Promoting the health of women with a migrant background

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Training document

The influence of lifestyle habits on health

(diseases of civilisation)

Prepared and implemented in the context of **femmesTische** – female migrants in Styria talk about health, daily life and family – a **network project** by the women's and girls' advice centres **innova**, **Novum** and **Frauenservice Graz**.

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Health and lifestyle habits

Health depends on a number of different factors, and is hugely impacted by lifestyle habits, environmental conditions and social relationships. Whether we are healthy or sick is largely related to our personal behaviour. We can positively influence and determine our health, and thus prevent certain diseases (of civilisation) in a targeted way.

Diseases of civilisation

Diseases of civilisation are illnesses that are related to lifestyle habits in modern societies. They are associated with overeating and malnutrition, lack of exercise and stress. Some of them may also be genetic. In principle, people can influence many health risks and draw more on their own resources by changing how they live their personal and social lives.
The term disease of civilisation is synonymous with the colloquial term widespread disease.

What are the most common diseases of civilisation?
Diseases of civilisation are widespread in many sections of the population, and are among the most common and significant health problems. Typical diseases of civilisation are cardiovascular diseases, diabetes mellitus, diseases of the musculoskeletal system and mental disorders. They affect quality of life, capacity to work and mortality.

Obesity

Being severely overweight (obese) is a seriously increasing health problem. People who are overweight are at increased risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes mellitus, and certain cancers.

How common is obesity?
In Austria, around 3.7 million people over the age of 15 are overweight, and around 17 per cent of them are obese. By the age of eight, one in three boys and one in four girls are already overweight or obese. Overweight children are at higher long-term risk of various diseases.

How is excess weight measured?

Body Mass Index (BMI) is the most common way of determining your own body weight.
BMI is generally calculated using a simple formula:

$$BMI = \frac{\text{body weight (in kg)}}{\text{height (in m)}^2}$$

The normal value for women is between 19 and 24, and between 20 and 25 for men. Women are considered to be overweight if they have a BMI value of between 25 and 30. For men, this BMI value is between 26 and 30. We speak of obesity, or severely overweight, with a BMI of 30 or more.

What are the causes/risk factors of being overweight?

Excess weight always occurs when the body takes in more energy than it expends. In addition to unfavourable lifestyle factors, other causes may come into play:

- Poor eating habits: excessive portions, too much sugar, too much fat, too much fast food, etc.
- Constant availability of food
- Lack of exercise
- Chronic stress
- Metabolic diseases (for example diabetes, hypothyroidism)
- Genetic factors
- Medications: for example certain antidepressants, cortisone or the contraceptive pill
- Hormonal causes (for example menopause, pregnancy)
- Being overweight in childhood

How can I prevent becoming overweight?

The best ways to prevent excess weight/obesity are a balanced diet and regular exercise.

You can find further information at:
Weight loss for adults (gesundheitskasse.at)
Obesity in children (gesundheitskasse.at)

Type 2 diabetes mellitus

Diabetes mellitus is one of the most common diseases worldwide. In Austria, an estimated 600,000 people currently suffer from diabetes, a trend that is rising sharply.
Over 90 per cent of all diabetes sufferers are affected by type 2 diabetes mellitus. It's a disease that means a lifelong battle to successfully manage it on a daily basis.

What is type 2 diabetes mellitus?

Diabetes is a chronic metabolic disease that is characterised by increased blood glucose levels. Type 2 diabetes used to be primarily a disease of older people. For this reason, it was often referred to as age-related diabetes. It is increasingly also being diagnosed in young people.

What are the causes and risk factors for type 2 diabetes mellitus?

The cause of type 2 diabetes mellitus is generally carrying excess weight. 80 per cent of type 2 diabetics are overweight. In addition to being overweight, type 2 diabetics often suffer with other health issues such as high blood pressure and thyroid disorders.

What are the possible symptom of type 2 diabetes mellitus?

Type 2 diabetes often develops slowly. Sometimes, there are no or only minor symptoms for a long time. Typical symptoms are urinating frequently, raging thirst, fatigue, dizziness and nausea.

How can I prevent type 2 diabetes mellitus?

