

Our improved relationship with food during COVID-19 must stay

BOSTON, Massachusetts: It's 5pm on who can tell which day, and instead of rushing from work to kids' activities, I'm unpacking a box of produce while my seven-year-old peels carrots beside me.

Rather than grab what we can from the fridge on the way to soccer practice, my family is all sitting down together to a homemade vegetarian meal. On the menu tonight: Cauliflower lentil tacos. Before you get the wrong impression that everything's going swimmingly at my house, it's not. But as a registered dietitian and a mom, I'm noticing a few noteworthy patterns amid the pandemic, both in my own family and in what my clients report every day. Some of these food-related behavior changes have the potential to become new habits with long-term benefits, which I hope will endure beyond the pandemic.

EATING FAMILY MEALS TOGETHER: For the first time, some kids now have two parents home for weeknight dinners. In stark contrast, kids of frontline workers may eat more meals away from their parents. Each of these scenarios highlight the importance of eating together when you can. Research has found that eating as a family helps kids have better self-esteem, more success in school and lower risk of depression and substance use disorders. person cooking scrambled tofu on pan, vegan Finding time for family meals isn't always possible or easy, but hopefully people will continue to prioritize eating together whenever they're able. Remember, it isn't only dinner that counts. Even eating a quick snack together or family breakfast is valuable.

KIDS LEARNING HOW TO COOK: Some fami-



lies are making time to get kids involved in the kitchen. That's good news, because research shows it leads to healthier eating as an adult.

EATING MORE PLANT-BASED NUTRIENTS: Nutritionists have spent decades encouraging people to eat plant-based meals. Now suddenly everyone's stocking up on all kinds of dried beans and lentils. They're trying out all kinds of homemade veggie burgers and finding out that, with the right recipes, these foods can be delicious. Alternatives to animal protein benefit the health of individuals and our planet. This doesn't mean you need to become vegetarian, but you can start thinking

about meat differently. Make it less of a main dish and more like a condiment. For example, instead of grilling a whole pack of chicken breasts for dinner try making vegetable kebabs using smaller or fewer pieces of chicken on the skewers. Or make a colorful dinner salad with grilled salmon crumbled on top.

BUYING FOOD LOCALLY AND LENDING A HELPING HAND TO THE CRISIS: In the early weeks of COVID-19, some grocery shelves went bare while farmers plowed ripe crops into fields and dumped fresh milk down drains. Problems in the food supply chain that have been magnified by the pandemic have

prompted people to seek local sources of food. Sales of regionally milled flour, sustainably caught fish and community-supported agriculture programmes have skyrocketed in the US. I hope this trend continues long after the pandemic ends and deepens our appreciation for who and what it takes to bring food to our table.

Another crisis is that 42 million Americans are facing food insecurity, a number that has grown daily amid the coronavirus pandemic. With increasing awareness of the hunger problem, people are stepping forward to help. Like my friend who's decided to donate the produce from her garden to help other families in need. One critical thing we can do is advocate for policies that expand access to quality food and health care.

CHANGING MINDSETS ABOUT WELLNESS TO INCLUDE SELF-COMPASSION: Eating is one of the most basic ways we take care of ourselves, and disruptions in food and activity routines have people rethinking how they define wellness. Many of my clients are starting to gently investigate their relationships with food and with their bodies. With proper support, they're creating "new normal" plans for eating that include self-compassion as a daily practice. One example is short daily meditations, which research suggests improves many aspects of well-being, including self-worth and body appreciation. One of the most important things I hope people maintain after the pandemic is more friendliness toward themselves as eaters. People have come home to roost around food in these unprecedented times, discovering new habits and insights about what it means to truly nourish themselves. —CNA

Researchers ask if survivor plasma could prevent coronavirus

Survivors of COVID-19 are donating their blood plasma in droves in hopes it helps other patients recover from the coronavirus. And while the jury's still out, now scientists are testing if the donations might also prevent infection in the first place.

