For taking care of yourself as a vet

Four steps to feeling your best

1. Be mindful of mental health
2. Keep your body mechanics working
3. Protect your future health
4. Take time to unwind
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Hello from BVA

Providing outstanding care for animals is one of the greatest achievements for vets. But how well do vets take care of themselves? Many of you will be familiar with some of the headline facts: mental health issues are a big concern for vets along with muscle, bone and joint conditions that can be caused by the physical nature of veterinary work. Then, there are long-term health conditions like cancer, heart disease and diabetes that everyone is at risk of.

BVA have been partnered with Bupa, one of the UK’s leading healthcare companies, for over 15 years. Through this partnership, Bupa offer BVA members discounted rates on BupaCare health insurance.

Together, we’re committed to your physical and mental wellbeing. This guide from Bupa explores things that you can do to help yourself – and colleagues who need extra support. I hope that you find it useful.

To find out more about BupaCare health insurance, please call Bupa directly on 0808 273 4185 (Bupa may record or monitor calls).

Quiz

Test your health knowledge and turn to the relevant section to see if you’re correct.

Contents

Step one
Be mindful of mental health

Quiz question:
How many UK adults have a diagnosed mental health problem at any given time?

Is it: 1 in 4 or 1 in 10 or 1 in 20

Step two
Keep your body mechanics working

Quiz question:
How many working days are lost each year to muscle, bone and joint problems?

Is it: 9 million or 2m or 12m

Step three
Protect your future health

Quiz question:
What percentage of cancer cases are believed to be preventable?

Is it: 63% or 38% or 15%

Step four
Take time to unwind

Quiz question:
Which age group is most dissatisfied with their work-life balance?

Is it: 25–34-year-olds or 35–44 or 45–54
Be aware of your stress levels

Being a vet is hugely rewarding but also challenging. Managing clients' expectations, dealing with difficult and emotional cases or working long hours are all things that can amount to stress. Feeling stressed often and over a long period of time can lead to both mental and physical issues. These are some of the things to look out for in your or your colleagues' behaviour:

- constantly worrying
- struggling to concentrate
- lacking confidence
- mood swings
- feeling irritable or having a short temper
- behaviour changes like drinking too much alcohol
- feeling tired a lot of the time

Don’t be afraid to speak to your friends, family or GP about any of these signs of stress. Recognising it early can help you learn how to cope and build resilience for the future. Changes to your lifestyle, such as improving your diet, exercising more or finding hobbies that help you to relax could all help.

Notice the signs of depression

Persistent feelings of sadness and difficulty functioning day to day can be a sign of depression. Studies suggest that vets are more likely than other professions to be affected. Beyond the profession, one in 20 adults in the UK have a depressive episode each year and it is the third most common reason for visiting a GP. So, it’s nothing to be ashamed of. Signs of depression include:

- constantly feeling low
- crying in situations you wouldn’t normally
- changes in behaviour such as avoiding seeing people

It’s important that you seek support if you’re experiencing these symptoms. As well as visiting your GP, you can also call Vetlife, an independent, confidential and free helpline for anyone in the veterinary community, on 0303 040 2551 or visit vetlife.org.uk

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- losing interest in life

Be mindful of mental health

Looking out for colleagues and peers and talking openly is really important. Part of this is learning how to spot the signs that you, or someone around you, might be struggling.
77% of vets surveyed had experienced concern for a colleague or peer’s mental health and wellbeing.¹

Try mindfulness

There are lots of techniques that can help you improve your mental wellbeing. You’ve probably heard about mindfulness as it’s gained popularity over recent years. But how does it work and is there any evidence behind it?

Isn’t mindfulness just a fad?

It would be easy to think that, given how popular it’s become. But actually, medical studies around the world have found that mindfulness can have benefits for mental wellbeing.³ This includes evidence suggesting that mindfulness may help you to:

- manage your emotions better, for example by focusing on solutions rather than problems
- express yourself in social situations
- build good personal relationships with others, for example by being more resilient about conflicts
- prevent new depressive episodes for those who have recurrent depression. As a result, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) now recommend a type of counselling called mindfulness-based cognitive therapy as a treatment for depression.

More information about mindfulness

There are lots of online resources to help you find out more about mindfulness. Here are a few suggestions:

- bemindful.co.uk run by the Mental Health Foundation
- Headspace app an app that aims to help you be more mindful
- bupa.co.uk/mindfulness articles from our experts on mindfulness

How to practise mindfulness

There isn’t a set method. Generally, it’s about embracing the here and now in a non-judgemental way. These steps should start you off.