Type 2 diabetes mellitus is avoidable. Several factors play a role in the development of diabetes mellitus, many of which depends largely on lifestyle.. Obesity and lack of exercise are major factors. You can influence your risk of developing type 2 diabetes by:

- Exercise regularly, at least 30 minutes per day
- Eat a balanced diet (Austrian Nutrition Pyramid)
- Keep your adult weight relatively stable, and within the normal range
- Do not smoke

You can find further information at:
Type 2 diabetes explained simply - we are the diabetes umbrella organisation
Living with type 2 diabetes (sozialversicherung.at)

Cardiovascular diseases

Cardiovascular diseases are among the most common disorders globally. In Austria, cardiovascular diseases are the leading cause of death in women over the age of 65 and men over the age of 45.

What are cardiovascular diseases?

The cardiovascular diseases group includes diseases of the heart and blood vessels. The most common cardiovascular diseases are:

- High blood pressure
- Heart attack
- Stroke
- Coronary heart disease
- Heart failure (cardiac insufficiency)

What are the causes/risk factors of cardiovascular diseases?

A key risk factor for developing heart disease is high blood pressure. Obesity, lack of exercise, smoking, elevated blood lipid levels and high blood sugar are also risk factors.

How can I prevent cardiovascular diseases?

Everyone can significantly reduce their personal risk of disease by living a healthy lifestyle:

- Exercise regularly, at least 30 minutes per day
- Eat a balanced diet (Austrian Nutrition Pyramid)
- Avoid or minimise harmful substances such as tobacco smoke, alcohol and drugs
- Maintain your blood pressure, blood lipids and blood sugar levels within the normal range
- Avoid stress

You can find further information at:

(Preventing cardiovascular diseases (gesundheitskasse.at)

High blood pressure

With every heartbeat, blood is pumped through our body, creating pressure within the blood vessels - this is blood pressure. Blood pressure ensures that blood reaches all our organs and tissues, thus supplying them with nutrients. Only at normal or low blood pressure levels do the vessels remain elastic and passable.

What is normal blood pressure?
Ideal blood pressure is a systolic value of below 120 mmHg and a diastolic value of below 80 mmHg. Each time it beats, the heart contracts to force blood into the bloodstream. Experts refer to this as a systole. Following this, the heart muscle relaxes. The heart then expands and fills with blood - this is diastole. The diastolic pressure is lower than the systolic pressure.

At what point does high blood pressure occur?
High blood pressure (arterial hypertension) is a condition in which blood pressure is chronically elevated. It occurs at values of 140/90 mmHg and above. One in four people in Austria suffers from high blood pressure. This rises to one in every two in older age. High blood pressure is generally without symptoms, but it causes damage the vessels over the years. There is a risk of secondary diseases such as heart attack or stroke.

What are the causes/risk factors of high blood pressure?
In most cases, there is no discernible organ diseases as the cause in people with high blood pressure. In these individuals, the causes are mainly hereditary factors and/or an unhealthy lifestyle.

You can find further information at:
Living well with high blood pressure (gesundheitskasse.at)

Heart attack

In Austria, around 32,000 people suffer a heart attack every year.

What is a heart attack?
A heart attack happens when a blood vessel in the heart suddenly becomes blocked. As a result, part of the heart muscles does not receive sufficient oxygen and nutrients. The larger the blocked vessel, the greater the area of the heart attack, and the more serious the complaint, and the medical consequences. A heart attack is often life-threatening! Every second counts, and it is important to recognise the symptoms as early as possible. The sooner action is taken and treatment given, the greater the chance of survival.

What are the causes/risk factors of a heart attack?

In addition to a congenital risk or a disease such as diabetes mellitus or high blood pressure, the other heart attack risk factors are often behavioural, i.e. a consequence of the individual's lifestyle and thus mostly preventable:

- Lack of exercise
- A diet that is mainly high in fat
- Obesity
- Smoking
- Stress

What symptoms point to a heart attack?

There are certain symptoms to typically indicate or precede a heart attack. Sometimes, these symptoms may not be present, however (‘silent heart attack’)! Possible indications include:

- Severe pain behind the breastbone. These may radiate to the neck, throat, jaw, shoulders, back, arms or upper abdomen. They are generally described as burning or pressing.
- Feeling of tightness in the chest, feeling of ‘constriction’, feeling like ‘someone is sitting on your chest’
- Outbreaks of sweat, with cold sweat
- Nausea, vomiting
- Dizziness
- Shortness of breath through to gasping for breath
- Restlessness, feeling of anxiety, through to fear of death
- Pale grey complexion

In women, signs of a heart attack can also be non-specific complaints such as shortness of breath, nausea and vomiting as well as discomfort in the upper abdomen.

