

5 Top Tips for Preventing Illness and Injury

We're all striving for a healthy, pain-free life, which of course, can be easier said than done. Still, we've gleaned a lot of advice from University of Miami Health System professionals through the years for everything from avoiding chronic illness to steering clear of broken bones and other injuries.

Whether you're a weekend fitness warrior or a busy grandmother, some universal laws of illness and injury prevention apply no matter what your lot is in life. Here are some of the best bits of wisdom we've received from the Miami health professionals to keep you feeling your best at any stage in life.



#1 - Get vaccinated

Despite the naysayers, the overwhelming volume of scientific evidence supports vaccinations as one of the best modern tools for preventing illness. This is true whether it's the COVID-19 vaccine or the flu shot. The COVID-19 vaccine has been shown to be safe in every group that it's been recommended for, including pregnant women and teens most recently.

"Get the vaccine as soon as you can get it," says Michael Paidas, M.D., an

obstetrician-gynecologist who serves as chair of the obstetrics team at UHealth. "We're in a pandemic, and it's far more important for pregnant women to have the protection of antibodies that will last several months than to be without them."

The annual flu shot is another simple step to protecting yourself from the illness every year. Interestingly, a recent study from researchers at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine showed that the flu vaccine might also provide some protection against COVID-19, as well, though it is not intended as a replacement for COVID-19 vaccination.

#2 - Eat heart healthy

Maintaining a healthy weight through diet and exercise is critically important to your lifelong health and reducing the risk of chronic illness and injury. The DASH diet, which lowers blood pressure with whole grains, fruits and vegetables, nuts and seeds, low-fat dairy products, lean protein, and low salt, is just one of many such diets that can be effective in this effort. In fact, recent research has shown that the DASH diet not only lowers blood pressure but protects against chronic heart disease, as well.

"Keep in mind that an unhealthy diet is one of the most important causes of inflammation," says Maria Delgado-Lelievre, M.D., founder and director of the University of Miami Health System's Comprehensive Hypertension Center. "Thus, when you remove unhealthy foods, inflammation will decrease in our bodies. Inflammation is in many ways the starting point for heart disease."

#3 - Protect your skin

Skin cancer is among the most common forms of cancer, yet all too many of us avoid the basic precautions we need to protect ourselves from the sun's harmful UV rays. When you consider that melanoma, the most deadly form of skin cancer, is on the rise, this makes precautions such as using sunscreen, wearing sun-protective clothing, or avoiding direct sun exposure when the sun is at its brightest even more critical.

"Short exposures to the sun, which we call incidental sun exposure, can add up over time," says Anna Nichols, M.D., Ph.D., a dermatologist at Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center. "So don't forget to protect your skin even if you are not going to be in the sun for a prolonged period."

#4 - Listen to your body

We all know how important exercise is to staying healthy and fit as we age. However, when it comes to preventing illness and injury while trying something new, our experts recommend a gradual approach to the new activity. By starting slowly, you can listen to your body, recognize problems before they get worse, and adjust the intensity to match what your body is telling you.

Michael Baraga, M.D., a sports medicine specialist with the University of Miami Health System, experienced this first-hand while training for a half marathon after Achilles tendon surgery. "You go out on the run, and you're supposed to get six miles in, but at mile four, you start feeling a sharp pain in one of the muscles. You think you can push through, but then it starts hitting you a little bit harder," he says. "Eleven years ago, I would've kept on running."

When that happened, he stopped and modified his activities for a week until things got better. "More importantly, I didn't make anything worse," he says. "I was able to resume training without losing much by adding the components of cross-training and doing activities that could keep me active but not necessarily cause the same pain."

#5 - Get a checkup

Finally, if you're truly serious about stopping illness and injury before it starts, then see your doctor for a physical exam every year to get a sense of how you're doing overall. No excuses.

With regular check-ins with your doctor, even when you're feeling fine, you can help your health care team detect problems both big and small. "Discussing a family history of diabetes, cancer, or genetic disorders can make an early diagnosis possible," says E. Robert Schwartz, M.D., a family medicine physician with the University of Miami Health System. "Simple tests such as a urinalysis or a hemoglobin A1C to screen for diabetes, for example, are effective screening tools that can help you stay healthy before a disease even makes itself known."

List compiled by Wyatt Myers, contributing writer.

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