Thousands of coronavirus patients in hospitals around the world have been treated with so-called convalescent plasma — including more than 20,000 in the U.S. — with little solid evidence so far that it makes a difference. One recent study from China was unclear while another from New York offered a hint of benefit.

"We have glimmers of hope," said Dr. Shmuel Shoham of Johns Hopkins University.

With more rigorous testing of plasma treatment underway, Shoham is launching a nationwide study asking the next logical question: Could giving survivors plasma right after a high-risk exposure to the virus stave off illness? To tell, researchers at Hopkins and 15 other sites will recruit health workers, spouses of the sick and residents of nursing homes where someone just fell ill and "they're trying to nip it in the bud," Shoham said.

It's a strict study: The 150 volunteers will be randomly assigned to get either plasma from COVID-19 survivors that contains coronavirus-fighting antibodies or regular plasma, like is used daily in hospitals, that was frozen prior to the pandemic. Scientists will track if there's a difference in who gets sick.

If it works, survivor plasma could have important ramifications until a vaccine arrives — raising the prospect of possibly protecting high-risk people with temporary immune-boosting infusions every so often. "They're a paramedic, they're a police officer, they're a poultry industry worker, they're a submarine naval officer," Shoham ticked off. "Can we blanket protect them?"

The new coronavirus has infected more than 7 million people worldwide and killed more than 400,000,

according to official tallies believed to be an underestimate. With no good treatments yet, researchers are frantically studying everything from drugs that tackle other viruses to survivor plasma — a century-old remedy used to fight infection before modern medicines came along. The historical evidence is sketchy, but convalescent plasma's most famous use was during the 1918 flu pandemic, and reports suggest that recipients were less likely to die. Doctors still dust off the approach to tackle surprise outbreaks, like SARS, a cousin of COVID-19, in 2002 and

"hyperimmune globulin" for a study expected to start next month.

And as more people survive COVID-19, there are increasing calls for them to donate plasma so there's enough of a stockpile if it pans out. On Friday, U.S. health officials notified doctors that it doesn't violate health privacy rules to track down prior COVID-19 patients and tell them about donation options. Convalescent plasma seems safe to use, Dr. Michael Joyner of the Mayo Clinic reported last month. His team tracked the first 5,000 plasma recipients in a Food and Drug Administration-spon-

sored program that helps hospitals use the experimental treatment, and found few serious side effects. Does it help recovery? A clue comes from the first 39 patients treated at New York's Mount Sinai Hospital. Researchers compared each plasma recipient to four other COVID-19 patients who didn't get plasma but were the same age, just as sick and being given the same amount of oxygen. People who received plasma before needing a ventilator were less likely to die than non-plasma recipients, said Dr. Sean Liu, the study's lead author.

"We really tried to target patients who were early in their course, preferably within the first one to two weeks of their disease," Liu said. "Being a doctor during this time, you just feel helpless," Liu added, stressing that more rigorous study was needed but he was glad to have tried this first-step research. "Watching people die is, it's heartbreaking. It's scary and it's heartbreaking." But results of the first strictly controlled study were disappointing. Hospitals in the hard-hit Chinese city of Wuhan were comparing severely ill patients randomly assigned to receive plasma or regular care, but ran out of new patients when the virus waned.

With only half of the 200 planned patients enrolled, more plasma recipients survived but researchers couldn't tell if it was a real difference or coincidence, according to a report in the Journal of the American Medical Association last week. The real proof will come from ongoing, strict studies that compare patients assigned to get either survivor plasma or a dummy treatment. Further complicating the search for answers, COVID-19 survivors harbor widely varying levels of antibodies. And while researchers want to use what Hopkins' Shoham calls "the high-octane stuff," no one knows the best dose to test.

