A microscopic view of blood cells. Large, biconcave red blood cells are shown in a vibrant red color. Interspersed among them are numerous smaller, yellowish-green platelets, some of which appear to be interacting or clumping together. The background is dark, making the cells stand out.

love your body

(from the inside out)

Hardest-working
cells in your
bloodstream:
Platelets (enhanced
in yellow) mingle
with red blood cells.

You probably spend time every day thinking about how your body looks. But how often do you consider how it *works*? SELF asked writers to salute some of the oft-ignored internal parts that help power their complex and amazing machine. From this vantage point, a woman's body appears enviably strong and beautiful, however she fares under fluorescent changing-room lights. So step away from the mirror and discover new reasons to love the skin you're living in—and every single thing underneath it.

I love my... **platelets**

I am so highly accident-prone that I could walk to work or go rock climbing and sustain the same scrapes and bruises. I burn my mouth on coffee. I kick myself in the ankle with my other heel. So it's reassuring to know there will always be a part of my body to help me recover: my platelets.

I remember the first time I realized their importance. In European history class, I learned of a Russian prince—one of the many royal hemophiliacs of previous centuries—who had to be carried around on a cushion lest he bleed to death. Later, in biology, I learned about the microscopic components of blood. I was fascinated by the way blood cycles oxygen through the heart and comes out new, like a fountain at the center of a lake.

I was most taken with platelets. A fraction of the size of red blood cells, they are charged with preventing bleeding and bruising. Yet after high school, they quickly fall out of our consciousness (along with the Russian court). As if this weren't insult enough, platelets are colorless. Their only chance to shine is when their sticky bodies band together to help create scabs. But this is the beauty of platelets: They are the fallible body's insurance policy.

Should your insides have the unfortunate luck to take some abuse from the outside world—via a bike accident or just a harshly plucked eyebrow—your platelets swarm into action. They are ultimately the reason I don't have to spend my life trapped on a cushion. And that should give all my other organs something to cell-ebrate. —*Sloane Crosley*

Show your platelets some love

- These tiny cells are lightweights—too much alcohol can temporarily poison your bone marrow and impair platelet production. Limit yourself to one or two drinks most days, says Andrew I. Schafer, M.D., physician-in-chief of the NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital/Weill Cornell Medical Center in New York City.
- Feed them folate. Foods such as spinach, lentils and asparagus keep your bone marrow healthy. "Deficiency in the bone marrow can shut down your body's ability to make platelets, especially when you're pregnant," Dr. Schafer says.
- If you love your platelets, set them free. Donating is harmless and your supply is immediately replenished. Go to GivELife.org for more info. —*Kelly Mickle*

I love my... **tear ducts**

As a writer in Brooklyn, New York, I live close to Broadway theater, but I can rarely afford to see it. So when I do, I revel in the intensity and the drama. What I don't love? Anytime the crowd gives a standing ovation, I know that as soon as my legs unfold, my eyes will start to water. Impassioned applause makes me cry.

It's a magical process: Your brain signals your tear glands, tucked away behind your upper eyelid like some nurse on call, to make tears when you need physical or emotional relief. There are baseline tears, always present to keep eyes moist and protected, and emergency tears, to wash away an errant eyelash or, more mysteriously, to signal our emotions to others. Crying may actually release stress hormones from the body.

I used to find my tendency to cry at the drop of a curtain tragically embarrassing. In college, I worried that the tears broadcast that I was too emotional, uncritical. Now that I'm older and wiser, I'm less enamored with rationality. And I understand that my ducts are more aware of what I'm going through than I am.

I write to connect with other people; watching another creative person do that and receive gratitude for it just *gets* me. Thanks to my tear system, I realize what a wide capacity I have to feel joy for others. Which is not just the stuff of good writing, of course, but the stuff of the good life. —*Courtney E. Martin*

Show your tear ducts some love

- Here's the easiest health advice ever: Blink. "Blinking allows tears to provide a protective coating that prevents dry eyes and keeps out irritants," says Marguerite McDonald, M.D., professor of ophthalmology at New York University School of Medicine in New York City. Your blink rate slows when you're at the computer; artificial tears can keep eyes fresh.
- To reduce your risk for a blocked duct, wash your hands and keep fingers out of your eyes.
- When you apply eyeliner, stop just short of your tear ducts. "Crayon or liquid liner can cause infection," Dr. McDonald warns. Always remove makeup before you hit the hay. —*K.M.*

I love my... **bladder**

Like a silent, sacrificing husband who vacuums every day with scarcely a thank-you in return, my internal organs rarely get a second thought from me. Unless, of course, there's a problem—in which case I race to my doctor's office, full of worry, questions and vows to clean up my act. This is our organs' equivalent of chocolates and flowers.

