

WOMEN

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Bottle-necking. Traffic-jamming! Train-stalling!! Blood-boiling!!! Soul-sucking!!!! And then we crash—mentally, physically, wholly. [Please wait...system processing.] *Women's Health* is here to help you reboot your commute and take back your life.

BY KRISTEN DOLD

We don't have to tell you that a bad commute—day after gloriously shitty day—can make you question your faith in humanity. There's a good chance you're already living it. The average working stiff now spends some 52 minutes a day in transit; 11.4 million clock two hours or more.

Commuting has always been a necessary evil, but experts say it might feel particularly Machiavellian these days because it defies everything we've been programmed to do. "We live in a culture that prizes productivity—if we're in traffic, we're not multitasking or feeling efficient, so we panic, get anxious, feel guilty, and stress out," says sociologist Christine Carter, Ph.D., author of *The Sweet Spot*. Compounding all that: The trek itself has gotten rougher. Roads are falling apart, traffic is beyond congested, and we swear manspreaders on trains have reached critical mass. And nearly 600,000 Americans are now "mega-commuters," traveling at least 90 minutes and at least 50 miles (one way!) to work every day. The

strain is especially brutal for women, who tend to make more pit stops (think: picking up dinner)—which means even *more* time avoiding potholes and dodging drooling bus seat-mates.

The daily back-and-forth has also been linked to a slew of ills, with those who travel by car—that's 86 percent of us—getting the worst of it. A measly 10-mile drive each way is associated with anxiety and depression. People who pile on the miles also weigh more, spend less time exercising, and have higher blood pressure—risk factors for heart disease, diabetes, and stroke.

The pileup gets worse: Studies show the longer you spend traveling—on road or rail—the more your overall happiness nosedives. Ditto your sleep quality and even your relationship: Couples in which at least one partner has a 45-minute-or-longer commute are 40 percent more likely to get divorced.

Deep breaths.

You know what? Screw that. It's gonna take way more than a few inhale-exhales to get from point A to point B without wanting to throw yourself into oncoming traffic. It's gonna take this no-BS primer. Turn the page and prepare to crush rush hour.

Dizzying gridlock outside Universal City, Los Angeles

DANITA DELIMONT/GETTY IMAGES



The morning rush in Grand Central Station, New York City

## WARNING: SPARE TIRE AHEAD

Commuting more than 15 miles one way has been linked to weight gain. Yes, due to the butt coma, but also stress-induced cortisol surges that spur your body to scarf junk and store fat. We can't shave time off your trip, but we can help offset the rising scale.

### COMMUTER'S CURSE

Between honking horns, squealing tires, and subway rumbles, you're so frazzled by the time you get to work that you stress-eat yesterday's crumbs off your keyboard.

### HIT THE BRAKES

Research shows the more traffic noise you're exposed to, the more likely you may have extra belly fat (the most dangerous type of chub). Invest in noise-canceling earbuds, like Sony's ZX770BN Noise Cancelling Bluetooth Headphones (\$230, amazon.com). They can mute your surroundings entirely, and there's no cord to get tangled up in your bag.

### COMMUTER'S CURSE

You're lucky to get your bra snapped correctly before running out the door—no time to eat anything. The result: Half your paycheck goes to the doughnut shop next to your office.

### HIT THE BRAKES

Sunday night, pull together a to-go breakfast packed with healthy carbs, friendly fats, and protein—the best combo to keep energy levels up. Exhibit A: mini frittatas that are delish hot or cold. Mix five eggs with one cup of chopped veggies and a sprinkling of low-fat cheese. Pour into five muffin tins and bake for 15 minutes at 350°F. Brekkie for the week, sorted.

### COMMUTER'S CURSE

You're so wiped out when you get home that you barely have the energy to dial for delivery (but somehow, you manage).

### HIT THE BRAKES

Survey says: We usually consume an extra 190 calories while chowing on takeout as opposed to a home-cooked meal, so if you've got to phone it in, order fare that isn't fried, breaded, or bathed in creamy sauces. Pile on the veggies

where you can. Your best bets are Thai spring rolls, steamed shrimp dumplings, chicken fajitas (limit the sour cream and cheese), and sushi.

### COMMUTER'S CURSE

You can't hit the gym M-F, so on the weekend you work out for two hours on both days. Bad? Good? Better than nothing? Bueller?

