When Drugs Don’t Mix. New research reveals that a number of drugs — including Prilosec, Nexium, Tagamet and Prozac — greatly reduce the effectiveness of Plavix, an anti-clotting medication. This finding suggests that drug interactions are much more common than we thought. To prevent potentially serious interactions, ask your pharmacist and your health care provider if all the medications on your list are compatible.

Are PROBIOTICS Good For You?

You may be surprised to learn that only 10 percent of the cells in your body are human; 90 percent are other microbes. Yes, the majority are billions of “friendly” bacteria and fungi living in your intestines and assisting in digestion, food absorption and immunity. Some things can throw off the balance of this microbe mix, leading to digestive trouble and making you feel sick. Antibiotic use is one example. However, a solution gaining popularity is to eat foods containing probiotics — live microorganisms that may help reset the natural balance of bacteria in your digestive tract. Common sources are yogurt, buttermilk, kefir and tempeh. But do probiotics work?

Early research indicates that probiotics help restore normal bowel function, assist in treating diarrhea (caused by infections or antibiotics) and reduce colon inflammation. Probiotics are also being studied for treating conditions such as inflammatory bowel disease, influenza, urinary tract infections, cancer and even obesity.

When buying a probiotic-enhanced food, look for “live cultures” on the label and respect the expiration date.

What about supplements? Talk to your health care provider; high-dose probiotics should only be taken under medical supervision.

TopHealth takeaway: More research is needed to determine the safety and effectiveness of probiotics, but they are generally considered safe (even though they aren’t regulated like medications). Some people, including pregnant women, should be careful. But if you’re having frequent digestive problems, talk to your health care provider to see if probiotics are right for you.

What a Burst of INTERVAL TRAINING Will Do

If your regular workout of brisk walking, jogging or biking has become a bit too routine, consider incorporating interval training for a change.

The basics: During your steady activity you include brief bursts of faster-paced or higher-intensity exercise, ranging from about 30 seconds to 5 minutes. Think of going from a comfortable jog into an all-out run for half a minute and then settling back into your regular pace. Or increase the incline on your treadmill for a few minutes to raise the intensity of your walk. If you ride a bike or use an exercise machine, every few minutes try moving faster for 30 seconds at higher intensity.

The more vigorously you exercise, the more fat and calories you burn. Other reported advantages of interval training include:

- Higher level of fitness and endurance
- Less muscle soreness, quicker muscle recovery
- Less boredom

Bottom line: Adding high-intensity “sprints” may allow you to get the same (or better) results in less time. As always, check with your health care provider before significantly increasing your exercise level, and don’t risk injury by overdoing it.

Oral Cancer Quick Check

The American Cancer Society recently reviewed its detailed guide to oral and oropharyngeal cancer (cancer of the mouth and throat). While tobacco use, in smoke or smokeless form, and alcohol use top the list of culprits, HPV infection (human papilloma viruses) is now on the radar as a budding concern, particularly among younger people. HPV is the group of viruses mainly associated with cervical cancer in women. The facts? The current estimate is that HPV may be a factor in about one-fourth of oral and oropharyngeal cancers. Developing oral cancer easily goes unnoticed until it spreads, so a dental checkup may be one of the best ways to catch it early.

Want to learn more about cancer and reducing your cancer risk? WELL CONNECTIONS covers these topics at www.personalbest.com/extras/cancerapril10.
CUTTING BACK ON DRINKING

Are you often late for work as a result of your alcohol consumption? Do you experience conflict in your relationships as a result of it? Do you have more than two drinks a day (for men) or more than one (for women)? **If so, you should cut back with these strategies:**

- **Set a goal.** Your health care provider can help you determine a safe limit.
- **Keep track.** Write down how much you’re drinking.
- **Get support.** You may find it helpful to talk with loved ones, a professional counselor or a group such as Alcoholics Anonymous.
- **Find alternatives.** Meditation, exercise and sober social events can help “fill the void.”

**Remember:** Heavy alcohol use can create serious health problems and wreck relationships. So while new habits may take time to establish, don’t give up.

Fast Guide to TOOTHACHES

A toothache is usually caused by a cavity but can also result from pain elsewhere (such as the jaw or ear). **Call your dentist or doctor when:**

- **Over-the-counter painkillers** don’t relieve your symptoms.
- **You feel severe pain** two or three days after a tooth is removed.
- **Pain** is accompanied by fever, swelling, chest pain, nausea or trouble swallowing.
- **A tooth** has been broken or knocked out.

Tooth and gum problems have also been linked to other diseases. **Research suggests:**

- **Gum disease** may raise your risk for — or be a sign of — heart disease.
- **Chronic dry mouth** — which can be caused by antihistamines, decongestants, painkillers and some antidepressants — can raise your risk of tooth and gum problems.
- **Diabetes** — especially if poorly controlled — can increase your risk of gum disease, which in turn can make blood sugar harder to manage.

**What to do?** Floss daily, brush your teeth at least twice a day and see your dentist as directed. Tooth and gum care is an important part of your overall health care.

**SLOW DOWN TO DROP POUNDS.** Looking for weight control strategies? Here’s another one — eat your meals more slowly and you may eat less. A recent study showed that eating quickly blocks the release of the satiety hormones that keep you from overeating. **Mom was right:** Wolfing down your food could make you fat, so dine at a leisurely rate and savor your meal.

MENINGITIS: Removing the Mystery

Meningitis is an inflammation of the membranes surrounding your brain and spinal cord. It can be mild or life-threatening, depending on the infection causing it. While it is relatively rare, people tend to fear meningitis because it can be deadly.

**What causes meningitis?** It’s caused by both viral and bacterial infections. Viral meningitis, the most common form, can be caused by measles, mumps and chicken pox, or by viruses spread by mosquitoes and other biting insects. It may improve without treatment. Bacterial infections can quickly become life-threatening, so prompt treatment with antibiotics is important. Bacteria can travel to the brain from an ear, sinus or respiratory infection.

**What are the symptoms?** In those older than age 2, symptoms may include sudden high fever, severe headache and stiff neck. In babies, there may be constant crying, excessive sleepiness or irritability, stiffness, poor appetite or a bulge on top of the head.

**Who’s most at risk?** Meningitis occurs most often in children under age 5, young people between ages 16 and 25, and those over age 55. Other risk factors include being in a community setting (college dorm, child care center), pregnancy, having weakened immunity or working with animals.

**How do I reduce my risk of getting meningitis?** Avoid anyone with an active infection. Wash your hands well, especially before eating or after petting an animal or being in a crowd. If you're pregnant, cook meat carefully and avoid unpasteurized milk products. Discuss immunization for you and your children with your health care provider.

“**If your dog is fat, you’re not getting enough exercise.”** ~ Anonymous