



## What Research Tells Us about Living a Productive and Satisfying Old Age

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Are there magic bullets that will insure that every person can grow old gracefully – live out the final years with soundness in mind and body? Of course not. Illnesses or accidents can strike unexpectedly, and no one has the capacity to alter completely the influence of genetic destiny or avoid the inevitable decline of bodily systems. Yet there is much that each person can do – along with family members, friends, and caregivers – to maximize the likelihood of completing the final stages of life in strong, active, and satisfying fashion.

Professionally-vetted research, including studies I have completed with my colleague Edward Thompson, Jr., reveal that lifestyles can have a powerful effect on extending both the quality and quantity of the years available to each person as he or she grows older. Optimal choices require people to be well-informed and exercise good judgment about everything from eating habits and physical activity, to keeping in touch with other people and making regular visits to the doctor.

### Choices that Improve Personal Health

- **Don't smoke – or stop smoking.** Tobacco use is estimated to be the leading cause of preventable death. Not smoking or chewing tobacco is one of the best ways to reduce chances of disability, pain, and premature demise. The longer and more a person smokes, the greater the health risks – including a greater likelihood of suffering from lung cancer, heart disease, or a stroke. Once a person quits, the risk of heart disease, stroke, and several cancers declines dramatically over time; and so does the risk of contracting various infections. Circulation and lung functioning improve, oxygen levels increase and lungs clean themselves, and blood pressure and pulse rates decline. Also, the air becomes cleaner for other people who live or work with the former smoker.
- **Eat well.** Overeating, eating too fast, and eating the wrong things – all can lead to unhealthy outcomes. Healthy diets include fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy products. Fiber, unsaturated fats, complex carbohydrates, and lean protein are recommended; but refined sugars, trans-fats, and saturated fats should be avoided. Cholesterol and salt intake need to be limited, but drinking water throughout the day boosts health.
- **Stay physically and mentally active, and monitor weight.** Regular physical activity is vital for older as well as younger people – the key, along with diet, to making sure that weight is within the proper range for each age group. Being active reduces risks for certain illnesses such as diabetes and heart diseases. Regular physical activity increases blood circulation, regulates metabolism, boosts energy, and improves mental sharpness and mood.

- **Drink in moderation.** Drinking too much alcohol has a long list of negative effects on physical and mental health. As people get older, their bodies do not process alcohol as effectively and efficiently as they did when they were younger. People who take multiple prescription drugs, as many older men and women do, can also experience negative side effects from drinking alcohol at the same time. Unfortunately, the risk of alcohol (and other substance) abuse is increasing among older adults, and this problem is expected to continue to rise as baby boomers enter into old age.
- **Get plenty of sleep.** Getting enough sleep is just as important as eating well and staying active. Adequate sleep increases your energy, capacity to exercise, mood, memory, ability to concentrate, skin elasticity, muscle and bone healing, sexual performance, and immunity levels. It also reduces your body fat, cholesterol, and blood pressure levels. Most people should get seven hours or more of sleep every night although there are variations from person to person. Regular aerobic exercise and strength training will help you sleep better and longer.

## Social Ties and Regular, Preventive Health Care

Many keys to aging well depend on individual choices, but others center on each person's relationships with friends, family, community groups, and the medical care system. Neighborhoods, towns, and cities, along with community groups, can do a great deal to help by reaching out to older residents. Especially for older men or women living alone, vital help could be something as simple as regular visits from volunteers or occasional transportation to religious services, community events, and medical appointments.

- **Connect to people and the world.** Maintaining personal relationships and helping others is good for people physically and emotionally. Research reveals that people who live without friendships or family ties are more likely to suffer chronic illnesses and early death, while people in committed relationships and those who have regular social contacts get sick less often and recover faster when they do become ill. Being able to turn to a network of family, friends, and neighbors for enjoyment and support reduces life's stresses. Volunteering in the community also helps older adults to feel better and enjoy improved health.
- **Visit the doctor regularly – and do the recommended tests.** People over the age of 50 should schedule a doctor's visit annually and keep their doctors fully informed about health and lifestyle developments. Follow-up tests to catch health problems early are just as important as regular visits to the doctor. Older people, above all, must get all of the preventive screenings that are recommended – including blood tests, urinalysis, rectal exams and colonoscopies, blood pressure tests, electrocardiograms, and tuberculosis tests.
- **Avoid stress and find ways to relax and blow off steam.** People who find themselves in antagonistic or stressful situations – and cannot relax easily – have been shown to be at higher risk for many health problems that often strike older adults, such as diabetes, infections, stroke, heart disease, hypertension, cancer, memory loss, and migraine headaches. Depression can also plague people who experience too much stress. Time to relax and exercise can stave off trouble, although sometimes psychological treatment and medication are also necessary.

Making the “right choices” as suggested by the best available research on aging cannot prevent illness or decline in later life. Nevertheless, combined with a bit of luck and good family genes, adhering to an optimal lifestyle game plan can add happy and healthy years to most people's lives.

Read more in Edward H. Thompson, Jr. and Lenard W. Kaye, *A Man's Guide to Healthy Aging: Stay Smart, Strong, and Active* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).