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Maintaining your vigor in midlife

As you pass your 40th birthday, it's common to feel a lack of energy when you once were full of vigor. But don't resign yourself to a life of tiredness just yet. Think of it as a treatable medical condition! Try taking a close look at your lifestyle patterns and prescribe changes for yourself that will bring your energy level back to its old intensity.

Treat yourself to sleep. The optimal amount of sleep people need is seven to eight hours. Sleeping less compromises your quality of life, your memory, your energy level, and your longevity. On the other hand, sleeping more than nine hours is associated with a higher risk of stroke, so more is not better.

Another important factor is the quality of your sleep. Waking up tired after sleeping a healthy amount suggests that your sleep quality is poor. Many adults suffer from sleep apnea, which manifests itself in snoring or waking up frequently, because their airway is blocked and they cannot breathe normally. A sleep evaluation, including a sleep study, will detect apnea or other sleep issues and point to the best treatment strategy.

Count your caffeine intake.

Even if you don't think you are particularly sensitive to caffeine, it could be a culprit in sapping your energy. Caffeine consumption, even earlier in the day, prevents deep restorative sleep.

A large coffee at one popular franchise has more than 200 milligrams of caffeine. Your body eliminates only half the caffeine in six hours. If you finish two large coffees at noon, you have a 400 milligram caffeine load—which means that at 6 pm, half the caffeine remains (200 mg), and at midnight 100 mg of caffeine remain in your system. You are still revved up and won't experience good quality sleep.

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Alcohol is another culprit. You may drink beer, wine, or liquor to relax you and help you fall asleep, but alcohol will prevent you from entering the deeper phase of restorative sleep—and you will feel tired in the morning.

Assess your mental state.

Depression saps your physical and emotional energy. If you've recently lost interest in the people and activities you

normally enjoy, are sleeping too much or too little, or are eating too much or too little, you may be depressed. Treatment options include counseling, medication, or both.

Prioritize exercise. Weight gain is an energy sapper, slowing you down and increasing your risk of sleeping poorly. Normal loss of muscle mass begins in mid-life, and you begin to burn fewer calories per hour. You can combat this loss by performing weight-bearing exercise. People who exercise regularly also tend to sleep better at night.

Consider your thyroid. If you feel you're doing everything right and still suffering from low energy, your thyroid gland may be malfunctioning. Sluggish thyroid function saps your energy, makes your hair fall out, weakens your nails, and causes weight gain. The thyroid is a butterfly-shaped gland in the front of the neck that sets your metabolism or energy-burning rate. Thyroid disease is 10 times more common in women than men, and is more common with increasing age. It is diagnosed with a blood test, and treated with medication by mouth to restore the metabolic rate, returning your energy levels to normal.

If you have low energy at age 40 or beyond, or you wake up tired, explore these possibilities with your doctor before you chalk it up to "middle age" decline. ♦