- Sit down somewhere comfortable and quiet.
- Close your eyes and let your arms relax onto your lap.
- Gradually pay attention to the sensations in your body, such as the feeling of your feet on the floor, or the air passing through your nose as you breathe.
- As your thoughts about these physical sensations flow, simply be aware of what you are thinking about from moment to moment.

With practise, you can be mindful almost anywhere and at any time. At work, for example, it might help with client consultations. Focus solely on them, not letting your mind become distracted with the consultations ahead, and listen carefully to their individual concerns. Examine the patient from head to toe, mentally note your observations and revisit them afterwards.

Outside work, try a mindfulness walk. Just focus on your senses. Notice sights, smells, sounds and the feeling of your feet on the ground.

Need support?

Talking about your feelings is the first step in getting help and could make all the difference. If you’re feeling low, there are a number of mental health organisations that can support you wherever you live, either over the phone or online, including:

- **Vetlife**  
  0303 040 2551 or vetlife.org.uk
- **Samaritans**  
  116 123 or samaritans.org
- **Mind**  
  0300 123 3393 or mind.org.uk
- **Bupa**  
  bupa.co.uk/healthy-mind

*Quiz answer: One in every four UK adults has a diagnosed mental health problem at any given time.*

Keep your body mechanics working

Vets are well known to be at risk of muscle, bone and joint problems due to the physical demands of the job. Lifting animals, standing with awkward posture while treating animals and repeated movements can all cause issues. Read on for tips to help your body stay strong.

**Lifting animals safely**

You’ve probably mastered the art of lifting animals. But it’s important that you remain focused as even one lapse could injure the muscles, tissues, tendons and ligaments in your neck, shoulders, arms and back. The results can be tenderness, aches, pains, weakness, tingling and numbing. So, to prevent long-term issues, follow these tips when lifting animals.

- **Think before you lift** – is it necessary to lift the animal or could treatment be administered on the ground? Can you get someone else to help?
- **Adjust your position** – stand stable and balanced with your feet apart.
- **Wear loose clothes** – this will help you to move freely. Your shoes should also be appropriate and safe.
- **Review your technique** – hold the animal firmly and close to your body. Slightly bend your back, hips and knees. Only start straightening your legs when you start to lift the animal. Keep your head up and your shoulders in the same direction as your hips.
Get moving

Making time to exercise regularly – whether it’s swimming, horse riding, walking, cycling or running – can build your muscle strength and bone health, which could help you out at work. As well as cardio, consider strength training like weight lifting or weight-bearing exercises such as press-ups or yoga. Working against a force helps your muscles and bones get strong and stay strong.

Not the sporty type?

Even doing more everyday activities, like taking the stairs at work or walking the dog a bit further, can make a difference. And if you already have aches and pains, don’t be tempted to think that rest is always best. There’s evidence that physical activity can reduce muscle, bone and joint pain for people who already have these problems. This can include more gentle types of exercise such as Pilates or tai chi.

Remember to warm up

Whatever activity you do, warming up properly with gentle stretching exercise will help you avoid muscle sprains and strains.

Try to make time to exercise regularly
Eat well

Did you know that cells in your body are constantly renewing your bones, with your entire skeleton replaced every 10 years? Eating a well-balanced diet that’s rich in the right nutrients is key to keeping this process going.

Calcium

Calcium plays a major part in keeping our bones healthy. Good sources of calcium include dairy products, such as milk, yoghurt and cheese, as well as dairy-free alternatives that have been fortified with calcium (including some brands of rice, soya or nut milk). You can also get calcium from fish, kale and spring greens, pasta and tofu.

Protein

Protein helps to protect your bones. It’s found in meat, fish and dairy products, but also in vegetarian sources such as beans, eggs, nuts and pulses.

Vitamin D

Vitamin D helps you to absorb calcium and helps your bone to renew and take in minerals. It can also strengthen your muscles. You can get some vitamin D from your diet, for example from eating oily fish. But it mainly comes from sunlight, so make sure you get outside when you can, without letting your skin burn.

10 years

Every decade your entire skeleton is replaced as the cells in your body constantly renew.

Balance your weight

Being active and eating well should help you to maintain a healthy weight. It’s important to get the balance right with this.

Being very overweight puts extra pressure on your joints, including your knees and hips. It can double your risk of osteoarthritis in the knee and cause back pain and gout, among many other health problems.

On the other hand, being underweight can make it more likely, compared to someone of a healthy weight, that your bones will become weaker.

