Stride

KEEP ON MOVING | WELLNESS GUIDE | RESEARCH-BACKED

The Wellness Essentials Checklist

Are you on track for a healthier life? A story, the science, and a checklist to find out.

Most of us are not unwell, we are simply drifting. This guide follows one busy woman's wake-up call and turns decades of public-health research into a checklist you can use today.

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Accountability. Family. Fitness.

CHAPTER 1

The Morning Maya Said “I’m Fine”

> Maya is 41. She runs a team, drives two kids to practice, and answers “How are you?” with “Fine, just busy” so often that the words have stopped meaning anything. Her annual physical came back “normal.” Yet on a Tuesday in November she caught herself sitting in the parked car outside her office, too tired to open the door.
>
> “Normal,” she realised, was not the same as *well*. Nobody had ever handed her a simple way to see the whole picture: how she was sleeping, moving, eating, connecting, and what her numbers were quietly doing in the background. She had a to-do list for everyone else’s health and none for her own.

If Maya’s morning sounds familiar, you are in good company. Most of us do not fall off a cliff; we drift. The good news from decades of research is that the drift is reversible, and that a small set of essentials explains a surprisingly large share of how long and how well we live. This guide walks you through them, tells you what the evidence says, and gives you a checklist to find out where you stand.

CHAPTER 2

What the Science Says Matters Most

The American Heart Association’s “Life’s Essential 8.” In 2022 the AHA updated its model of cardiovascular health to eight scored measures: four behaviours (diet, physical activity, nicotine exposure and, newly added, sleep) and four health factors (body mass index, blood lipids, blood glucose and blood pressure) [1]. Think of it as a dashboard rather than a verdict. Each element can be improved, and improving one tends to help the others.

14 yrs

Women who followed all five low-risk habits at age 50 (never smoking, healthy weight, regular exercise, healthy diet, moderate alcohol) were projected to live about 14 years longer than women with none; **men**, about 12 years longer. Harvard researchers followed 123,219 adults for roughly three decades [2].

That analysis, led by Dr. Yanping Li with senior author Dr. Frank Hu of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, also found a dose-response pattern: each additional healthy habit was linked with additional years of life, and people with all five habits had a 74% lower risk of dying during follow-up [2,3]. In plain terms, you do not need perfection to benefit. Every habit you add counts.

Relationships are a health factor, too. When psychologist Julianne Holt-Lunstad and colleagues pooled 148 studies covering 308,849 people, those with stronger social relationships had a 50% greater

likelihood of survival over the study periods than those with weaker ties, an effect comparable to well-known risks such as smoking [4]. Maya's fatigue was not only about sleep; she had not had a real conversation with a friend in weeks.

Sleep is not a luxury. A joint consensus statement from the American Academy of Sleep Medicine and the Sleep Research Society recommends that healthy adults sleep at least seven hours a night to support optimal health [5].

Movement is non-negotiable, but flexible. The World Health Organization recommends 150–300 minutes of moderate activity (or 75–150 of vigorous activity) each week, plus muscle-strengthening on two or more days, and notes that all activity counts [6].

CHAPTER 3

What This Means for You

Here is the encouraging part for Maya, and for you. None of these essentials requires a gym membership, a special diet or a personality transplant. They require *awareness* first, then small, repeatable changes. And repeatable is the key word.

66 days

On average, it took about 66 days for a new daily behaviour to feel automatic in a University College London study of 96 people. Individual results ranged from 18 to 254 days, and missing a single day did not materially derail habit formation [7].

Read that again: *missing one day did not materially derail habit formation.* The research gives you permission to be human. What predicts success is returning to the habit, not never slipping.

CHAPTER 4

Your Wellness Essentials Checklist

Tick each box that is **mostly true** for you right now. There are no gold stars for perfection. This is simply a map. Reference numbers show where each benchmark comes from.

- ☐ **1. I move on most days**
  I get roughly 150 minutes of moderate activity a week (a brisk 30-minute walk, five days), or I am steadily building toward it [6].
- ☐ **2. I strengthen my muscles**
  I do some form of resistance work (bodyweight, bands, weights) on at least two days a week [6].
- ☐ **3. I sleep enough**
  I usually sleep seven hours or more and wake up reasonably rested [5].

