

Women's Health



Eating Right

While many of the rules for healthy eating are true for everyone, women have different nutritional needs, particularly during pregnancy or after menopause.

It's important to be aware of those differences so women can remain healthy throughout their lives.

The first thing to keep in mind, according to the Office on Women's Health, is calorie intake. For a long time, the recommended daily allowance was thought to be 2,000 calories for adults.

Nutritionists have dialed that back for women, because they generally have less muscle mass, more body fat, are physically smaller than men, and need fewer calories in a day. Women also tend to burn fewer calories at rest and during exercise than men do. Although the average woman needs between 1,600 and 2,400 calories daily, how many calories an individual woman needs depends on her age, height, weight and level of physical activity.

A woman working in manual labor or even working as a teacher, where she's up and down all day, needs more calories than a woman who works at a desk. Talk with a doctor or nutritionist about your needs.



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The second factor is what nutrients women need. Calcium, iron and folic acid are particularly important for women. Outside of pregnancy, there is not consensus on whether multivitamins have significant benefits, but during pregnancy, many doctors recommend prenatal vitamins or a folic acid supplement.

Women's nutritional needs

also change throughout their lives, especially during pregnancy and breastfeeding and after menopause. Teenagers need more calcium, iron and vitamin D, and teens and young adults often need more calories than more mature women, as their bodies are still growing and their metabolism is high. Women who are breastfeeding, in addition to

healthy foods, should drink more water than normal. Postmenopausal women, who are at greater risk of chronic diseases and osteoporosis, may need more calcium and vitamin D and often need to eat fewer calories overall.

Finally, think about what to eat. Fiber is an important part of every diet but is especially critical for women, most of

whom do not eat enough. Add whole grains, beans, berries, leafy greens and squash to increase your intake. Foods with omega-3 fatty acids like fish also are beneficial; they can reduce the risk of heart disease and premature birth and contribute to healthy growth and development in unborn babies and breastfed infants.

Exercising

Most people know how important exercise is for a healthy lifestyle, but it's not always the easiest habit to get into.

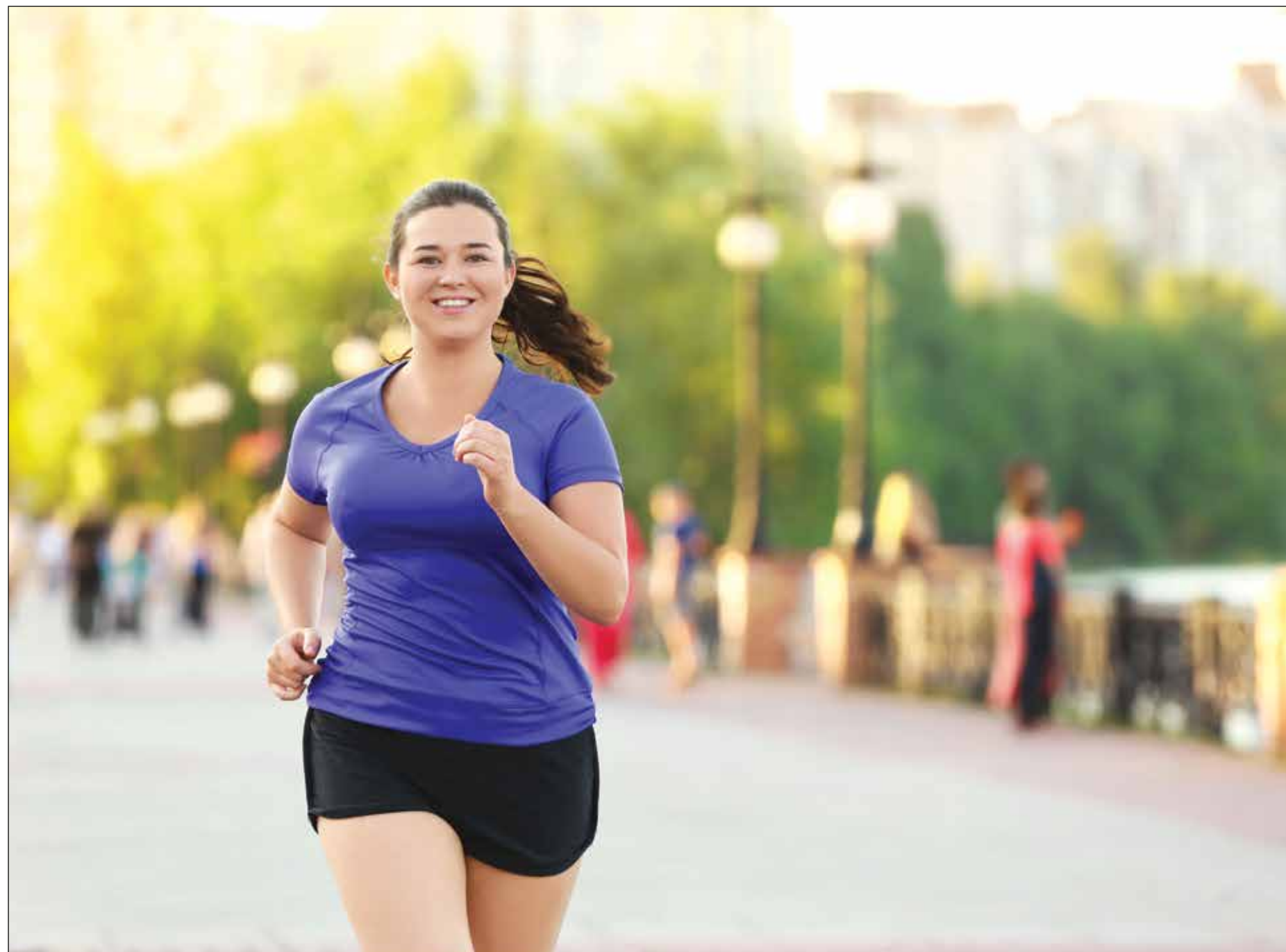
According to the Office on Women's Health, this is particularly true for women who are overweight, older or have a disability, which can make finding the right exercises harder and can put women at greater risk. However, there are plenty of ways women of all sizes and abilities can work out safely and enjoy themselves.