### HIT THE BRAKES

Two days well spent can actually be more effective than four to five misdirected workouts during the week, says certified strength and conditioning specialist Greg Robins. To give your muscle fibers time to repair, vary your workouts (for example: tennis Saturday, strength training Sunday). Then, during the week, eke out 10 daily minutes for short bursts of activity (a brisk walk to the train counts!) to combat the higher injury risk seen with most weekend warriors.

## MAKE YOUR HERE-TO-THERE SUCK A LITTLE LESS...

Just download these free apps.



### SPOTHERO

Reserve a (discounted!) space in a parking garage, then use a QR code from your phone to enter and exit (no more lost tickets). Cancel at any point up until your start time.



### MOOVIT

Not a fan of cramped, tight rides? This public transit navigation app tracks overcrowded buses and trains, service changes, and delays, plus serves as a GPS.



### CITYMAPPER

It gives work-goers the fastest routes for getting to and fro and even calculates how many cal's you burn getting there.

BENJAMIN LOWY/GETTY IMAGES REPORTAGE

## THE PEOPLE ON THE BUS GO...

Ouch, mostly. In fact, about 25 percent of folks who commute as little as 10 minutes each way, via any mode of transport, report recurring back or neck pain. How to keep aches in check no matter how you roll.

### RIDING THE BUS

**1 SCOOT YOUR BUTT BACKWARD** until your back is at a 90-degree angle to your legs and your feet are flat on the floor (your knees should also be bent 90 degrees). Shorties should use the foot rest.

**2 LOOK STRAIGHT AHEAD** to avoid "text neck"-related spine degeneration. Lost in a book? Every 15 minutes, gaze at the ceiling for 30 seconds to stretch your neck.



### DRIVING A CAR

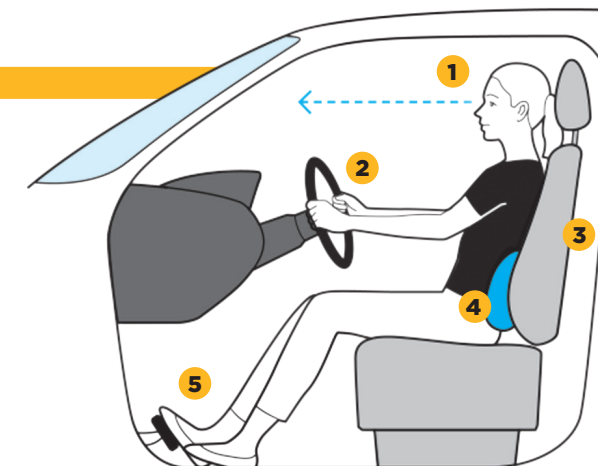
**1 RAISE THE SEAT UP (OR DOWN)** so you can see the road over the wheel without tilting your head. Perching too high or low can strain neck muscles.

**2 POSITION YOUR HANDS AT NINE AND THREE;** gripping the top of the wheel can tax your shoulders and neck.

**3 TO DECREASE PRESSURE** on the disks in your lower spine, angle your seat back so it's a little less severe than a perfect L-shape.

**4 USE A LUMBAR SUPPORT PILLOW** (or tuck a rolled hand towel between the small of your back and the seat) to slash your risk for low back pain.

**5 MOVE THE SEAT FORWARD** until you can press the gas pedal with the ball of your foot, keeping your heel on the ground.



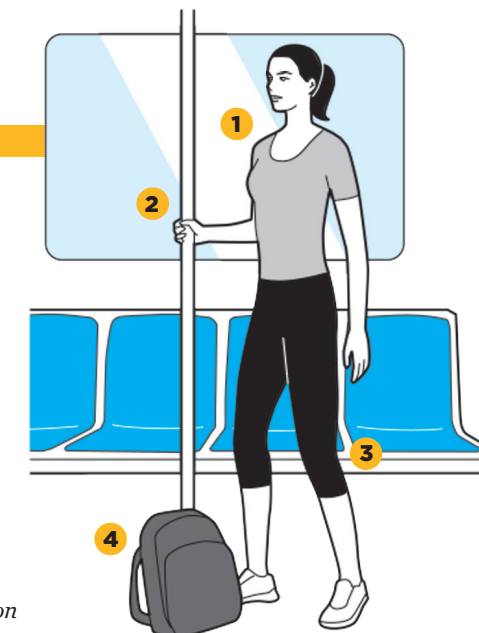
### STANDING ON THE SUBWAY

**1 STAND TO THE SIDE OF THE POLE.** If you face it head-on, you'll fall backward or forward in a sudden stop.

**2 LIGHTLY GRIP THE POLE.** Leaning on it puts extra pressure on your heels and is unstable for your pelvis and hips; it also puts more stress on the shoulder and arm.

