

## Keep your health on course by tracking your progress

By Aaron Warnick

**B**eing healthy is a process. There are no magic buttons you can push to quickly become healthier. But there is one easy step you can take: keeping track.

So many decisions that people make about their health can be broken down into numbers. Whether it's the calories in your food, blood pressure numbers on a monitoring device or minutes of activity, keeping a regular record can inform you about your health.

Tracking your health can be an everyday activity. A lot of smartphones come with built-in pedometers that track daily steps, and many people use scales to monitor weight gain. But those measures are just the beginning.

**HABITS**

"These common things are important to track, but they're certainly not the only things you can watch to live healthier," says APHA Physical Activity Section Chair-elect Noël Barengo, MD, PhD, MPH, an associate professor at Florida International University.

### Tracking your activity

Physical activity is critical to staying healthy. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, regular physical activity can improve your brain health, help manage your weight, reduce your risk of certain diseases, and strengthen your muscles and bones.

It's recommended that you get at least 30 minutes of moderately-intense exercise every day. Barengo says an important way to gauge whether you're exercising at the right level is that you should be able to talk, but not be able to sing.

And while 30 minutes a day seems easy in theory, it can be harder in practice. According to CDC, only a third of adults get the recommended amount of physical activity each week.

Barengo recommends you make a calendar and check off each day you hit your goals. You can even reward yourself with a gold star or fun sticker on those days to make them stand out. If most of your days go unmarked, you may need to alter your routine or change your goals.

"It's not all or nothing — and in the case of physical activity, something is definitely better than nothing," he says. "Adjust your goals so you can start seeing more of those check marks, getting into routines, and then increase your goals over time."

The National Institutes of Health's Go4Life campaign has free printable resources to make it easy to track your activity, including a goal-setting worksheet, activity log and monthly progress test.

### Tracking your food and drink

There are a lot of ideas about what to track — such as calories, carbohydrates, fat — when you want to change your diet. Your health care provider can help you sort out what's important for you. Once you know



>> For free activity tracking tools, visit [www.nia.nih.gov/go4life](http://www.nia.nih.gov/go4life)

where to go, start keeping track in a journal.

A food journal is a way to record what you're eating, how much you eat and when you eat it. By writing it all down, you can find patterns in your food intake. Free resources are available online and in smartphone apps that can help track how much you eat. But it can also be as simple as grabbing a pen and paper.

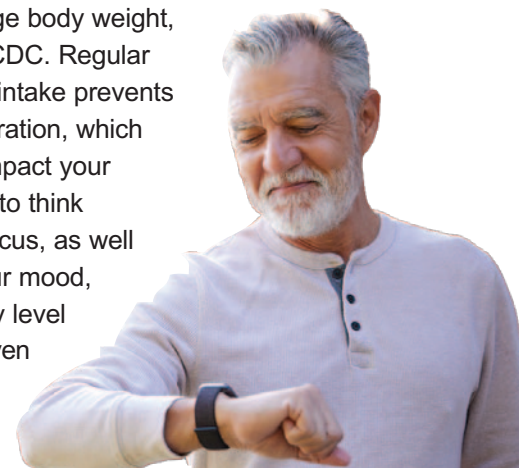
"Once you start writing things down, you might realize that some of your habits are not great," Barengo says.

Often, people find that they snack and eat unhealthy foods more frequent than they imagined. We live in a snacking culture, he says.

Keeping a food journal can be hard for some people, as you are watching your own behavior. If you want a little support, it can help to tell a friend about your goals or even ask them to join you.

"It can really help to get that social and environmental support," Barengo says.

An often-overlooked part of being healthy is staying hydrated, so you should also track what and how often you drink. Reaching for a glass of water, especially when you were thinking about going for a soda or a sugary coffee, can help you manage body weight, says CDC. Regular water intake prevents dehydration, which can impact your ability to think and focus, as well as your mood, energy level and even skin health.



### What health stats should you track?

If you're not used to keeping track of your habits, it's understandable if you feel overwhelmed by all of the things you can measure. So you might want to pick and choose those most important to you. If you have concerns about high blood pressure, be sure to monitor that. If you're frequently tired and performing poorly at work or school, try keeping track of how many hours you sleep at night.

"You have to prioritize what is most important for your health," Barengo says. "Set realistic goals and don't get discouraged if you're not succeeding right away."

But don't go overboard. Obsessively weighing yourself every day is not useful, for example. Our body weights fluctuate throughout the day and over several days, and dieters can become discouraged if they don't see weight loss improvement right away.

"If losing body weight is a goal, consider monitoring changes on a weekly basis and consider alternatives to stepping on a scale, such as measuring your waist," he says.



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