LARGER WOMEN

Extra weight puts more stress on muscles and joints, so women who are overweight may have a harder time exercising. If you're not exercising at all, start slowly — move more around the house, park a little further from the store and stretch or lift small weights while you watch TV. You can use canned foods, water jugs and other household items as weights.

Walking is a great place to start. Start slow and walk for about 10 minutes; as you do this consistently, you'll be able to increase your speed and walk for longer. Make sure you have good shoes and are walking somewhere safe.

If you have a gym membership, take advantage of the swimming pool or the stationary bikes, both of which are



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easier on joints. You can also get a session or two with a trainer to set up a routine.

OLDER WOMEN

Exercise helps women prevent muscle and bone loss, prevent conditions like diabetes and reduce the effects of arthritis or depression. Much of the same exercises men-

tioned previously will help; start slowly, increase intensity over time and find a routine that fits into your day.

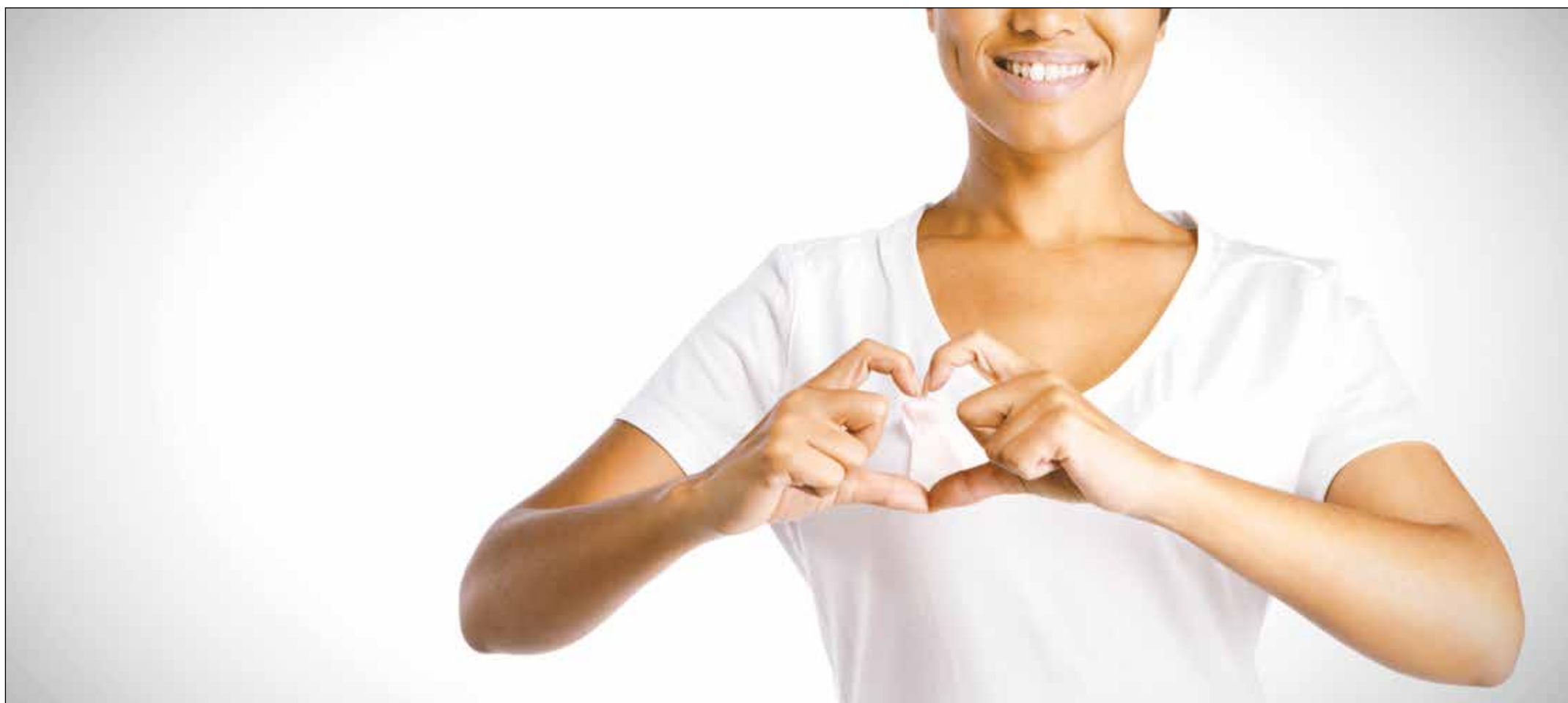
Exercises you can do around the house include walking backward and standing from a sitting position. Balance exercises like yoga, pilates and tai chi are especially important for older women, which helps

reduce your risk of falls.

WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

The OWH recommends women with disabilities get the same amount of exercise as all adults. Start with talking to your doctor; she can help you develop an exercise routine that won't exacerbate your

condition. A physical therapist or personal trainer also can help you figure out a routine. Look for opportunities like water aerobics classes, yoga and walking groups or workouts you can do at home and modify for your condition. Consider joining a gym, which will give you access to many different machines and classes.



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Be in the Know: Heart Disease

Heart disease is the most common cause of death of women in the United States, though it is more commonly associated with men.

About half of women don't even realize it's such a threat, which increases the risk, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. To make it even more complicated, almost two-thirds of women who die of

coronary heart disease reported no symptoms previous to their heart attack.

There are, however, ways to know if you're at higher risk and, whether you're at high risk, to live a healthier lifestyle and reduce the likelihood of suffering from heart disease.

SYMPTOMS

While there are common symptoms and signs to watch for, heart disease presents differently in different people. Symptoms to keep an eye out for include pain in the neck, jaw, throat, abdomen or back, as well as angina, which is a dull pain or discomfort in the

chest. Sharp, burning chest pain is a common symptom among women.

Other symptoms to watch for:

- Shortness of breath, fatigue and swelling, which could indicate heart failure.
- Pain in the chest and upper back, nausea, heartburn, indigestion and nausea, which could indicate a heart attack.
- Heart palpitations or arrhythmia
- Weakness, paralysis, numbness and difficulty functioning are signs of a stroke.

