



healthy habits CAN LENGTHEN LIFE

NIH News in Health

Have you heard the advice to exercise, choose a healthy diet, keep a lean weight, never smoke, and limit alcohol?

Researchers wanted to find out whether people who follow this advice live longer than those who don't. So, they compared lifespan and other data from thousands of adults with all five of these healthy habits to those without.

People in the healthy habits group got at least 30 minutes of exercise each day. They ate the recommended amounts of fruits, vegetables, nuts, whole grains, and healthy fats. And they limited salt, sugary drinks, trans fat, and red and processed meats. They also limited alcohol. Women

had no more than one drink each day and men no more than two drinks. They also maintained a normal weight and didn't smoke.

The people in the other group didn't exercise, have a healthy diet, or limit drinking. They smoked and were overweight.

Based on the results, the researchers estimated that a 50-year-old woman who had all five habits would live, on average, to age 93. In contrast, if she didn't have any of these habits, she would live on average to age 79.

Habits, page 2



COUNSELOR CORNER

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Q: Other than eating right and exercising, what I can do to live a longer, happier life?

A: We all know that eating right and getting regular exercise contribute to much greater overall health and wellness, and while these are very important aspects to maintaining good health, they are not the sole factors to overall well-being.

When we make healthy food choices, we are selecting the options that give our bodies the "good fuel" – the nutrients it needs to feel good and work optimally. Just as we need to be mindful of putting healthy food into our bodies for optimal health, we also need to be selective about what we put in our heads and hearts such as the quality of our thoughts and the quality of our experiences.

Are our thoughts typically positive or negative? What impact is this having on our stress and sense of well-being? Are we being present to the people and experiences we say we value? Are we taking care of our emotional needs and processing our feelings, or suppressing/avoiding them and letting them fester?

If we are eating healthy but filling our hearts and minds with toxic thoughts, excessive worry, regret, and high stress, we will feel depleted and discouraged.

Continued on Page 2

COUNSELOR CORNER CONT.

Here are some suggestions to put “good fuel” back into our hearts and minds:

- **Be present.** To savor life, we must be present to this moment, not living in the future and then regretting the moments we have missed when we look back. Practice being present to what is happening now and when you notice you are living in the past or the future, bring your focus back to this moment.
- **Laugh!** Laughter has been shown to reduce stress, boost the immune system, reduce pain and improve blood flow to the brain. Healthy laughter encourages us to find the lighter side of life and connects us in positive ways to others.
- **Have an attitude of gratitude** and develop healthy outlets for expressing and processing emotions.
- **Find purpose and meaning in life.** Researchers who studied people in areas of the world with the longest life span found that doing something that matters is correlated to seven extra years of life.
- **Foster and maintain healthy relationships.** In a Harvard study, researchers found that the strength of people’s relationships was a better indicator of how well they would age than their cholesterol levels.
- **Make self-care a priority** and take time for the activities that “recharge your batteries.” Whether that’s reading a good book, gardening or soaking in a warm bath, regularly make time to rest your body and your mind.
- **Meditation leads to stress reduction** and lowered blood pressure, and research also suggests it could increase the activity of an enzyme associated with longevity. Taking as little as 15 minutes a day to meditate can have significant health benefits.
- **Practice self-compassion** by extending the same kindness and support to yourself that you do to others. Self-compassion helps us to feel seen and valued, and we all do better when we are encouraged rather than criticized. Believe in yourself and know you deserve a happy, healthy life.



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Habits, from Page 1

For a 50-year-old man, the average lifespan was about 88 years old with healthy behaviors and only 76 years without.

“This study underscores the importance of following healthy lifestyle habits for improving longevity in the U.S. population,” says Dr. Frank B. Hu, senior author of the study.

BUILD HEALTHY HABITS

• **Plan.** Identify unhealthy patterns and triggers. Set realistic goals. Write down steps to help you achieve them.

• **Change your surroundings.** Find ways to make healthier choices easy choices. Remove temptations. Work for changes in your community, like safe places to walk.

• **Ask for support.** Find friends, family, co-workers, neighbors, or groups for support or ask people to join you.

• **Fill your time with healthy activities.** Try exercise, a favorite hobby, or spending time with family and friends.

• **Track your progress.** Record how things are going to help you stay focused and catch slip-ups.

• **Imagine the future.** Think about future benefits to stay on track.

• **Reward yourself.** Give yourself a healthy reward when you’ve achieved a small goal or milestone, like a massage or personal time.

• **Be patient.** Improvement takes time, and setbacks happen. Focus on progress, not perfection.

Source: NIH News in Health