neuvillers, a private practice cardiologist in France, urges careful interpretation. “These findings should be considered carefully,” she cautions, “as it is very difficult to determine the relationship between the two factors among all others.”

Some experts point out that the observed association could be, in part, due to shared underlying risk factors that contribute to both. Lifestyle factors such as being overweight or obese, lack of regular physical activity, smoking and chronic stress are known to increase the likelihood of developing both GERD and cardiovascular problems.

MEDICATION: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

The side effects of medications used to treat both conditions add to the complexity. GERD medications may worsen acid reflux with long-term use by weakening the oesophageal valve. While not directly causing heart issues, this can make GERD symptoms more persistent and confusing when they overlap with cardiac symptoms.

Conversely, heart medications like

aspirin can irritate the stomach lining, potentially causing gastritis, ulcers and GERD-like symptoms.

When GERD and heart conditions coexist, these medication side effects can make diagnosis and treatment particularly challenging, underscoring the need for coordinated care between specialists.

HEARTBURN OR HEART ATTACK?

While distinguishing between GERD and heart issues can be tricky even for physicians, paying attention to how symptoms behave, especially during physical activity, offers crucial clues. Heartburn from GERD often improves with movement or sitting upright, as gravity aids in reducing acid reflux.

However, discomfort that worsens during activities like walking or exercise is a red flag. Physical exertion increases the heart’s oxygen demand, and if blood flow is restricted, this can trigger chest pain, burning or pressure—classic angina symptoms that demand immediate attention.

“Walking puts stress on the heart, just like a treadmill test we use to check heart function under exertion,” says Dr Saxena. “If you feel chest discomfort, burning or pain that gets worse with activity, get an ECG immediately.”



“If you feel chest discomfort, burning or pain that gets worse with activity, get an ECG immediately

— Dr Ashish Kishore Saxena,
internal medicine specialist, Dr Saxena
Medicentre, Ludhiana

”

WHEN TO SEEK HELP?

It is tempting to reach for over-the-counter antacids when we experience heartburn. They are frequently prescribed, especially for older adults. However, persistent heartburn (especially with unusual characteristics) should never be ignored.

“Symptoms of anginal chest pain do not reliably distinguish between cardiac and gastrointestinal origins in about one-third of patients,” explains Dr Jha. “Delay in reaching the emergency room of a nearby hospital can endanger life.”

TRUST YOUR SYMPTOMS, DON'T MAKE ASSUMPTIONS

Ultimately, GERD and heart conditions present a complex and sometimes confusing picture. Research highlights a link between them, but symptoms, medications and individual experiences can create confusion. Therefore, self-diagnosis is risky.

Instead of googling, *Is it just heartburn?* err on the side of caution. Prioritise listening to your body and go in for a medical evaluation if you are experiencing any new, persistent or concerning symptoms. Recognising the potential communication between your gut and your heart is not just good knowledge to have—it could be lifesaving.

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GASTROENTEROLOGY

Published 21 hours ago

Posted by Santosh Kumar, Chennai

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Posted on 06 Jun 2024 02:40:37 PM