Note

Anyone suspected of having a heart attack must be admitted to hospital immediately – call the emergency services at once **(ambulance service 144)**.

Stroke

In Austria, stroke is the third most common cause of death, and the leading cause of permanent disability. Every year, around 25,000 people in Austria suffer a stroke.

What is a stroke?

Stroke of a disease of the brain in which a disturbance of blood flow causes a sudden failure of certain regions in the brain. The cause is a blood clot blocking a vessel in the brain. The medical profession refers to this as apoplex or apoplexy, cerebral stroke, cerebral insult or cerebral infarction.

What are the causes/risk factors of a stroke?

In healthy people, clots very rarely form in the blood vessels. However, certain diseases, behaviours and hereditary predispositions can increase the risk of stroke. These include, for example, smoking, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and atrial fibrillation.

What symptoms point to a stroke?

A stroke usually becomes noticeable through sudden paralysis, vision problems or speech disorders. Only one side of the body is usually affected, so that the person can no longer move their right arm and/or right leg properly, for example. The corner of the mouth dropping is also typical. Sometimes, the individual may also experience severe headaches, accompanied by nausea and vomiting as well as loss of mobility.

The symptoms that occur, depend on which side of the brain is affected.

A stroke is an emergency, as must be treated immediately. Every second counts with a stroke, and it is important to recognise the symptoms as early as possible. Sufferers need fast medical treatment in hospital.

Common indications of a stroke are:

- sudden weakness on one side of the body
- feelings of numbness and signs of paralysis
- speech disorders
- loss of visual field
- dizziness and unsteadiness on the feet

How can I check for the important signs of a stroke?

- Face: Ask the person to smile. If one corner of the mouth droops, it points to paralysis on one side of the body.
- Arms: Ask the individual to extend their arms forwards, turning their palms upwards. If paralysis is present, they will be unable to raise both arms, and one arm will sink or rotate.

- Speech: Get the person to repeat a simple sentence. If they are unable, or their voice sounds washed out (‘slurring’), there is probably a speech disorder.

Note
If an individual displays such symptoms, call the emergency services immediately **(ambulance service 144)** and describe the symptoms. The sooner treatment begins, the better the chances of recovery.

Back pain

Back pain is a common ailment of modern civilisation. Almost everyone will suffer from back pain at least once in their lives.

What is back pain?

Back pain is pain in the spine between the neck and buttocks that can radiate to the legs and arms. The pain is usually associated with muscle tension, and often with restricted movement. Incorrect strain and sitting wrongly can cause acute pain. The pains is not usually dangerous, and goes away again without treatment after a few days or weeks. But back pain can recur, or become chronic, and persist over several months or years.

What are the causes/risk factors of back pain?

A ‘sedentary lifestyle’ combined with a lack of physical balance activities such as gymnastics, strength training or endurance sports are a main cause of back problems occurring. Other factors that play a part in non-specific back pain are:

- Wear and tear: over time the intervertebral discs lose elasticity and flatten out. The vertebral joints also wear down more with age. Both can cause pain.
- Incorrect strains: repeated physical overload or incorrect strains, for example due to heavy or incorrect lifting, can accelerate wear and tear and trigger acute back pain.
- Psychological factors: stress, too much pressure at work, anxiety, depression etc. can play a part in the development of back pain.

What are the possible symptoms?

Back pain occurs mainly in the lower back. In addition to the actual pain, other symptoms may develop, such as pains that radiate into the leg, a feeling of numbness, tingling in the legs and feet, loss of strength, problems standing upright, restricted mobility and muscular pain.

How can I prevent back pain?