The one exception to this rule is my bladder. You back-burner her at your own peril. I did that only once in my adult life. My husband and I were taking the kids to a water park and had been driving for hours. My iced coffee had long since moved through my system, but when we arrived, one of the girls was asleep in the back. So I stayed in the car, my bladder uncomfortably full, while my husband took our other daughter to the park. Vivian slept. And slept. And slept as if Prince Charming himself couldn't wake her, and meanwhile my bladder was having none of it. I wound up draping towels over the windows and peeing into the paper cup my coffee had come in. It was utterly gross, and it taught me a lesson: Heed the bladder, or she will make you pay the price in humiliation.

I now see the positive side of having such an impatient organ. Because I am practiced at ignoring my bodily signals—jogging through knee pain, for instance—my bladder teaches me daily one of the lessons that the Dalai Lama himself hopes to impart to the masses: Live in the present; come back to the moment. I'm pretty sure my bladder is a Buddhist. —Stephanie Dolgoff

Show your bladder some love

- When you gotta go, you *gotta* go. "Holding it in too long can stretch out your bladder, causing incontinence or infections," says Tomas L. Griebbling, M.D., vice chairman of the department of urology at the University of Kansas Medical Center in Kansas City.
- Drink more H₂O. Dehydration can cause the urine to become too concentrated, sometimes leading to more bathroom breaks for you.
- Your bladder can have pet peeves. "Some foods and beverages tend to irritate the bladder," Dr. Griebbling says. Common culprits are caffeine, acidic citrus and pineapple. "What bothers one person may not affect another, so watch how your diet changes your symptoms," Dr. Griebbling suggests. —K.M.

I love my... **cervix**

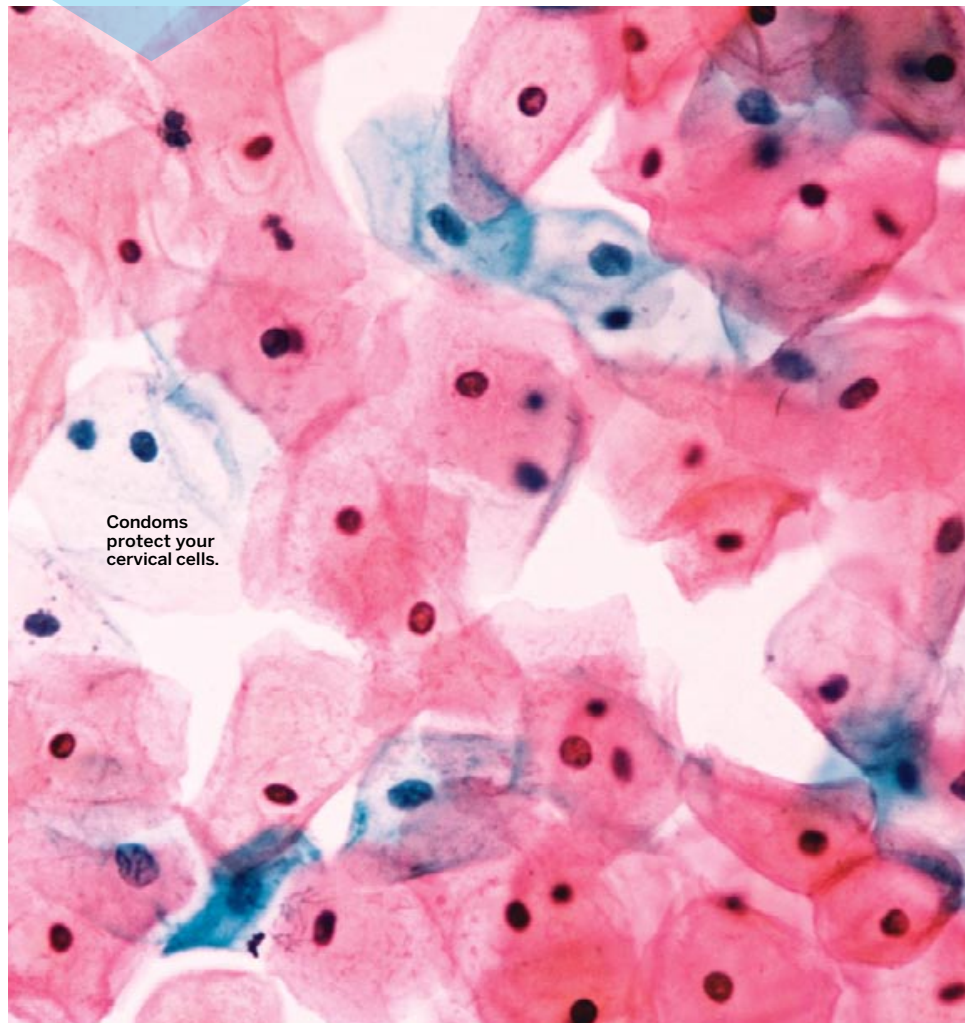
I was in a highly compromising position at the gynecologist's when I received the weirdest compliment of my life. "You have a perfect cervix," my doctor cheerfully told me. "You could be a model for my med students." I had just graduated college, and money was scarce—but not so scarce I'd submit to a public Pap smear. Still, I carried my strange secret with pride. Even in sweatpants and a ponytail, I knew at least one part of me was a Platonic ideal.