"About 20% of recovered patients and donors have very strong immunity," estimated Dr. Michele Donato of Hackensack University Medical Center, who is studying how long they retain that level of protection. Those are the people researchers want to become repeat donors. "It's, I think, our job as humans to step forward and help in society," said Aubrie Cresswell, 24, of Bear, Delaware, who has donated three times and counting. One donation was shipped to a hospitalized friend of a friend, and "it brought me to tears. I was like, overwhelmed with it just because the family was really thankful." The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Department of Science Education. The AP



the 2014 Ebola epidemic in West Africa, but even those recent uses lacked rigorous research. When the body encounters a new germ, it makes proteins called antibodies that are specially targeted to fight the infection. The antibodies float in plasma — the yellowish, liquid part of blood.

Because it takes a few weeks for antibodies to form, the hope is that transfusing someone else's antibodies could help patients fight the virus before their own immune system kicks in. One donation is typically divided into two or three treatments. Donations also can be combined into a high-dose product; manufacturer Grifols is producing doses of that

sored program that helps hospitals use the experimental treatment, and found few serious side effects. Does it help recovery? A clue comes from the first 39 patients treated at New York's Mount Sinai Hospital. Researchers compared each plasma recipient to four other COVID-19 patients who didn't get plasma but were the same age, just as sick and being given the same amount of oxygen. People who received plasma before needing a ventilator were less likely to die than non-plasma recipients, said Dr. Sean Liu, the study's lead author.

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Being a cat lady can be good for your health, say studies

Sorry, dog lovers! Not only do most of us know plenty of decidedly normal cat lovers, but years of scientific research suggest that cohabitating with cats has zero effect on developing psychosis later in life, reported inStyle.

And if that's not enough to get feline fans purring, a 2009 study published in the Journal of Vascular and Interventional Neurology certainly will. In it, scientists found that cat ownership can be beneficial to our health in a number of ways. Most significantly, researchers observed a decreased risk for death due to heart attack and all cardiovascular diseases (including stroke) among persons with cats. "Acquisition of cats as domestic pets may represent a novel strategy for reducing the risk of cardiovascular diseases in high-risk individuals," the study's authors mused.

A kitty cuddle session can also ease symptoms of anxiety. As Melanie Greenberg, Ph. D., licensed clinical psychologist and author of The Stress-Proof Brain explained to NBC News, the act of petting your cat releases oxytocin, the bonding hormone or "cuddle chemical," which can make you feel less stressed. Mark those down as two more in the win column for cats, y'all! Have something to add to the story? Share it in the comments below



Immobility during COVID-19 and its effects on our sleep, physical activity and well-being



SINGAPORE: Adequate sleep, exercise and a good diet are the trio of lifestyle factors critical for optimal health and well-being. Mobility restrictions arising from COVID-19 upset routines related to all three.

How are different people affected, what are the consequences of this imbalance and what can we do to restore balance?

Anna had been in her job for three years as a consultant when COVID-19 struck. Kept busy by a steady stream of deadlines, she was taken back by the announcement of DORSCON Orange, but her steady nature kept her rooted. When the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the pandemic, business continuity plans began to kick in at her office, but she still went to work. She started sleeping later, close to lam and waking up later as well.

This trend jumped a gear when the

circuit breaker was announced. Face-to-face meetings were replaced by Zoom calls that started after 9am and ploughed on into the evening. While she saved about an hour on the morning commute to work and another going home, the time saved seemed to disappear into online meetings. Unlike her married colleagues with young children, who had to handle home schooling, Anna had fewer reasons not to be available for work calls. Her colleagues expected her to carry a relatively higher workload and she obliged.

CHANGE IN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY: Although Anna slept about 15 minutes more each night, and the difference in weekday and weekend sleep duration lessened, her physical activity took a big hit. Her gym routine evaporated after the lockdown. Together with not having to walk to and from the MRT station

her physical activity was reduced by 50 per cent compared to before the lockdown.