The most important thing is: remain active and mobile. This scientifically proven principle helps to prevent back pain, and may alleviate existing symptoms:

- as well as endurance training such as walking or running, regular exercise should also include strength and mobility exercises. Find a sport you really enjoy and that slots easily into your daily routine.
- Strong back muscles support and relieve pressure on the spine. For example, special training comprises exercises to strengthen and stabilise the muscles. This training is also known as 'back school'.
- Sitting for long periods, poor posture when seated and monotonous, repetitive movements at work put a strain on the back. Take regular breaks and do balancing movements to loosen you up. Ergonomic workstations, such as an appropriate chair, are important in preventing back pain.
- To avoid back pain, you must follow the right procedure when lifting heavy objects or loads.
- Avoid becoming overweight.

You can find further information at:

Back pain (gesundheitskasse.at)

Osteoarthritis

Around 1.4 million people in Austria are affected by osteoarthritis, older people most frequently. The disease can develop in almost any joint. Women are affected by osteoarthritis slightly more than men.

What is osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis is a degenerative disease of the joints. A degenerative change occurs due to wear and tear, ageing, or prolonged exposure to damage. The disease typically manifests itself through painful and stiff joints. If the symptoms become more severe, they can massively restrict movement. The most commonly affected joints are the knees, hips and fingers.

What are the causes/risk factors of osteoarthritis?

Cartilage wear and tear is influenced by various factors. The risk factors include:

- Anatomical factors (misalignment of the knee and hip joints, for example)
- Being severely overweight or obese
- Jobs that involve frequent kneeling, bending, squatting or heavy lifting
- Certain types of sport that put strain on the joints, such as wrestling, boxing, football and handball
- Lack of exercise (spending hours sat in front of a computer every day, for example)
- Permanent overuse of the joints with the load on one side (for example, top-level sports) or

monotonous or incorrectly taught movement sequences (for example, heavy labour)
- Being female

What are the possible symptoms?

The symptoms creep up. In the early stages of osteoarthritis, the joint is generally painful only when it is strained. Stabbing pains are then often felt in the affected area under impact loads. There may be a feeling of 'stiffness' in the affected joints in the early morning, which usually subsides within half an hour. Early indicators of osteoarthritis also include joint noises under stress.

How can I prevent osteoarthritis?

Everyone can do something for themselves to slow down the development and progression of osteoarthritis. The following measures help to avoid permanent overloading of joints:

- Correct congenital deformities in good time, for example with orthopaedic inserts.
- Schedule regular exercise, especially posture and balance exercises
- Do exercise training and sports that are easy on the joints (swimming or cycling, for example)
- Avoid activities in your daily life, at work and when playing sports that put a strain on the knees
- Avoid or correct movement sequences involving one side
- Avoid becoming overweight (BMI< 25)
- Eat healthily
- Avoid extreme sports

Headaches

There are different types of headache that happen for no specific reason. The most common are tension headaches, migraines and cluster headaches. Headaches are often associated with lifestyle. According to studies, excess weight, too little exercise and smoking, along with frequent consumption of alcohol and coffee, are factors that trigger the pain.

What is a tension headache?

Headaches of the tension type (tension headaches) are the most common form of headache. Around one in three Austrians suffers from tension headaches at times, with women and men affected equally.

Tension-type headaches usually feel like having a helmet or headband sitting too tightly on your head. The pain is mild to moderate, and can last from half an hour to a few days.

Tension headaches are caused my many different triggers. Stress is a main one. Tension headaches used to be called 'stress headaches'. Prolonged psychosocial stress, such as stress in the work place, or conflict with your partner, weakens the body's sensitive pain defence mechanism. They are often also caused by poor posture with the head tensed, mainly due to sitting at a screen. Alcohol, nicotine and

caffeine (and withdrawing from them) can also trigger symptoms.

How can I prevent headaches?

Active prevention is recommended, such as reducing stress, a regular sleep pattern, plenty of exercise in the fresh air, endurance sports such as swimming or cycling as well as reducing your alcohol and tobacco intake. Relaxation techniques and stress management strategies may also help. Avoid irregular patterns during your day. That includes skipping a meal, not drinking enough fluids, but also having too much or too little sleep. Potential triggers might be unmasked with the help of a headache diary.

Mental illnesses

More and more people in Austria are suffering from a mental illness. Mental illness has many facets, which are often characterised by a combination of distressing thoughts, emotions and behaviour. Examples include depression, anxiety disorders, behavioural disorders, bipolar disorders and psychoses.