Dr. Saurabh Satyanarayan Agrawal
Gastroenterologist, Hepatologist

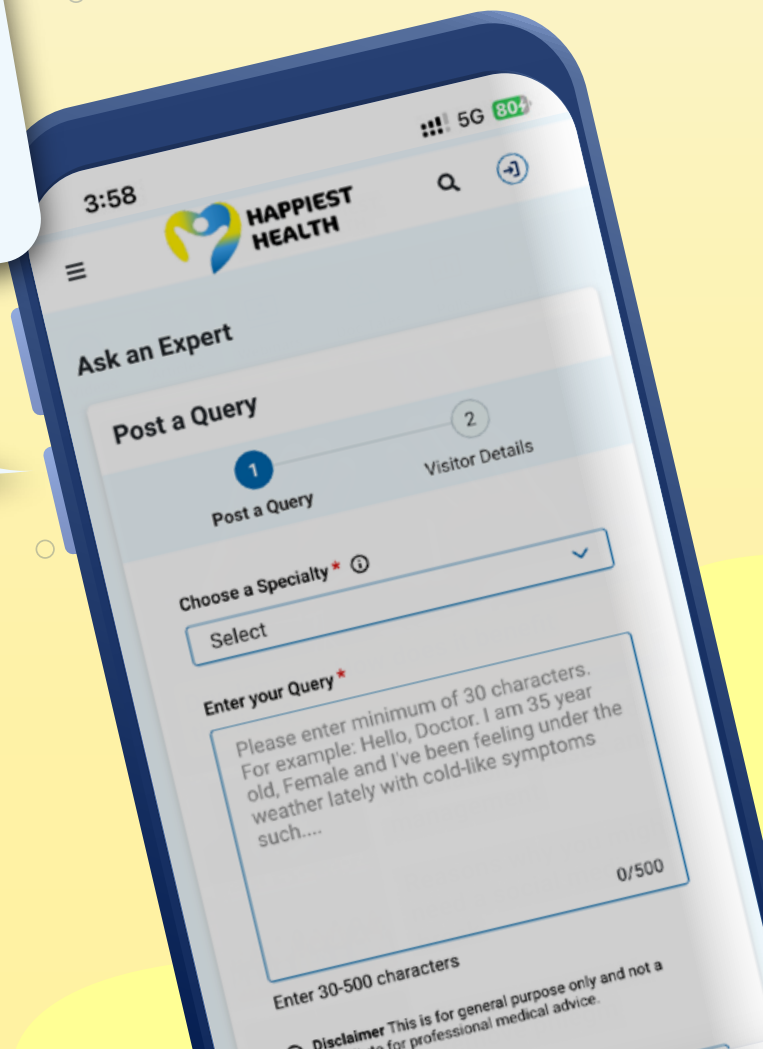
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SOOTHING SPOONFUL

Slurp up the goodness of health

BY: ARATHI S

Spinach soup

Serves: 2

INGREDIENTS

- 2 cups chopped spinach
- ¼ cup chopped onion
- ¼ teaspoon chopped garlic
- 1 tbsp chickpea flour or gram flour
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 ½ tsp oil/butter
- 1 tsp cumin powder
- 3 to 4 pinches of crushed black pepper

METHOD

- Rinse the spinach thoroughly and drain.
- Heat oil or butter in a saucepan and add a bay leaf. Sauté it on low heat.
- Now, add chopped onions and garlic. Sauté till the onion softens.
- Add the spinach leaves and sprinkle some salt and crushed black pepper to taste. Stir well.
- Add gram flour or chickpea flour to this.
- Pour a cup of water and mix well.
- Now, add a teaspoon of cumin powder and bring the mixture to a boil.
- Turn off the heat and allow this mixture to cool.
- When it is cool, transfer the mixture to a blender. Remove the bay leaf before blending.
- Blend until smooth. Transfer this to a saucepan and simmer for a few minutes.
- Add some crushed black pepper. You can also add some coconut cream for extra flavour. Serve hot.



Bottle gourd soup

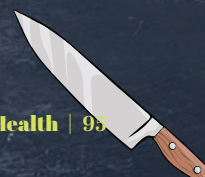
Serves: 3

INGREDIENTS

- ¼ cups chopped onion
- ¼ teaspoon chopped garlic
- 2 ½ cups chopped bottle gourd
- 1 tbsp oil
- Salt as required
- Crushed black pepper as required
- Mixed herbs as required

METHOD

- Wash, peel and chop the bottle gourd and set aside.
- Heat some oil in a pressure cooker and add the chopped garlic and onions. Sauté till the onion softens.
- Now, add chopped bottle gourd and salt and stir well.
- Pour 2 cups of water and mix. Cook this mixture for two whistles.
- Once the pressure drops, open the lid and let the bottle gourd cool. Strain and collect the broth.
- Now, blend the bottle gourd, onion and garlic.
- Add some broth if the consistency is thick. Transfer the blended mixture to a saucepan.
- Sprinkle some crushed black pepper and mixed herbs as required. Stir well on low to medium heat.
- Transfer to a bowl and serve hot.