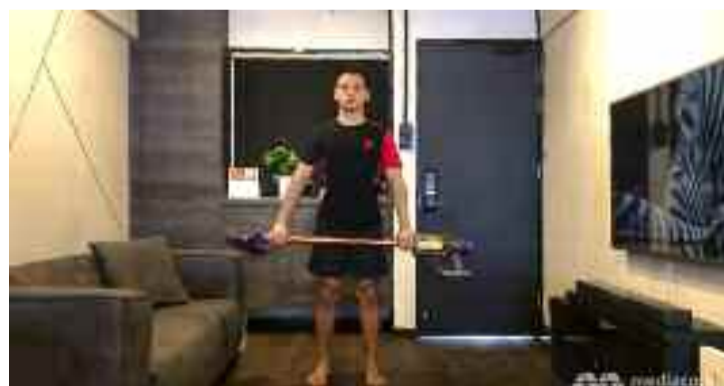
Bereft of her night socialising, her Saturday morning retail therapy and having to field additional "crisis management calls", Anna's weekdays and weekends melded into one long, undifferentiated string of days.

A person like Anna made up about 50 per cent of about 1,000 participants in an ongoing population health study operated by the Singapore Health Promotion Board.

Aged between 21 to 40 years, these predominantly office workers have been wearing Fitbit sleep or activity trackers consistently for two years, yielding objective data about their rest-activity patterns.

Is the change in Anna's life healthy?

Most people are sleeping later but also getting up later. Young singles like Anna innately tend to sleep later than older adults. This is accentuated by an East Asian work culture that makes for longer hours at work and shorter nocturnal sleep compared to Nordic countries or in Australia. Woman sleeping and holding glasses A third cause of later sleeping and rising was unmasked during the lockdown. According to its longitude, Singapore belongs in the "+7 GMT" time zone. This was the case from 1905 to 1932. In 1941, we shifted to the "+7:30" time zone and to stay with Malaysia's time zone we shifted to "+8 GMT" in 1982. This



results in later sunrise and sunset. The consequence of persistent exposure to later evening light is a delay in sleep times. Evening light tends to delay the circadian clock. Under normal conditions, with work and school start times relatively earlier in body clock terms, this results in shortened nocturnal sleep.

With the circuit breaker, the hour recovered from not having to commute to work has resulted in persons being able to follow their body clock and to wake up significantly later. This modest sleep extension on weekdays may help offset the ill effects of sleeping later - increased risk of obesity, diabetes mellitus and cardiac events. Alongside this, reduction in the accumulated sleep debt over the workweek may be evidenced in the smaller difference in weekday-weekend sleep duration under lockdown conditions.

Interestingly, office workers also

showed a 2 beat per minute reduction in resting heart rate. Commonly associated with better cardiovascular fitness, this favourable shift may indicate reduced exposure to stress, improved sleep or both. While sleep in persons like Anna has gained from mobility restrictions, the decline in physical activity is worrisome.

It may not appear so, given the increased numbers of people walking and jogging. However, for many working adults and school children, physical activity associated with commuting and moving around the office contributes a substantial number of total steps. These have not been fully replaced by recreational walking. Does a 30-minute High Intensity Interval Training (HIIT) make up for a 10-hour Zoom marathon? For the most part, no.

Workplace sedentariness is a major health risk factor and in-

creases all-cause mortality, cardiometabolic disorders in addition to impairing musculoskeletal and bone health. Sitting through online meetings for extended periods is unhealthy and a brief burst of exercise does not make up for it.

ALIGNING MULTIPLE BODY CLOCKS: The new normal is an opportunity to recalibrate how we work. Time saved from commuting should be channelled to improving productivity, freeing time for creative thought, recreation as well as building community and family ties. Minimally, a person working from home should stand up and walk around a few minutes every half an hour, get exposure to outdoor light, preferably in the morning for at least 30 minutes and not have to field evening or late-night calls except on occasion.

Meetings should be kept efficient or terminated. Time saved should not be frittered on cyber-loafing and constant news-checking. A different routine should be in place for weekends, allowing for downtime, time with family and non-work activity. In contrast to Anna's fairly regular routine, Thomas, an undergraduate, found the move from traditional classroom learning to e-learning liberating. Ever pushing boundaries, he's discovered a way to supplement his educational experience by joining online classes and conferences held in different time zones, opportunities unique to this period