

THE Numbers GAME

If you're unsure how to play, here are the rules: to hit health's sweet spots, ignore the sensationalist, pseudo-scientific headlines and study up on the wellness digits you definitely need to know

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Read the news on any given day and chances are the latest advice will put everything you thought you knew about healthy living in the shade. With headlines constantly churning out goalpost-shifting ideas, it can be tough knowing what's best. How much H₂O do you *really* need? Is red meat now the enemy? Can you really get too *much* sleep? It's time to cut through the confusion... We've referred these matters to world experts and leading science to give you the WH digits of health.



Hours of sleep per night

Confused much? You've clocked up a blissful nine hours under your White Company duvet and, frankly, you're feeling smug. After all, a US study* published this year found that sleeping less than six hours a night quadrupled the risk of catching a cold, plus a body of research shows the benefits of solid shut-eye range from boosting our mood to regulating our appetite-controlling hormones. But, uh-oh, Warwick University researchers analysed a decade of studies and found that those who sleep for more than eight have the same increased mortality risk as those who slept for less than

six, while 2010 research from the University of California San Diego School of Medicine in the US found that women who slept between five and six-and-a-half hours were most likely to still be alive after 14 years. **The target:** Considering all the evidence, seven is the most desirable digit. Why? "The lowest mortality and morbidity is with seven hours," concludes Shawn Youngstedt, sleep researcher at Arizona State University, US. Sounds pretty final. Another benefit? A 2013 study* found that cognitive performance increases the more sleep we get – peaking at seven hours, after which, it declines.



Glasses of wine per week

Confused much? Oh cab sav, you're so contrary. A study in the journal *BMC Medicine* found two to seven glasses of wine a week can lower your risk of depression, while a 2005 study found moderate drinking – half to one glass of wine a day – keeps the brain sharper than staying teetotal*. The counter argument? A study this year* found just one glass a day could up breast cancer risk, echoing the findings of Oxford's influential 2009 *Million Women Study*. Tricky.

The target: You can have up to seven 175ml glasses a week (one a day) without running afoul of government guidelines, but five is your friend if you want to minimise the risk while getting all the good stuff. "For women, the breast cancer risk is real, so it's a matter of balancing that with the benefits for heart disease, metabolic health and how much pleasure one derives from moderate alcohol," says Dr Meir Stampfer, professor of epidemiology and nutrition at Harvard. Kelly Grainger, dietitian at Leaders in Oncology Care, says the key is to avoid binge-drinking. "I also encourage people to have two consecutive alcohol-free days per week, so we don't get into a habit of daily drinking."



490

Grams of red meat per week

Confused much? First, the good news regarding that sirloin: around 23% of UK women may not be getting enough iron in their diet, according to the British Nutrition Foundation – and red meat is one of the richest sources of ‘haem’ iron, the type most efficiently absorbed by our bodies. Currently we’re only clocking about 56g a day. *But* chomping more than 100g a day has been linked in study after study to an increased risk of bowel cancer.

The target: “The Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition advise eating an average of 70g a day, and that’s a sensible way forward,” says Dr Emma Derbyshire, a public health dietitian whose research has focused on women and iron. Meanwhile, to get more out of your plant-based non-haem iron sources (think lentils and leafy greens), pair them with a glass of OJ or a side of kale: the vitamin C helps boost absorption*.



1.4

Litres of water a day

Confused much? Water is brilliant for flushing out toxins, aiding digestion and even accelerating weight loss, according to a study published this year in the journal *Obesity*. And, apparently, for not making you a road hazard – recent research by Loughborough University revealed that subjects who drank just 25ml an hour during the test versus 200ml on control days made the same number of mistakes when driving as someone over the drink drive limit. But has our thirst for healthy H₂O intake gone too far? A report in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* this spring highlighted the growing risk of exercise-associated hyponatraemia from necking water and sports drinks. It’s a potentially fatal condition where your body can’t

rid itself of excess fluid through sweating or urination. Their recommendation? Only drink when thirsty. **The target:** Your two big bottles of Evian may be overkill. Professor Tom Sanders, emeritus professor of nutrition and dietetics at King’s College London and adviser to the Natural Hydration Council, advises sticking with the European Food Safety Authority’s suggested two litres of water per day total – but only 1.4 litres of that will come from drinks. “Ideally, 70-80% of your water intake should come from drinks and 20-30% from foods,” he says. “Women eat around 1kg of food a day, which will contain approximately 600ml of water. Sip regularly, rather than guzzle.”