Almost everyone is familiar with the ups and downs of their state of mind. People are generally able to overcome mental lows themselves, or they get support from family or friends, for example by talking about things.
But what does mentally ill mean? If the mental strain persists over weeks, and has a detrimental impact on the sufferer's day-to-day life, professional life and social abilities, doctors refer to a 'mental illness or 'mental disorder'. Physical symptoms for which there are no organic cause may also point to a mental illness.

What are the possible symptoms?

Recognising mental illness is not always easy. Most of the indications are non-specific, which means that the symptoms may be due to a different illness. The following indications may point to a mental illness:

- Nightmares
- Anxiety
- Inner unrest
- Loss of libido
- Back pain
- Disrupted sleep patterns
- Fluctuations in mood
- Stress
- Tinnitus
- Grinding of teeth when asleep

Which factors have an impact on mental health?

Mental health – at least to a certain extent – can be controlled. Many factors work together here. These influencing factors include:

- Loving and being loved
- Self-confidence
- Security
- Meaning of life
- Social relationships
- Working conditions
- Dealing with problems and problematic situations
- Awareness of physical and mental needs
- Taking responsibility for your own actions
- Environmental influences

diseases, drugs and other factors can have a hugely detrimental impact on mental health, and result in illness. Certain medications can also influence the mind.

What can I do for my mental health?

There are preventive and health-promoting measures not only in the area of physical health, but also mental health. Maintaining a mental balance is often not easy. Burdens, stress, crises or simply life's daily demands sometimes require a lot of us.
Yet talking about the mind is still a taboo. Mental health plays a large part in our well-being. The body and mind are constantly subject to mutual influences. It is also helpful to recognise potential risk factors.

The following tips may help to do something good for the mind at all times. You won't always be able to do everything at once. But step by step, greater mental balance can be achieved:

- Be kind to yourself: What are your needs (for example for food, social interaction, peace, activity)? What feelings do you have?
- Practise setting boundaries: That includes sometimes saying 'no'.
- Value yourself.
- Set goals for yourself: Try to take small steps towards your personal esteem.
- Take personal responsibility: Not everything is within our control. But there is plenty that we can influence ourselves (for example feelings or lifestyle).
- Discover moments of enjoyment: try to engage your senses more. What do you smell, taste, see, feel and hear?
- Create 'islands of relaxation' for yourself: for example regular breaks from work, using a relaxation technique (such as Jacobson's progressive muscle relaxation), or simply do nothing for once.
- Learn about stress management: How can I learn to handle stress as effectively as possible.

- Get support if you need it: If you simply don't know what to do next, everything is too much for you or you have mental or general health problems. Or simply to hear a different perspective. Whether assistance in everyday life, advice from a friend or professional help for the mind or other issues: don't hesitate to arrange support for yourself. It is not a sign of weakness. On the contrary, it takes courage and demonstrates active problem and stress management.

What protective factors are there for mental health?

Protective factors include, for example:

- A stable circle of friends,
- Self-confidence,
- A sense of humour,
- A balanced spiritual life,
- The ability to ask for help, and
- Being part of a social network.

A generally healthy lifestyle also has a protective effect: a balanced diet and exercise, enough sleep, not smoking and drinking alcohol in moderation.

Dental health

Beautiful and healthy teeth require the correct care. The right dental and oral care is not only crucial for the health of your mouth, but also for the health of the whole body. Insufficient dental care may result in harmful bacteria. The bacteria can not only cause problems in the mouth, such as decay or gingivitis, but can also reach other parts of the body via the bloodstream and promote diseases there.

Why are healthy milk teeth important?

The role of milk teeth is often under-estimated. There are many reasons to take particular care of milk teeth:

- To protect the remaining teeth: diseased milk teeth can transfer their bacteria to other still healthy teeth. Even before the next teeth are fully developed and have come through. Therefore, always seek immediate treatment for milk teeth with decay.
- As place-holder: the milk tooth acts as a place-holder in the jaw for the second tooth to come. If the milk tooth falls out, this can lead to a shift in the position of the teeth. Milk teeth are therefore essential for the healthy development of a child's jaw and skull.
- For speech and sound development: if milk teeth fall out prematurely or have to be removed due to decay, it may hamper speech development.
- For chewing and bighting: Healthy milk teeth ensure food is broken down optimally.

- For social life: visibly decayed teeth or bad breath from decay can cause a child to be teased and/or ostracised by others.