RISK FACTORS

High blood pressure, high

cholesterol and smoking are the greatest indicator of heart disease among women and men. Diabetes, being overweight, not getting enough exercise or eating a balanced diet and drinking too much alcohol also can increase your risk of heart disease.

PREVENTION

About half of Americans have at least one of the three biggest risk factors. The first step is to find out your risk; then work with your doctor to mitigate those risks.

• Check your blood pressure, cholesterol and triglycerides. If any of them are high, you may

be able to make changes to your lifestyle to lower those numbers, but if not, there are many medications available to help lower those numbers.

- Talk with your doctor about whether you need to be tested for diabetes.
- Quit smoking. This includes vaping.
- Reduce your alcohol intake.
- Add more fruits, vegetables and fiber to your diet. Limit processed and high-sodium foods.
- Exercise. Just a 30-minute walk can have significant health benefits.
- Find healthy ways to deal with stress.

Postpartum Depression

Postpartum depression can affect women after they give birth.

Researchers have yet to pinpoint a specific cause, but they believe the condition is related to the hormone changes women experience during and after pregnancy, which can lead to chemical changes in the brain that trigger mood swings.

KNOW THE SYMPTOMS

The reality of new motherhood, including sleep deprivation, also contributes to the postpartum depression. Symptoms include feeling moody, irritable, restless, overly anxious, sad or overwhelmed; crying more than usual or for no reason; oversleeping or being unable to sleep; having difficulty concentrating, making decisions or remembering details; feeling anger or rage; losing interest in favorite activities; social withdrawal; and thoughts of harming herself or her baby.

GET HELP

Women who suspect they have postpartum depression should talk to their doctor about their symptoms. This occurs in about 15 percent of births and can be before or anytime after childbirth. Typically, it begins within a month of childbirth, but it can set in months after, so don't be afraid to talk to your doctor if symptoms present later.

WHO'S AT RISK

While we don't know all causes and contributing factors for postpartum depression, there are risk factors. These include experiencing symptoms of depression during a previous childbirth; previous experience with depression or bipolar disorder or a family member with depression; medical complica-

tions during childbirth; a lack of strong emotional support from her partner, family or friends; alcohol or drug abuse; or experiencing a stressful life event around the time of giving birth, such as losing her job, the death of a loved one, domestic violence or illness.

PPD VS. 'BABY BLUES'

Feelings of worry, unhappi-

ness and fatigue after childbirth are not unusual. These "baby blues," which National Institute of Mental Health estimates affects about 80 percent of mothers, often are the result of having a newborn who needs constant care, worrying about the baby, mothers not getting enough sleep and the changes they're experiencing. Often these

symptoms go away on their own.

With postpartum depression, symptoms are extreme and may interfere with a woman's ability to care for herself or go about her day-to-day activities. Post-partum depression almost always requires treatment, which could be therapy, medication or a mix of the two.



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Prenatal Health

Women who are pregnant or thinking of becoming pregnant should take extra steps to help increase their chances of having a healthy pregnancy and baby.

Even if you're not ready to have a baby or are done with pregnancies, many of these tips from the Centers for Disease and Control can contribute to greater overall health.

MAKE CHANGES TO YOUR LIFESTYLE

If you want pregnancy in your future, quit smoking and quit or cut back in alcohol intake. Using tobacco and alcohol during pregnancy can cause birth defects or lead to premature birth. Stopping prior to pregnancy can reduce stress on a woman's body during pregnancy as well.

Also look at other habits that you can change. Women who are overweight or obese are at a greater likelihood of experiencing complications during pregnancy, but losing weight during pregnancy can be unhealthy. Do what you can to get to a healthy weight before you get pregnant. This is true for underweight women as well.

Of course, healthy weight loss isn't quick or easy, and



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weight isn't the only indicator of good health. Talk to your obstetrician about concerns you have about your weight and how you can change eating and exercise habits, which are much more contributory to a healthy life than weight by itself.

TAKE FOLIC ACID

Each day, take 400 micro-

grams of folic acid for at least a month before pregnancy as well as throughout your pregnancy, though starting earlier is a good idea for women who want to get pregnant within the next year. Having sufficient folic acid can help prevent serious birth defects like anencephaly and spina bifida. Even women with no plans for pregnancy in the near future can

benefit from regular folic acids; it helps your body make new cells, the noticeable effects of which are helping skin, hair and nails grow.

