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SEVEN STEPS TO LIVING LONGER AND HEALTHIER

Here are seven steps that can help counter the effects of aging

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Humans have searched for the secret to immortality for thousands of years. For some, that quest now means sleeping in hyperbaric chambers, experimenting with cryotherapy or blasting oneself with infrared light.



Most aging experts doubt that these actions will meaningfully extend the upper limits of the human life span. What they do believe is that by practicing a few simple behaviors, many people can live more healthily and longer, reaching 80, 90 and even 100 in good physical and mental shape. The interventions just aren't as exotic as transfusing yourself with a young person's blood.

"People are looking for the magic pill," said Dr. Luigi Ferrucci, the scientific director of the National Institute on Aging, "and the magic pill is already here."

Below are seven tips from geriatricians on how to add more good years to your life.

MOVE MORE

The No. 1 thing experts recommended was to keep your body active. Study after study has shown that exercise reduces the risk of premature death.

Physical activity keeps the heart and circulatory system healthy and provides protection against chronic diseases that affect the body and mind. It also strengthens muscles, which can reduce older people's risk of falls.

"If we spend some of our adult years building up our muscle mass, our strength, our balance, our cardiovascular endurance, then as the body ages, you're starting from a stronger place for whatever is to come," said Dr. Anna Chang, a professor of medicine specializing in geriatrics at the University of California, San Francisco.

The best exercise is any activity you enjoy doing and will stick with. You don't have to do a lot, either — the American Heart Association recommends 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise per week, meaning just walking a little more than 20 minutes a day is beneficial.

EAT MORE FRUITS AND VEGETABLES

The experts didn't recommend one specific diet over another, but they generally advised eating in moderation and aiming for more fruits and vegetables and fewer processed foods.

The Mediterranean diet — which emphasizes fresh produce in addition to whole grains, legumes, nuts, fish and olive oil — is a good model for healthy eating, and it's been shown to lower the risk of heart disease, cancer, diabetes and dementia.

Some experts say that maintaining a healthy weight is important for longevity, but to Dr. John Rowe, a professor of health policy and aging at Columbia University, that's less of a concern, especially as people enter old age. "I was always more worried about my patients who lost weight than my patients who gained weight," Dr. Rowe said.

GET ENOUGH SLEEP

Sleep is sometimes overlooked, but it plays a major role in healthy aging. Research has found that the amount of sleep a person averages each night is correlated with the risk of death from any cause and that consistently getting good quality sleep can add several years to a person's life. Sleep appears to be especially important for brain health: A 2021 study found that people who slept less than five hours a night had twice the risk of developing dementia.

"As people get older, they need more sleep, rather than less," said Dr. Alison Moore, a professor of medicine and the chief of geriatrics, gerontology and palliative care at the University of California, San Diego. Seven to nine hours is generally recommended, she added.

DON'T SMOKE OR DRINK TOO MUCH

This goes without saying, but smoking cigarettes raises your risk for all kinds of deadly diseases. "There is no dose of cigarette smoke that is good for you," Dr. Rowe said.

We're starting to understand how bad excessive alcohol use is, too. More than one drink per day for women and two for men — and possibly even less than that — raises the risk for heart disease and atrial fibrillation, liver disease and seven types of cancer.

MANAGE YOUR CHRONIC CONDITIONS

Nearly half of American adults have hypertension, 40 percent have high cholesterol and more than one-third have prediabetes. All the healthy behaviors mentioned above will help manage these conditions and prevent them from developing into even more serious diseases, but sometimes lifestyle interventions aren't enough. That's why experts say it's critical to follow your doctor's advice to keep things under control.

"It's not fun to take the medications; it's not fun to check your blood pressure and check your blood sugar," Dr. Chang said. "But when we optimize all those things in a whole package, they also help us live longer, healthier, better lives."

PRIORITIZE YOUR RELATIONSHIPS

Psychological health often takes a back seat to physical health, but Dr. Chang said it's just as important. "Isolation and loneliness is as big a detriment to our health as smoking," she said, adding that it puts us "at a higher risk of dementia, heart disease, stroke."

Relationships are key to not only living more healthily, but also more happily. According to the Harvard Study of Adult Development, strong relationships are the biggest predictor of wellbeing.

Dr. Rowe tells the medical students he teaches that one of the best indicators of how well an elderly patient will be faring in six months is to ask him "how many friends or family he's seen in the last week."

CULTIVATE A POSITIVE MIND-SET

Even thinking positively can help you live longer. Several studies have found that optimism is associated with a lower risk of heart disease, and people who score high on tests of optimism live 5 percent to 15 percent longer than people who are more pessimistic.

That may be because optimists tend to have healthier habits and lower rates of some chronic diseases, but even when accounting for those factors, the research shows that people who think positively still live longer.

If you had to pick one healthy practice for longevity, "do some version of physical activity," Dr. Moore said. "If you can't do that, then focus on being positive."