**3 SLIGHTLY BEND YOUR KNEES, AND STEP ONE FOOT IN FRONT OF THE OTHER.** Shift your weight back and forth between your legs for balance.

**4 REST BAGS AT YOUR FEET;** heavy loads put you at risk for back and shoulder injury, especially when held on one shoulder. Floor covered in goo? Alternate carrying sides every 10 minutes.



Source: Rob Danoff, D.O., spokesperson for the American Osteopathic Association

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JASON LEE

## A TALE OF TWO TRIPS

WH editors with very different door-to-doors

### “THIS CRAP IS KILLING ME!”

Last Christmas Eve, my husband, 2-year-old daughter, and I moved into our dream house in a dreamily charming suburb.

In the midst of this intense REM state came a shocking wake-up call: my nightmare of a commute into midtown Manhattan. Each weekday morning, I leave at 7 a.m. and travel by car, bus, and train (a.k.a. Satan’s idea of a hot threesome). It’s a commute where disabled vehicles are as common as lattes, where a one-hour trip easily turns into a three-hour tour of New Jersey, and where dreams go to die.

Friends tell me to meditate, but conditions could not be more inhospitable for such things! Most days, I self-soothe with Spotify playlists and refreshes of my newsfeeds. But halfway into my bus route, I hit a Wi-Fi desert. No streaming. No e-mail. Just me and my stupid thoughts. *What am I doing with my life? Am I a shitty mom? Is that twitch in my left tit cancer? Holy crap, it is so cancer.*

This unhealthy relationship with my commute has spilled over into every aspect of my life. I’ve gained 15 pounds I can’t shake—even though my eating habits haven’t changed much. I barely spend any time with my daughter during the week—ironic, considering how I moved to the suburbs to frolic with her on our well-manicured lawn. When I finally get home, I snap at my husband over the most inane things. I can feel him falling a little more out of love with me at each snap. It’s a scary feeling because I can’t stop it. It’s 9 p.m. I haven’t eaten. And I’m so very tired.

At its core, a bad commute makes you feel insignificant—a passenger in your own life. To take back some semblance of power, I joined an online grassroots push that essentially forced Governor Chris Christie off his presidential campaign trail and back to New Jersey to meet with officials in an attempt to fix our state’s crumbling infrastructure. My commute is still as awful as ever. But I’m taking the proverbial wheel, and it’s the first bit of good I’ve felt about all this bad in months.

**Theresa O’Rourke**, executive editor, Cranford, New Jersey

## GAH! TOWN

THE NUMBER OF HOURS THAT RUSH-HOUR COMMUTERS SPENT STUCK IN TRAFFIC LAST YEAR. THAT’S 42 HOURS A YEAR PER DRIVER.

### “I HAVE MY LIFE BACK!”

For nearly two decades, I had hour-plus public-transport hell commutes—first in Boston, then London, then Philadelphia. When I joined *WH*, I drove an hour and 15 minutes each way, from Philly to northeast Pennsylvania, with my daughters, then 3 years and 5 months (at-work child care: sweet!).

It was doable, until the day we got stuck in a blizzard for three hours. A few weeks later, I contracted an intestinal superbug after taking antibiotics for a sinus infection that my exhausted bod just couldn’t kick. Two days after that, a kidney stone landed me in the ER. Worn down by stress and lack of sleep, I told my husband: Either we move or I quit my job, because my body is crying uncle. We packed our bags.

These days, the music is blaring, there’s a smoothie in the cup holder, and I’m spending a lot less on gas. I leave the house at 8 a.m., drive past bucolic cornfields and wooded glens (hello, deer!), and arrive at the office at 8:13. Yep, my ride is 13 minutes (it’s okay; you can hate me).

