

## The Best Time to Do Everything

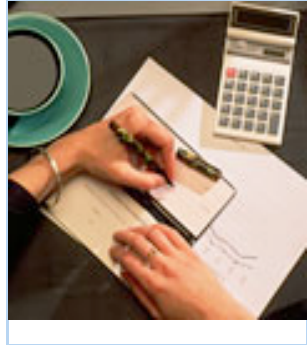
**When should you: Pay your bills? Pop a vitamin? Do your cardio exercises? Start a diet?—and more!**

by Virginia Sole-Smith, Prevention magazine

Whoever said "timing is everything" must have shopped at my grocery store. For months I thought that getting stuck in long checkout lines was my lot in life. Then my schedule changed, thanks to a new job, and I started shopping on Wednesday nights instead of Sunday afternoons, when everyone in town stocks up for the week ahead. Presto—uncrowded aisles, unhurried staff who could help hunt down my favorite brand of peanut butter, and best of all, no one between me and the cash register.

What's true at the grocery store is true in the rest of your life—good timing can mean the difference between getting sick and staying healthy. Consider that a flu shot offers the most protection if you get it in late October or early November, before flu season gets under way, or that a cold sore will heal 18 to 21% faster if you take a dose of antiviral medication as soon as you feel the first tingle. Before you make another health move, check the tips that follow and then consult your watch or calendar. You can't afford not to.

### To Sharpen Your Brain...



#### **Pay bills or do a crossword between 10 and 11 am or 8 and 9 pm.**

"According to our circadian rhythms, that's when we're maximally alert," says Michael Thorpy, M.D., director of the Sleep-Wake Disorders Center at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx. Try not to waste a minute—the brain boost lasts only for about an hour.

#### **Take a nap at 2 p.m.**

The dip in body temperature that helps ease you into sleep at night also occurs midday, which is why afternoons can be so unproductive. But if you can catch a catnap around 2 p.m. (the slump usually hits between 1 and 3 o'clock), it could boost your alertness for several hours. Ten minutes will do the trick—nod off for more than 20 and you may wake feeling groggy. If a nap is out of the question, eat plenty of protein at lunch, which will give you longer-lasting energy, says Christine Gerbstadt, M.D., R.D., a spokesperson for the National Dietetic Association. Mid-afternoon is also a good time for "strategic caffeine use," says Brian Foresman, D.O., director of the Sleep Medicine and Circadian Biology Program at Indiana University School of Medicine. "If you don't exceed a cup or two per day, caffeine works phenomenally well at increasing your alertness." This should be your last cup of coffee for the day, though—any caffeine consumed within seven hours of bedtime can disrupt your sleep.

#### **Go on vacation in late February or early March.**

And take it outdoors. By March, as many as 50% of people not living in the Sun Belt will already have had a few months of winter-induced mood dips, says Matthew Edlund, M.D., director of the Center for Circadian Medicine in Sarasota, FL, and author of *The Body Clock Advantage*. March is also the month when the more extreme psychological slump known as seasonal affective disorder, or SAD, can become overwhelming for the estimated 10 million sufferers in this country. By taking a break somewhere sunny, you can "reverse your emotional course," reports Edlund. Warmth isn't required to garner a mood boost: Hitting the slopes can be as uplifting as heading south. The key is to use the great outdoors—plan an active vacation that maximizes your exposure to daylight.

## To Boost Your Energy

### Follow a sleep schedule.

Several studies suggest that obeying your alarm clock can help relieve daytime fatigue. And sleep researchers are finding that people who get at least seven hours of sleep a night are much less likely to be obese—and weight gain can act as an energy drain. Going to bed and getting up at the same time every day also keeps your biological clock on schedule. This clock, a cluster of 20,000 neurons in your brain, regulates your body's temperature, hormones, blood pressure and other important functions. Throw it off-kilter and you could be looking at serious health problems: Studies on night-shift workers suggest that people with irregular sleep habits have an increased risk of digestive troubles, emotional and mental problems, heart disease and cancer, says Foresman.

### Head to bed at least 3 hours after eating dinner.

It ensures more efficient digestion and—because eating too much food before sleeping can cause heartburn—deeper sleep, says Foresman. If you want a cocktail, have it with dinner to give your body plenty of time to metabolize the alcohol. Even if a drink makes you feel sleepy at first, just one nightcap can cause you to wake up more frequently during the night, finds a study from Wake Forest University. Imbibing too late in the evening upsets normal brain patterns, delaying REM (dream) sleep. Later, when REM rebounds, you'll be more likely to have startling, vivid, or violent dreams, which can also disturb sleep, says Joyce A. Walsleben, Ph.D., an associate professor at New York University's Sleep Disorders Center and coauthor of *A Woman's Guide to Sleep*.

### Learn more about the best timing for these activities at [Prevention.com](http://Prevention.com):

- [Power Up Your Pills](#)
- [Get More From Your Workouts and Protect Your Pearly Whites](#)
- [Maximize Your Medical Care](#)

*Virginia Sole-Smith is a freelance writer in New York.*

Article available online at <http://health.msn.com/womenshealth/ArticlePage.aspx?cp-documentid=100124484>