What are chalk teeth (MIH=Molar Incisor Hypomineralisation)?

Chalk teeth are the teeth of children and youngsters with a developmental enamel defect. It mainly affects the first permanent molars and incisors. The causes are not known. Suspected triggers are maternal illnesses during pregnancy, complications at birth and illnesses in the first four years of life etc. The tooth enamel defect causes these teeth to be discoloured in sharply defined areas, less hard and brittle like chalk.

The teeth are often highly sensitive to temperature and touch, which can make everyday activities such as cleaning the teeth and eating or drinking hot or cold food and drinks painful. Both mean that the teeth are considerably more susceptible to decay than healthy teeth, usually require early dental treatment, and must be examined more regularly.

How does decay occur?

Not brushing the teeth and sugar are the main causes of decay. Sugar remains stuck to the teeth as an invisible coating (plaque). Bacteria in the mouth convert the sugar into acid which dissolves the tooth enamel. Tiny white, then brown then black flecks are initially visible, which over time become holes.

What is parodontitis?

Parodontitis is a disease that affects both the gums and tooth-bearing part of the jawbone (the periodontium). It results in progressive loss of the supporting tissue and bone. Teeth become lose as a result, and may fall out or have to be extracted as a consequence. With targeted treatment, the progression of parodontitis can often be slowed down. Success depends on good oral hygiene, and eliminating risk factors that contribute to the disease. Parodontitis is commonly also known as gum disease.

How can I care for and protect my teeth and gums?

For optimal tooth and gum care and protection, ensure the following:

- Choose the right toothbrush. Note that there are different sizes and bristle hardness grades. Age and individual needs should be taken into account. Some experts recommend electric toothbrushes. They automatically ensure the right cleaning movement. However, all tooth surfaces should be brushed slowly.

- Clean your teeth twice a day for around 3 minutes. Cleaning your teeth before bed is particularly important. You should not eat or even drink anything afterwards, except water and unsweetened tea. Because bacteria multiply in the mouth overnight.
- Stick to a systematic way of brushing so you don't leave any areas out: First the chewing surfaces, then the outer surfaces and finally brush the inner surfaces. Brush gently so you don't damage your gums.
- Clean your tongue as well: many bacteria form on it and can transfer to the teeth, causing bad breath. You can clean your tongue with a toothbrush, or with a special tongue cleaner.
- Use dental floss daily, and/or interdental brushes: They remove plaque between the teeth where you toothbrush doesn't reach during brushing. This effectively prevents tartar and tooth decay in the hard-to-reach areas.

To give your teeth long-term protection and prevent a lot of problems, as well as conscientious oral hygiene, you should do the following at regular intervals:

- Change your toothbrush every 2-3 months. Otherwise, the bristles will bend and bacteria will be deposited in the brush head.
- Supplement your tooth-brushing with additional fluoride. Fluoride strengthens the enamel.
- Have your teeth cleaned professionally approximately once a year. During a so-called prophylaxis, hard-to-reach areas are cleaned, discolouration is eliminated, and tartar is removed. You will have to pay for this yourself, however. This service is provided free of charge to children and young people aged between 10 and 18.
- Go to dentist twice a year for a check-up. Any disease can be determined at an early stage, and treated professionally.

What impact does my diet have on dental health?

A healthy and balanced diet also supports your dental health. Food containing a lot of minerals and vitamins (for example calcium, fluoride), make your teeth and gums resistant. When choosing your meals, take note of the Nutrition Pyramid, and don't forget to chew thoroughly. Avoid frequent consumption of snacks and drinks that contain acids and sugar as far as possible.
Many people don't realise: fruit, fruit juices, soft drinks and energy drinks are real 'enamel eaters'. That's because they contain a lot of acids that soften the enamel, and cause valuable minerals to come off. The result: the teeth become increasingly thin and sensitive.

Tips:

- Tap water is perfect for quenching thirst.

- Dilute fruit juices with water.
- Drink sugared drinks only rarely, and follow them by water if you do drink them.
- Mix fruit yoghurt with natural yoghurt to reduce the proportion of sugar.
- Avoid sticky sweets such as chocolate bars, for example.
- Alternative snacks: apples, berries, unsalted nuts, …
- Drink water after snacking!

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