*SOURCES: PUBLIC HEALTH ENGLAND; EUROPEAN SOCIETY OF CARDIOLOGY; DUKE UNIVERSITY MEDICAL CENTER; UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LOS ANGELES; CORNELL UNIVERSITY; US OFFICE FOR NATIONAL STATISTICS; PSYCHOLOGY & AGING; AMERICAN JOURNAL OF EPIDEMIOLOGY

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Portions of fruit per day

Confused much? The health superpowers of nature’s sweetest snacks have been well documented, with a study showing an average daily fruit intake of 1.5 portions cuts cardiovascular disease risk by 40% and Harvard research finding that eating at least two servings per week can help prevent type 2 diabetes. However, headlines of doom have fostered fructose fear – spinning scientific findings, like those linking 74g daily of fructose to a 77% higher risk of high blood pressure, as reason to drastically cut our berry-popping habits.

The target: First, the facts: you’d need to eat 30 oranges to enter the 74g danger zone. The research touted by tabloids tends to test high-fructose corn syrup, not fresh fruit. “The benefits of eating two servings of fruit a day – reducing cardiovascular disease, improving insulin resistance and increasing fibre – outweigh any negatives of the fructose,” says Dr Qi Sun, associate professor at Harvard Medical School. “It’s added refined sugar in fruit juices and soft drinks that people need to be limiting.”



Close friends

Confused much? We’re in a mates muddle – how big does your crew need to be? A study* found two close friends is the average, stating the small number could be down to the fact we’re selective about who we trust. But a report* revealed we’re more likely to feel satisfied with 10 or more close buddies. Where’s the middle ground? **The target:** Through his studies, evolutionary psychologist Dr Robin Dunbar has concluded five is the optimum number of close friends. This less-is-more approach was supported by research*, which found that as we move into our thirties, fewer friends means we’re happier later in life. “Five is the perfect number as it’s manageable in terms of time and energy,” psychologist Suzy Reading says. “It provides enough social support, delivers a boost to positive emotions and builds resilience to stress.” Over the limit? “The best way to gauge a friendship is to ask yourself how you feel after seeing that friend: brilliant or drained?” psychotherapist Hilda Burke asks. “If your heart sinks every time you’re together, it’s time to phase them out.”

COUNT DOWN
UP GAINS



Minutes standing each working hour

Confused much? Our sedentary office-based lifestyles have prompted warnings that sitting is the new smoking, responsible for everything from heart disease to diabetes – not to mention a 94% increased mortality risk for women who sit for more than six hours a day*. But before you burn your chair, consider this: research by Swiss university ETH Zürich found five hours of standing, even when broken up by hourly five-minute breaks, can lead to long-term muscle fatigue.

The target: Stand tall for two hours total, spread across the workday, ideally progressing to four, says John Buckley, professor of exercise sciences at University Centre Shrewsbury and co-author of new guidelines published in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, based on more than 60 studies on the dangers of sedentary working. “We know once people are clocking more than two hours on their feet, we start to see health gains,” he explains – including healthier blood sugar levels, increased calorie burn and lower BMI. And don’t dismantle your new sit-stand desk if the transition feels uncomfortable at first. “Your body will adapt and strengthen its tissues to learn to cope with that,” Buckley adds. “It’s like training for a marathon.”





Cups of coffee per day

Confused much? Multiple studies have shown drinking java can spike blood pressure, and having more than five daily cups of the unfiltered stuff may raise cholesterol by up to 8%. But research has also linked a protective cardiovascular benefit with moderate consumption of two to four cups a day, along with decreased risk of depression. **The target:** A six-cup habit won't kill you, but experts say the sweet spot lies at two 235ml takeaway cups of filter coffee a day. That's where a study* found the heart-protecting benefits peak, and where you'll still get a lowered risk of Parkinson's disease, and liver and ovarian cancers. Lead author Dr Elizabeth Mostofsky says the blood pressure warnings may be overhyped: "We develop a tolerance over a matter of days, so we no longer have that spike every time we drink coffee." As for cholesterol risk? Choose filter coffee, which removes the bits responsible for the uptick. **WH**

GOOD TIMING

There really is the perfect moment for everything. We've mapped out your ideal day, numerically



Sex: 7am to 8am

Make the most of the morning (glory) and get going between the sheets early on. This is when couples are most likely to orgasm and conceive*.



Important tasks: 9am to noon

Take advantage of your focus before it drops later – people are most easily distracted from noon to 4pm, says a US study*.



Napping: 1-2pm

O/é! The siesta is legit, and this is when a snooze would benefit us most*.

(Though unless your workplace sports sleep pods, save this for weekends.)



Shopping: 2-4pm

An argument to eat al desko and use your late lunch break to pick up groceries: you'll choose more low-cal foods than the pre-dinner crowd at 4-7pm*.



Kettlebell workout: 5-6pm

For optimum toning, weight training is more effective in the evening. A Finnish study* shows leg torque is higher at 5pm than 7am.



Bed: 10pm

Sleep easy knowing 10pm is the ideal time to do so. A study* found those who nod off later are 2.42 times less likely to feel they got adequate sleep.