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Be careful with cigarettes, alcohol and coffee

Smoking and drinking too much alcohol can both raise your risk of bone problems. This is partly because they can stop your body from absorbing enough calcium. Guidelines in the UK recommend a limit of 14 units of alcohol a week. That’s about six pints of beer or six regular glasses of wine. By sticking to this and not smoking, you’ll minimise the risk of bone problems and improve your overall health.

Sadly for us coffee addicts, too much caffeine can also reduce your calcium intake and increase the risk of bone problems. But don’t worry too much – as long as you’re not drinking more than around four cups a day, you should be fine. And increasing the calcium in your diet can go some way towards making up for any effects of caffeine.

Getting help

Speak to your GP or a physiotherapist if you have a bone, muscle or joint problem that you’re concerned about. You can also visit bupa.co.uk/muscles-bones-joints for more information, including our free online knee clinic.

Quiz answer: Nine million working days are lost every year due to illness caused by muscle, bone and joint problems.²

Protect your future health

Vets are known for working long hours, doing everything for others and putting themselves last. This could mean if a lump or bump crops up, or you start to experience unusual symptoms, it might be a while before you notice anything or act to get it checked out. But, ultimately, your health is paramount.

Preventing type 2 diabetes

Type 2 diabetes is a serious, lifelong condition where your body doesn’t respond to insulin properly, which causes blood glucose levels to become too high. Over time, high levels of glucose in your blood can damage your heart, eyes, feet and kidneys.

The good news is, type 2 diabetes is largely preventable and there’s plenty you can do to reduce your chance of developing it. Try to:

- **maintain a healthy weight** – being overweight or obese puts you at a higher risk of developing type 2 diabetes, as well as a host of other diseases
- **keep your waist trim** – aim to keep your waist circumference less than 80cm (31.5 inches) if you’re a woman and under 94cm (37 inches) if you’re a man
- **stay active** – exercise plays a key role in maintaining a healthy weight and therefore reduces your chance of developing diabetes. Aim for at least 30 minutes on five days of the week, but on the whole, try to reduce how often you’re inactive
- **eat healthy** – enjoy a varied diet that includes plenty of fruit and vegetables and avoid food high in sugar and saturated fat. Swap fizzy drinks for water, cook meals from scratch as often as possible and avoid fast food

As you’ll know well from your work with animals, prevention is better than cure. Leading a healthy lifestyle is key to reducing your risk of developing a number of health conditions. But attending regular screening tests, or getting any unusual symptoms checked, can mean a problem is spotted at an early, more treatable stage.

Looking after your heart

Leading an unhealthy lifestyle can cause long-term damage, resulting in high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke.

Be good to your heart by eating well, doing plenty of exercise, keeping alcohol consumption within the recommended guidelines and not smoking. Here are some easy ways to support good heart health:

- **clock up some steps** – on your walk to work, for part of your commute or lunch break, try to fit some steps in to get your body moving and your heart pumping
- **easy on the salt** – eating too much salt is linked with high blood pressure, which can then lead to stroke and coronary heart disease. You shouldn’t be having more than six grams of salt in your diet a day. Go for reduced-salt options in the supermarket aisles and don’t add table salt to your food
- **eat a heart-healthy diet** – eat at least two portions of fish each week, one of which is oily. This could be mackerel, salmon or sardines. Choose wholegrain foods, such as wholegrain bread, rice and pasta, and eat foods high in fibre, such as oats and pulses like lentils and beans

Exercise plays a key role in maintaining a healthy weight
Women’s health

Some diseases are specific to just women. Be aware of the symptoms and what screening tests are available to help spot anything unusual at an early stage.

Cervical screening

Starting from the age of 25, you’ll be invited for a cervical screening (also known as a smear test) every three years. This screening test is designed to prevent cervical cancer by detecting and treating any abnormalities of your cervix. It’s important to attend your routine screening test and to see your GP if you have any abnormal symptoms in between your tests.

Breast screening

If you’re aged between 50 and 70 you’ll be invited for an NHS breast screening every three years. The screening uses an X-ray test called a mammogram, which you can also have at some private clinics. Breast screening can’t prevent breast cancer, but if cancer is found, it’s often in the early stages and can be easier to treat.

Get to know your breasts – any lumps, leaking, redness or changes to your breast might indicate a problem, so always get anything odd checked out.
Men’s health

Studies suggest that, on average, men are less likely to access health services and to be open about potential health problems than women.7 Push any thoughts about putting off seeing a doctor aside and make an appointment sooner rather than later if there’s something you’re worried about.

