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# Take a shortcut to a better you

Keen to get fit, eat healthily and relax properly but simply don't have the time? **Rachel Mainwaring** discovers there are plenty of shortcuts to a healthier, fitter you

**T**HOUGH we'd all like to eat our five-a-day, visit the gym several times a week and fit in some quiet time for rest and contemplation, busy lifestyles mean that, with all the will in the world, most of us don't really ever get round to it.

Though we appreciate the health benefits of regular exercise, not feasting on junk food and getting enough sleep every night, it's increasingly difficult to fit it all in.

But who doesn't love to cheat once in a while? Here are some healthy shortcuts that will not just improve your well-being, but will leave some extra time for you too.

## GET ACTIVE:

**The ideal:** Experts believe that 30 minutes of exercise on at least five days a week keeps your heart healthy, lowers your cholesterol and blood pressure, keeps your weight down and reduces the risk of some cancers.

**Shortcuts:** Do three or four mini bursts instead. Research has shown that it's just as effective in maintaining fitness and it doesn't feel as much of an effort either. Try getting up a bit earlier and take a power walk before your shower, devote 10 minutes of your lunch break to a brisk walk, climb a few flights of stairs several times a day

instead of using the lift at work or even volunteer to walk a friend's dog.

## GET YOUR FIVE A DAY:

**The ideal:** We all know that we should be eating five servings of fruit and vegetables every day to get all the nutrients we need yet only a third of adults succeed.

**Shortcuts:** Try vitamin-rich dried fruits or canned fruit. Using frozen berries, whip up a fruit smoothie, which can hold up to three servings of fruit. When you are eating your cereal in the morning, add some fruit and always enjoy a mid-morning banana as a snack. Down a glass of orange juice as well and that counts as two portions. If you're cooking a homemade dinner, add an extra vegetable to the mix. For example, try adding a couple of grated carrots to spaghetti bolognese, a handful of peas to mashed potato or an extra pepper to your stir-fry.

## DRINK ENOUGH WATER:

**The ideal:** We are regularly told that six to eight large glasses of water a day (around two litres) are what we need to keep us hydrated and our di-

gestive systems healthy (although it needs to be more if it's hot or you've been exercising) but many of us struggle to consume anywhere near that amount.

**Shortcuts:** The good news is that tea or coffee counts too as they still contribute towards hydration, as long as they are in moderate amounts. If you want to be super-healthy, swap your usual caffeine fix for herbal tea. If you manage to eat your five fruit and veg, they contain the equivalent of two glasses of water and even cereal-based foods are 40% water.

## CUT OUT THE JUNK FOOD:

**The ideal:** Yes, eating fresh, homemade produce is good for us but aren't you too tired or busy to be whipping up culinary masterpieces after a day's work?

**Shortcuts:** Rather than falling into the trap of relying on shop-bought food, try making your own healthy versions instead. Spend time at the week-end cooking and freezing batches of food for those days when you're feeling too lazy to cook. Cooking can actually be very therapeutic and relaxing too and you can get the kids involved for some quality family time. Or, if you're feeling really lazy, order a fruit or veg



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box if the task of shopping is just too unappealing in your free time. Or, for those who have the pennies to spare, several companies now offer an option of having healthy prepared meals delivered right to your door. Check out [www.gousto.co.uk](http://www.gousto.co.uk), [www.wiltshirefarmfoods.com](http://www.wiltshirefarmfoods.com) for starters.

### IMPROVE YOUR SMILE:

**The ideal:** To keep your mouth healthy, brush after every meal, and floss at least once a day. In a perfect world, you should brush and floss away all those little meal remnants before they had a chance to cause decay and damage.

**Shortcuts:** Do something to loosen up the bacteria in your mouth – for example, by chewing sugarless gum after you eat. It helps increase the production of saliva which helps wash away and neutralise acid produced by plaque bacteria that leads to decay and bad breath.

### GET ENOUGH SLEEP:

**The ideal:** While laziness is generally considered to be detrimental to your health, when it comes to sleeping it can actually pay off. Research has shown that sleep can help you live longer, boost your memory and reduce stress. A 2007 study at the University of Warwick found that women who slept fewer than five hours a night were twice as likely to suffer from hypertension as women who got seven hours of sleep. Previous studies have linked lack of sleep to weight gain and a weakened immune system.

**Shortcuts:** Take a nap without feeling guilty. If you're at home, lie down for a two-minute siesta in the afternoon to revive yourself or take a quick catnap when you get home from work to counteract the effects of lost sleep.

### KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON:

**The ideal:** Stress is well known for sapping energy so address your work-life balance and make sure you have free time to just relax and enjoy life.

**Shortcuts:** Take 10 minutes to listen to soothing music. Researchers at Stanford University, California, found that certain music can stimulate brainwaves to resonate with the beat, with up-tempo music helping improve concentration and slower tempos generating a calm, relaxed state. Deep breathing can work too. Take 10 slow, deep breaths – it takes no time at all and can be done anywhere. It'll transform you from stressed out and worried to calmer and more energised.

### WORK ON YOUR BRAIN POWER:

**The ideal:** Boosting mental health is as important as your physical wellbeing and it can easily be done from the safety and comfort of your sofa at home.

**Shortcuts:** Do a crossword puzzle. Apparently, frequent participation in mentally stimulating activities can reduce your risk of Alzheimer's Disease, so give your brain a challenge by doing Sudoku instead of watching TV.

### LAZY EXERCISING:

**The ideal:** All of us need a bit of rest in the evening but vegging out in front of the TV can be the quickest way to pile on the pounds. But if you do some simple exercises while watching EastEnders, you won't even know you're putting in any effort.

**Shortcuts:** To boost your fitness while watching TV, try squeezing a mini-workout into each commercial break. From

sit-ups to skipping or a quick run up and down stairs, there are plenty of ways to introduce activity into your TV-watching schedule. You could even use a baked bean or soup tin to do some arm exercises (which will also stop you reaching for the chocolate). Simply keep moving as research suggests even fidgeting while sitting can burn up to 350 extra calories a day.