The Daily Healthzine

POLLS



WELLNESS



INFOGRAPHICS



PODCAST

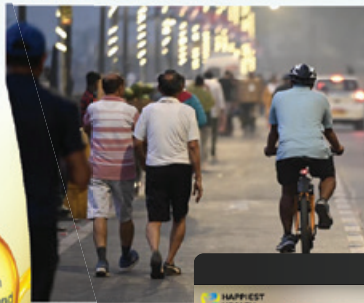


Cycling vs walking: which is better for weight loss?

Cycling and walking are both great cardiovascular activities that aid weight loss and keep various health conditions away. Pick one that suits your fitness goals and physical condition, say experts

Written by Neha Jain

With quotes from Deekshith Gowda (fitness coach), Biswajit Sahoo (fitness coach and nutritionist)



by Anantha Subramanyam K

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STUCK? FEEL THE POWER OF LIMINAL SPACE

Well-being for the young professional

BY: DR KAVITA ABRAHAM-DOWSING

I am feeling stuck' seems to be a theme at my practice this month. "Stuck in life, stuck in work, stuck in relationships, stuck between two choices, between a rock and a hard place".

Psychologists call this feeling of stuckness the liminal space. We see this space quite differently, as a space of potential and transformation where much of our work has possibility. It is where individuals seek help and often where they begin the real internal work. I work in the liminal spaces of organisational, behavioural and individual change.

The beginning of change can often present itself as a sensation of stuckness. A sense of treading in halwa, working very hard and getting nowhere. Sometimes, young professionals can feel hopelessly stuck in their mundane jobs and roles as if being pulled from pillar to post. To help explore this, I use the metaphor of the seasons, particularly winter.

SEASONS' GIFT

Some people hate winter, some love it. We survive the season in the knowledge that a new season of summer will appear. This process of nature, of resting and restoring resources, in preparation for another cycle, which inevitably appears as spring and then summer, reflects what happens to us psychologically when we go through change and transformation.

Some of us can just muddle through busy lives, others resist it, still others feel very stuck, depressed and unable to cope. Inevitably change does come and a new season is born, and we can miss the gift of winters, of change and of the potential of the liminal space.

BEHAVIOURAL STARS

How can we shift the behaviour and energy of this time? Here we meet two of our super heroes in the world of



Dr Kavita Abraham-Dowsing is a behavioral psychologist, a visiting fellow at the London School of Economics, an ICF accredited leadership coach (PCC). She is the founder of SIMPLICITY which works with leaders in global corporations like Bloomberg, Google and the NHS, UK. (www.simplicityconsulting.co.uk).

behavioural change — Priya and Feroze. Each role we inhabit in organisational life and beyond is formed with its own 'perspective on reality' (Priya). This perspective on reality brings with it a specific frame of reference (Feroze).

To enable behaviour change and to take back our individual agency we need to get to know Priya and Feroze within this role. What are the specific perspectives on reality and frames of reference that this role brings with it?

When we feel stuck and are sufficiently frustrated about it, we can

look at our frames of reference and our perspectives on reality. These are strongest in our organisational lives where we inhabit very specific roles. Let us examine what Priya and Feroze's perspectives look like in this role.

SHAPE-SHIFTERS

Priya and Feroze can shapeshift. They are not stuck in a particular shape and can reinvent themselves. We have the power to redesign them. Here begins the process of shifting, of behavioural change, or getting unstuck. They live in the liminal space which externally may look quiet and calm (sometimes stuck), while internally it can be a space and time of great creativity, prototyping, trying new behaviours or ways of being, deciding what works and doesn't.

This land of liminal space is very forgiving and allows for mistakes, failing fast (i.e. early feedback on the outcome of a concept) and rapid recovery as nothing is fixed. These psychological processes form the basis of beginning the change, and becoming unstuck.

In the busy, overextended lives of young professionals in the 21st century, the ability to notice the 'stuckness' is a good first step.

But one does not need to remain there long, just long enough to feel the fundamental need for change. If you find yourself here, do take steps to actively enter the liminal space, to engage with alternative versions of reality (Priya) or new frames of reference (Feroze).

The process of getting to know these two avatars can highlight the alternative shapes they can take. Realise there is potential within being 'stuck'. Use the gift of time to actively enter the liminal space and discover, envision and create the version of Priya and Feroze that can be more suitable for the next phase of your career or role.

Do not rush it, this time and space is precious.



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