Testicular cancer

It’s simple – any lumps, pain or swelling around your testicles, see your GP straight away. Checking yourself only takes a minute and can be done regularly during your morning shower or bath. If a cancerous lump in the testes is diagnosed early, 9 out of 10 men are completely cured.8

Prostate cancer

Prostate cancer is the most common cancer in men, so it’s important to be aware of the symptoms and what screening tests are available to you.

Prostate cancer doesn’t always cause symptoms, although some men may have some urinary problems or pain when they ejaculate. As always, see your GP if you’re experiencing any unusual symptoms.

The PSA (Prostate Specific Antigen) test can indicate whether you’re more likely to have prostate cancer. It works by detecting if your PSA level is raised – this can indicate cancer, but it can also mean you have another condition that isn’t cancer, such as an enlarged prostate or a urine infection. There are pros and cons to having the test, which should always be considered. Talk to your doctor about whether this test is appropriate for you.


Quiz answer: An estimated 38% of cancer cases are preventable.6

As a vet, have you ever thought about what animals might teach us about looking after ourselves? Take cats. You may have noticed that they have a great capacity for gazing out the window for seemingly inordinate amounts of time. Often, it’s not clear exactly what they are looking at. It could be argued that they are simply taking a break, being mindful or meditating. Making a concerted effort to build breaks and rest time into your days is important for your health – but, unlike cats, it’s something many of us neglect to do.
Here are a few things you can do to help you relax

- **A good walk** – if you can, fit this in during your lunch break. Exercise has been shown to have immediate positive effects on mood and mental sharpness.

- **Cinema trip** – going to see a movie can have parallels with mindfulness, as you become totally absorbed in the experience. It can be a great way to take a break and switch off. One study in the journal BMJ suggested that cinema, alongside other cultural activities, can inspire us to reflect on our current situation and think through how we should cope with problems.

- **Get creative** – making art has been linked to reduced stress levels. There can be mental health benefits to knitting, crochet, sewing, writing, art and even colouring, among many other forms of creativity.

- **Listen to music** – studies in certain groups of people show that listening to music may help reduce anxiety and improve mood.

- **Keep a gratitude diary** – when things are busy, it’s easy to forget the small things that give you joy. So, keep a record and flick back for a little lift. You could record the difference you’ve made to a patient’s life that day.

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**Make time for things you enjoy**

It’s important to take time out for yourself, including regular breaks at work, so you’re less prone to stress and feeling worn down. Doing things you enjoy is well recognised as important for mental wellbeing, yet less than half of people in the UK say they’re satisfied with the amount of leisure time they have. So, if you struggle too, why not give one of these activities a go?

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**Less than 1/2 of the general public are satisfied with the amount of leisure time that they have.**


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**Quiz answer:** 25–34 year-olds are more dissatisfied with their work-life balance than any other age group.

9 YouGov. Those aged 25-34 are unhappiest with work/life balance. Published March 2017.

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Sleep well

Most adults need 7-9 hours of sleep each night to function properly.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{11}Recommended amount of sleep for a healthy adult: A joint consensus statement of the American Academy of Sleep Medicine and Sleep Research Society, 2015.
Most adults need between seven and nine hours of sleep a night. There can be many reasons why you might struggle to get that much, some of which might be related to work issues, such as thinking about a patient or something that a colleague has said.

The following tips might help you to get a better night’s sleep:

- **try relaxation techniques** – you might find doing this before going to bed can distract you from your day and make you feel calm before rest. Try reading or listening to some relaxing music or a podcast on guided mediation

- **rearrange your sleeping environment** – is your mattress comfy? If not, a new one could be a good investment, helping you sleep while also supporting your back and hips better. It can also help to make your bedroom somewhere where you don’t work, eat, watch TV or use electronic devices

- **change what you eat or drink before bed** – avoid drinking caffeine after mid-afternoon and go for a herbal tea or warm milky drink instead. Avoid eating a heavy meal late in the evening and try not to drink much alcohol before bed. While you might think it’ll help you nod off, it can actually interfere with sleep and may cause you to wake up during the night

- **get into a routine** – having a regular wind-down routine can make a difference to how easily you fall asleep. It could involve sitting quietly and reading a book, having a soothing bath, and going to bed around the same time each night

- **do more exercise during the day** – this is a great way to help you sleep better. But try not to do exercise too close to bedtime, otherwise you might feel overly energised
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