- [ ] **4. My plate leans on whole foods**
  Most of my meals are built from vegetables, fruit, whole grains, beans, nuts, fish or lean proteins [1].
- [ ] **5. I do not use tobacco**
  I do not smoke or vape nicotine, or I am actively working with support to quit [1,2].
- [ ] **6. I know my numbers**
  I know my blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar from a check within the past one to two years, and I have discussed them with a clinician [1].
- [ ] **7. My weight is in a range my clinician considers healthy for me**
  The Harvard analysis defined a healthy BMI as 18.5–24.9, though BMI is an imperfect measure; ask your clinician what is right for you [2].
- [ ] **8. I keep alcohol moderate**
  The Harvard study defined moderate as up to about one drink a day for women and two for men; none is also a fine choice, and some people should avoid it entirely [2].
- [ ] **9. I have people**
  I have at least one or two people I can talk to honestly, and I connect with someone I care about every week [4].
- [ ] **10. I have a way to unwind**
  I have a regular practice (walks, prayer, music, journaling, time outdoors) that brings my stress down [1].
- [ ] **11. I am building habits, not chasing quick fixes**
  I pick one small change at a time and give it weeks, not days, to settle in [7].
- [ ] **12. I celebrate progress**
  I notice and name what is going well, not only what is missing.

How to read your score

9–12 ticks: You have a strong foundation. Choose one area to deepen and keep your routine steady.
5–8 ticks: You are on your way. Pick the *one* unticked item that feels easiest and start there.
0–4 ticks: Welcome to the starting line, which is a perfectly good place to be. Choose a single habit from the list below and give it a few weeks.

CHAPTER 5

Your First 66 Days: A Simple Plan

Phase	Focus	What to do
Days 1–7	Choose and cue	Pick **one** unticked item. Attach it to something you already do (“after I pour my coffee, I walk for 10 minutes”). Write the plan down.

Phase	Focus	What to do
Days 8–30	Repeat and protect	Do it the same way, same time. If you miss a day, simply resume the next day. The research shows one miss does not erase progress [7].
Days 31–66	Stretch gently	Lengthen, strengthen or add a second small habit. Reconnect with a friend who supports you [4].
Day 67+	Re-check	Retake this checklist. Celebrate every new tick. Pick your next habit.

A quick word on the evidence

The Harvard life-expectancy estimates come from large, long-running observational cohorts of health professionals (the Nurses' Health Study and the Health Professionals Follow-up Study) combined with national data. Observational research shows strong associations but cannot prove cause, and results may differ across populations [2]. The habit-formation study used a modest sample of volunteers, and the 66-day figure is an average, not a rule [7]. Use these findings as a compass, not a contract.

This guide is for general education and inspiration. It is not medical advice and does not replace care from a licensed clinician or registered dietitian. Talk with your healthcare provider before making significant changes to your diet, activity or routines, especially if you are pregnant, managing a health condition, or taking medication. Characters in the opening stories are composites created for illustration; all research findings are real and cited.

SOURCES

References & Further Reading

Every number in this guide traces back to the sources below. Superscript numbers in the text match the numbered entries. Where a finding comes from observational research (which shows association, not proof of cause), we say so.

1. Lloyd-Jones DM, Allen NB, Anderson CAM, et al. Life's Essential 8: Updating and enhancing the American Heart Association's construct of cardiovascular health. *Circulation*. 2022;146(5):e18–e43.
2. Li Y, Pan A, Wang DD, Liu X, Dhana K, Franco OH, Kaptoge S, Di Angelantonio E, Stampfer M, Willett WC, Hu FB. Impact of healthy lifestyle factors on life expectancies in the US population. *Circulation*. 2018;138(4):345–355. doi:10.1161/CIRCULATIONAHA.117.032047
3. Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. Press release: Following five healthy lifestyle habits may increase life expectancy by decade or more. April 30, 2018. hsph.harvard.edu
4. Holt-Lunstad J, Smith TB, Layton JB. Social relationships and mortality risk: A meta-analytic review. *PLoS Medicine*. 2010;7(7):e1000316. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316
5. Watson NF, Badr MS, Belenky G, et al. Recommended amount of sleep for a healthy adult: A joint consensus statement of the American Academy of Sleep Medicine and Sleep Research Society. *Sleep*. 2015;38(6):843–844.
6. Bull FC, Al-Ansari SS, Biddle S, et al. World Health Organization 2020 guidelines on physical activity and sedentary behaviour. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*. 2020;54(24):1451–1462.
7. Lally P, van Jaarsveld CHM, Potts HWW, Wardle J. How are habits formed: Modelling habit formation in the real world. *European Journal of Social Psychology*. 2010;40(6):998–1009. doi:10.1002/ejsp.674

Watch, Listen & Learn From the Experts

- **Robert Waldinger, MD** (Harvard Medical School; director, Harvard Study of Adult Development). TED talk: *What makes a good life? Lessons from the longest study on happiness* (2015).
- **Dr. Mike Evans** (University of Toronto). Short whiteboard video: *23 and 1/2 hours: What is the single best thing we can do for our health?* (2011).
- **American Heart Association**: Life's Essential 8 overview and self-assessment tool, at heart.org.
- **Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health**, The Nutrition Source, at nutritionsource.hsph.harvard.edu.