GET PRE-EXISTING CONDITIONS UNDER CONTROL

If you're taking medications, talk to your doctor about their potential effects on a fetus. You

may need to consider switching medications, but never do that without a doctor's guidance and ensure you're not putting yourself in danger by getting off needed medications. Look into vitamins and supplements and get up to date on vaccinations, including the flu vaccine if it's flu season. This will protect you and your baby.



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Addressing Eating Disorders

Although eating disorders are not exclusive to women, girls and women are more likely to suffer from these conditions.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, eating disorders are dangerous and can be fatal; these illnesses are associated with severe disturbances in a person's eating habits and their thoughts and feelings about

food. Signs that a person could suffer from an eating disorder include a preoccupation with food, weight and shape.

ANOREXIA

A person with anorexia nervosa does not get enough calories. They severely restrict how much they eat and see themselves as overweight, even when they are extremely underweight. People with anorexia have an intense fear of gaining weight, a single-minded pursuit of thinness and self-esteem that is influenced by how they think they look. Anorexia has the

highest mortality rate of any mental disorder.

BULIMIA

Bulimia nervosa is characterized by binge-eating followed by purging — vomiting, laxatives or diuretics, periods of fasting, hours of exercise or a combination of these behaviors. Unlike anorexia, a person with bulimia could be underweight or overweight or be a normal weight. Symptoms to look for include a chronically sore throat, worn tooth enamel or sensitive and or decaying teeth, severe dehydration or an electrolyte imbalance or intestinal distress.

BINGE EATING

A person who binge eats feels a lack of control over her eating, eating far too much during a certain period of time. Unlike bulimia, the bingeing is not followed by purging. This often leads to a person being overweight or obese. It is the most common eating disorder in the country. In addition to eating too much, symptoms of binge-eating disorder include eating when you're not hungry or when you're uncomfortably full, eating quickly, eating in secret to avoid embarrassment, feeling ashamed or guilty about your eating habits

and frequently dieting with little success.

DISORDERED EATING

Disordered eating describes a range of unhealthy eating behaviors that may not be an eating disorder but could indicate an unhealthy relationship with food that could lead to a more serious diagnosis. According to the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, symptoms include frequent dieting, skipping meals, rigid rituals or routines surrounding eating and exercise, feelings of guilt and shame related to eating and a feeling of loss of control around food.

Dealing with Stress

According to the Office on Women's Health, women report higher levels of stress than men.