There are trade-offs. Those deer are a pretty big sign that I don’t live in the most cosmopolitan of areas (translation: I haven’t had a decent curry in three years). And my girls are 6 and 3 now, which means those blaring tunes are mostly Kidz Bop. But it’s a small price to pay for actually getting to spend QT with them at the end of the day (instead of just looking at the tops of their heads in the rearview mirror).

Although I think “having it all” is unrealistic, a shorter commute *has* helped me have a bit of work-life balance. I’m happier and *waaay* less frazzled. Besides, curry gives me gas.

**Tracy Middleton**, health and features editor, Allentown, Pennsylvania

### CUTE COMMUTE!

Honk if you like my driving—and my crazy-chic coat. Our picks take you from traffic lights to office space.



#### UNDER COVER

Eighteen pockets for stashing your essentials, yet you won’t look like Inspector Gadget. *Scottevest Trench*, \$150, [scottevest.com](http://scottevest.com)



#### WELCOME FLAT

Profesh, polished, and pain-free, thanks to a shock-absorbing cushioned inner sole. *Rockport Layer Dorsay Flats*, \$130, [zappos.com](http://zappos.com)



#### RAIN? CHECK.

Umbrellas that go all inside out blow; this one’s aerodynamic shape withstands gusts up to 70 mph. *Senz 6 Automatic*, \$80, [senzumbrellas.com](http://senzumbrellas.com)



#### BOOT POINT

The sleekest way to handle heaps of slush, thanks to ground-gripping rubber soles (and comfy block heels!). *Swazey Tall Waterproof Boots*, \$260, [timberland.com](http://timberland.com)



#### HEAD START

Riders, protect your noggin *and* hair: This helmet has a slot in the back to pop out your pony. *Specialized Women’s Duet Helmet*, \$50, [specialized.com](http://specialized.com)



Instagram photographer Benjamin Lowy snapped these pics of New York City commuters between 2013 and 2014. Follow him at @benlowy.



### OH, YOU RANG?

‘Bout time! Enter the rise of delivery-service apps. Because commuting isn’t just your home-work-home round-trip; it’s any daily trek—driving to the grocery store, picking up your dry cleaning—that costs you minutes you can never get back.



#### WASHIO

Summon a “ninja” to whisk away your dirty laundry and bring it back in under 24 hours for a \$6 delivery fee. Wash-and-fold starts at \$1.39 per pound; a dry-cleaned dress runs about \$8.75.



#### SHYP

Snap a photo of any item you want to ship, and Shyp shoots back an estimate using the most cost-effective method. Then they pick it up, pack it, and send it off for a flat fee of \$5 (plus postage).



#### POSTMATES

Delivery of everything from sweaters to Slurpees (really) in under an hour. You pay for the privilege (from \$5, plus a 9 percent service fee on top of the price of your goods), but hey, you’re worth it.



#### INSTACART

Think of this grocery service as a practical Santa. It dispatches a shopper to local stores (including Whole Foods Market and Costco) and brings you the loot in under two hours for \$4. ■

## D. O. A. (OR: DOUCHE ON ARRIVAL)

You made it to the office! Try not to go nuclear on the first person who says “good morning,” m’kay?

### FLIP YOUR RESET SWITCH

You know that vine/GIF/clip that never fails to make you LOL (like any Key & Peele video on YouTube)? Play it on repeat until you simmer down. Feeling joy limits the production of cortisol and helps release endorphins, the happy hormone.

### GRIN IT TO WIN IT

When you enter the office mid-rage, you’re more apt to snap at little things—*No, for real: Who drank the last of the coffee and didn’t make a fresh pot?!*—but studies show even phony happiness can boost your mood. Make eye contact and smile at the next person who walks by.

### PICTURE IT PERFECT

Take five, close your eyes, and visualize how you want your day to go and how you want to act. (Try: a patient, persuasive, and articulate version of yourself. Not: the stress ball who tells her coworker to go to hell.) The mental run-through makes it much easier to transition to being that person, says psychologist Sharon Melnick, Ph.D., author of *Success Under Stress*.

### LET IT GOOO!

Try progressive muscle relaxation. Tense your entire bod (for five seconds), then release the muscles in your toes, working your way up to your neck and head. When your body chills out, your mind will follow.