Then last year I got pregnant, and I began to hear more about my cervix than I ever imagined possible. An ultrasound technician told me that a short cervix may be associated with premature birth; my long and lovely one would likely help carry me safely to full term. Later, my obstetrician pulled out a plastic model and showed me how the skinny canal would amazingly flatten itself out to allow the baby to travel from womb to world.

Do you know that there is a section of the cervix known as the *transformation zone*? It's the part of the organ where one type of cell changes into another type as the body prepares for puberty, menstruation and menopause. When my daughter arrived—7 pounds, 4 ounces and right on time—my cervix had accomplished something truly praiseworthy. And I knew in that moment I had entered my own transformation zone. —Sara Austin

Show your cervix some love

- Ace your exams. One out of seven American women blows off her Pap smears; without regular pelvic checkups, your doc can't test for human papillomavirus (HPV) infections and cell abnormalities that put you at risk for cervical cancer.
- Fill your plate with a garden variety: Women whose diet is high in vegetables were more than 50 percent less likely to have long-lasting HPV infections, according to a study from the University of Arizona in Tucson. —K.M.



Condoms protect your cervical cells.

Quit cigs and
your lungs
will love you
right back.

I love my... **liver**

One of the organs closest to my heart, literally and figuratively, is my liver, a shiny, russet-colored organ that weighs 3 pounds and sits right behind the rib cage. It works around the clock, like a robot or perpetual-motion machine. But it never complains; in fact, I never know it's there. If I damage it, it heals without a fuss. Like the best of friends, it never judges or points fingers. I can throw anything at it—tequila, coffee, french fries, Prosecco, dodgy oysters, cured meats or the myriad toxins of urban life—and it settles down to work, breaking down the poisons without one word of self-righteousness or condemnation about moving to the country or going on the wagon.

Last night I enjoyed a (minor) debauch: two stiff cocktails made with Herradura, key lime juice and cranberry juice, followed by roughly half a bottle of rosé. Everyone knows you're not supposed to mix hard alcohol with wine—except my liver. I awoke this morning as fresh and new as a kitten. My liver took good care of me as I slept.

And the liver is magic. It's the wizard of the body, the man behind the curtain. If bandits stole a big chunk, it would regrow; the liver is the only organ that can regenerate itself wholly, from as little as one quarter of its original size.

Without my liver, I'd be flat, boring and puritanical. I'd also be dead, but let's not quibble: As internal organs go, it is my hero. —Kate Christensen

Show your liver some love

- Watch your waistline to protect what's inside. "People who carry extra weight—especially around their midsection—are more likely to develop fatty liver, a liver disease that affects 30 to 40 million Americans," says Paul Kwo, M.D., associate professor of medicine at Indiana University School of Medicine in Indianapolis.
- But don't pop diet pills. In some cases—depending on factors such as your genetics and drinking habits—dietary supplements can prove toxic to your liver, even in low doses. Case in point: Hydroxycut recalled some products after an FDA warning that people taking them suffered serious liver injuries.
- Tattoos—even body piercings—can put you at risk for hepatitis C, the bloodborne infection that can cause cirrhosis. Be a badass, but make sure tattoo, ink and piercing implements are used only once and the area is sterilized first. —K.M.



I love my... **lungs**

Every afternoon, at the hour my body is most yearning for a nap, I put on my running shoes. I do so with reluctance—after all, curling up in bed seems so much easier, and it doesn't involve changing clothes or stretching my hamstrings. What motivates me is not the calories I'll burn (though I'll take that, too), but something that happens 15 minutes into my run.

By then, I'm jogging along a bluff above a river, and I've gotten into the rhythm of the exercise. My breathing slows. I'm aware of the expansion and compression of my rib cage. Although my lungs are working hard, oxygenating my blood, their measured, efficient cadences instill in me a feeling of almost hypnotic calm. I think of nothing—I only breathe. It's what yoga should do for me but doesn't. In yoga class, when everyone else is serenely practicing *pranayama*, I'm wondering if the cat ought to be put on a diet.

For me, running is yoga—and it is also a celebration of the lungs, those two slick lobes that surround the heart. The lungs are the organ of breath, and breath is the source of life. And life, as pretty much anyone will tell you, is kind of a miracle. I felt that way most powerfully in the first few seconds after my daughter was born, when I held my breath, waiting to hear hers, listening for that angry, startled squawk that would signal the beginning of her brand-new, beautiful life. —Emily Chenoweth

Show your lungs some love

- Get moving. "Workouts exercise your lungs, improving lung capacity, which helps your body provide more oxygen to your muscles to perform even simple activities," says Gary Frenette, M.D., an oncologist in Charlotte, North Carolina.
- Wear a protective mask when cleaning or painting; the material will limit your exposure to dust and toxins and protect your lungs from fine particles.
- Catch your breath. Deep-breathing exercises can increase lung function, which delivers more oxygen to the body, giving you new energy, Dr. Frenette says. —K.M.