The New Science on Making Healthy Habits Stick

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Any healthy choice seems doable for a day. Building consistent good habits around exercise, sleep and nutrition in the long term is harder.

Recent research is uncovering how long it takes to cement different kinds of habits—and gives fresh insight into how to make them stick. Simple health habits like handwashing, for instance, take a couple of weeks to develop, while more complicated ones like going to the gym take four to seven months, according to a recent study.

“You can’t mindlessly go to the gym the way you mindlessly shampoo your hair,” says Katy Milkman, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School and co-author of the study, which was published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.