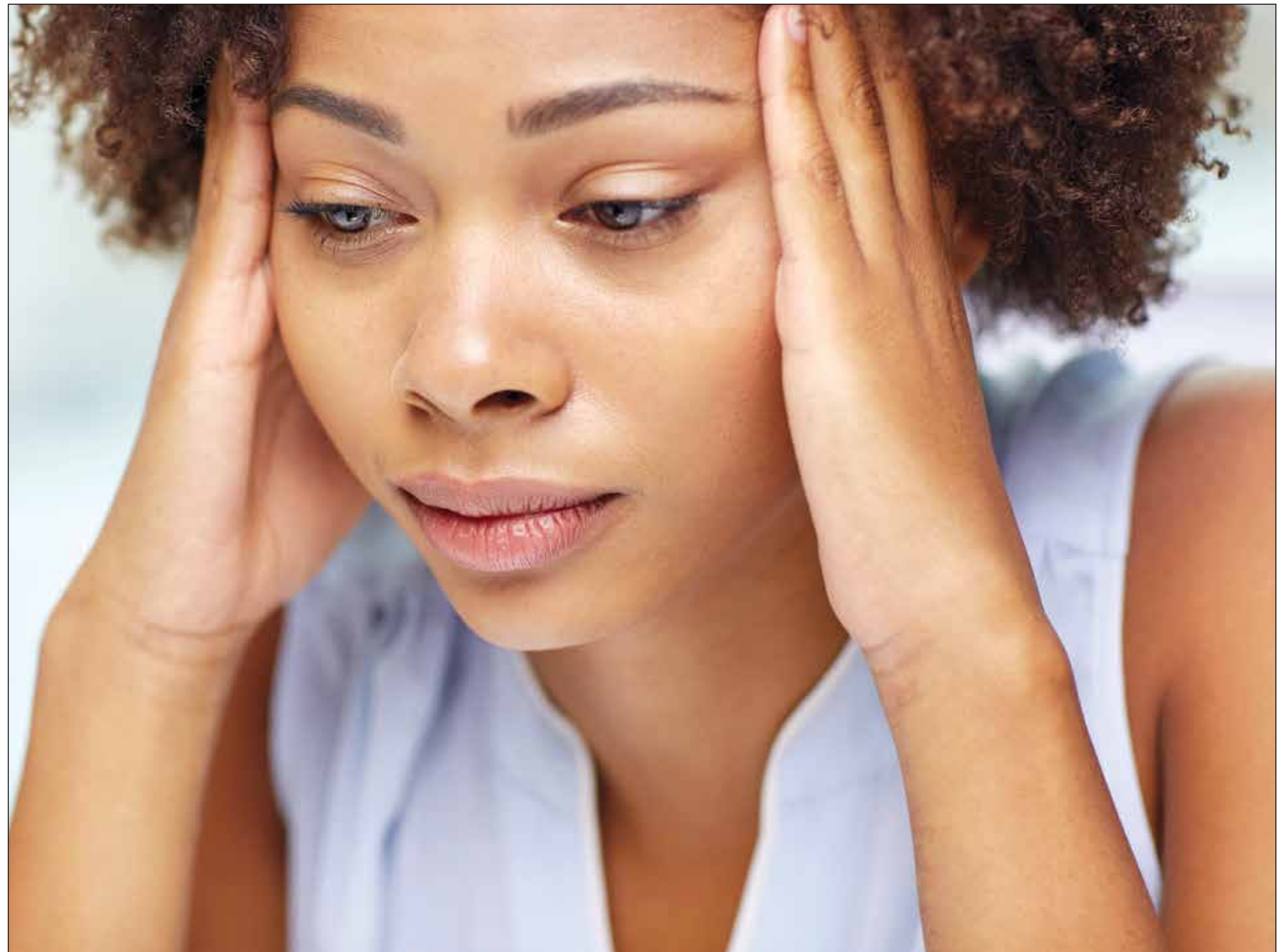
This could be because women are more likely to work the second shift — doing the full-time job of household and family management in addition to working a full-time job. Chronic stress can have consequences like irritability, nervousness, depression, headaches and stomachaches; it can impact a woman's ability to get pregnant, have negative effects on pregnancy and affect how she adjusts after childbirth. Stress also can affect menstruation and sexual desire and could make symptoms of PMS worse.

OWH suggested several ways to get a handle on your stressors and how you respond to them to help you live a healthier, less stressful life.

1. Know your stressors.

Write down which situations cause the most stress and how you respond. Taking notes can help you find patterns, which can allow you to prepare for those moments and take steps to alleviate or mitigate the stress you feel.

2. Set and enforce boundaries. If you feel overwhelmed with projects, deadlines or other demands on your time, identify your priorities and cut back on nonessential



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tasks. Learn to say no — at work, with your friends and family, with volunteer and church obligations.

3. Use your support system. Talk to family and friends and ask for their advice and support. Explain what you need from them and enlist their help in reducing stress. Consider talking to

a counselor; even a couple of sessions can help give you coping tools.

4. Make sleep a priority. This includes both quantity and quality of sleep. Changing hormones women experience because of menstruation and pregnancy can contribute to a higher rate of insomnia and other sleep

problems; insufficient sleep at night can lead to lower productivity during the day and weakened immunity and can trigger or exacerbate a mental health condition. OWH recommends adults get seven to nine hours of sleep a night. Aim to go to bed and get up at the same times each day and reduce distractions in

your bedroom.

5. Set one goal for better health. You can't fix everything, but you can find one habit that boosts your health that you have the energy to tackle. That can be taking a walk during your lunch break, taking the stairs or spending less time looking at your phone.