

16 Things You Can Do to Have a Long, Healthy, and Happy Life

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The calculus of aging offers us two options: We can live a shorter life with more years of disability, or we can live the longest possible life with the fewest bad years. As my centenarian friends showed me, the choice is largely up to us.

Dan Buettner

The Blue Zones: Lessons for Living Longer From the People Who've Lived the Longest
(p. 262)

Unfortunately, the vast majority of baby boomers do a terrible job of preparing for old age. High-fat diets, smoking, excessive drinking, and lack of exercise not only reduce people's chances of achieving older age, they markedly increase the likelihood of a longer period of poor health in a shorter life. Yet many of us probably have the genes to get to old age and perhaps extreme old age. We just have to learn how to use them.

Thomas Perls, MD, MPH, et al.

Living to 100: Lessons in Living to Your Maximum Potential at Any Age (p. 155)

- 1. Have low blood sugar.** Keeping your fasting blood sugar under 100 milligrams per decaliter through lifestyle or medication prevents the diabetes-related illnesses that shorten a lot of lives. Andrew Weil, MD, believes that high blood sugar is the model for accelerated aging and early death.
- 2. Have low blood pressure.** The new target of the American Heart Association is 115/75 milligrams of mercury, since every 20 points over 115 and 10 points over 75 doubles the risk of heart attack and stroke, the greatest killer of Americans.
- 3. Have low blood total cholesterol.** Keeping total cholesterol under 200 milligrams per decaliter is important in lowering risks for heart disease, stroke, and Alzheimer's disease.
- 4. Keep weight low and steady.** Unfortunately, two-thirds of Americans are either overweight or obese, which is a risk factor for eight of ten leading causes of death in the U. S.

- 5. Eat fewer calories.** Americans consume nearly 3,000 calories per day and live about six years shorter than Okinawans who eat 2,000 to 2,400 calories per day. Eating fewer calories is the only thing shown to extend lifespans of any animal species.
- 6. Eat a mostly vegetarian "Mediterranean diet" with coffee and tea.** This diet of mostly whole grains, fruits, vegetables, plant oils, low- or non-fat dairy products, and lean fish and poultry has been associated with longer life expectancies in nearly two dozen studies.
- 7. Take their vitamins.** Vitamin deficiencies in D, B12, and folate that can occur in older age can be rectified to some degree by taking multivitamins, but always consult with your doctor first.
- 8. Exercise regularly, are active, and stay busy after retirement.** Only one-fourth of Americans exercise regularly even though brisk walking for 30 minutes or so four or five times a week may deliver more health benefits than anything else.
- 9. Don't smoke or have stopped smoking after a short period of time.** Chronic smoking over a lifetime takes seven to fourteen years off the normal life expectancy.
- 10. Drank little alcohol.** Some benefits can be gained by moderate alcohol intake, but keeping to one drink per day for a woman and two drinks per day for a man is essential. Any type of alcoholic beverage has benefits, not just red wine.
- 11. Get regular and restful sleep.** This is an overlooked health issue in the U. S. as most older people get only about six hours sleep per day while centenarians sleep nearly eight hours. Sleep deprivation is a cause of high blood sugar, obesity, anxiety, and depression.
- 12. Have healthy gums.** Gum disease, found in three-fourths of Americans, is a cause of low-grade systemic inflammation in the body and has been linked to high rates of heart disease, stroke, and Alzheimer's disease.
- 13. Challenge their minds.** Keeping brains busy learning throughout the lifespan has been found to be associated with greater mental abilities and less dementia in older people.
- 14. Stay positive in attitude and avoid chronic anxiety and depression.** Negative attitudes, chronic anxiety, and chronic depression have been linked to early death through higher levels of heart disease, stroke, Parkinson's disease, and Alzheimer's disease.

15. Shed stressors, have daily structure in their lives, and are resilient. Learning to deal with stress and leave it behind in a resilient manner lowers the risk for many life-shortening physical and mental diseases. Having a daily structure and routine is beneficial, too.

16. Stay socially connected and have a serenity and a purpose to their lives. Social isolation is a risk factor for many diseases. Finding serenity in life and having a purpose to getting up each day is a strong predictor for living a long, long time and having good physical, cognitive, and emotional functioning.

Adapted from: Howard, ME. How to Live to 100 Years Old: 16 Common Lifestyle Characteristics of the Oldest and Healthiest People in the World. Concord, CA: Biomed General Press, in press.