

THE SECRETS TO Healthy Aging

How long you live isn't the only thing that matters – *how well you live* counts too. Experts are aiming their ample brainpower at helping people stay sharp and active for as long as possible. Here are the steps you can take now.

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MAY/JUNE 2025 GH 53

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LIFE + HEALTH / GOALS

Are you hoping to stick around to a ripe old age—say, your late 80s or beyond? If you're like many people, the answer might be no—maybe because you picture being sick or disabled, being a burden to your family or having a poor quality of life.

But what if you could reach a very old age and remain fit enough to manage a 5K or hike steep trails, or at least live independently and keep pace with your great-grandkids?

Scientists today are focused on something new: your *health span*. Rather than simply helping people celebrate many birthdays, they want to make those older years great ones, says Matt Kaerberlein, Ph.D., CEO of Optispan and a former director of the Healthy Aging and Longevity Research Institute at the University of Washington.

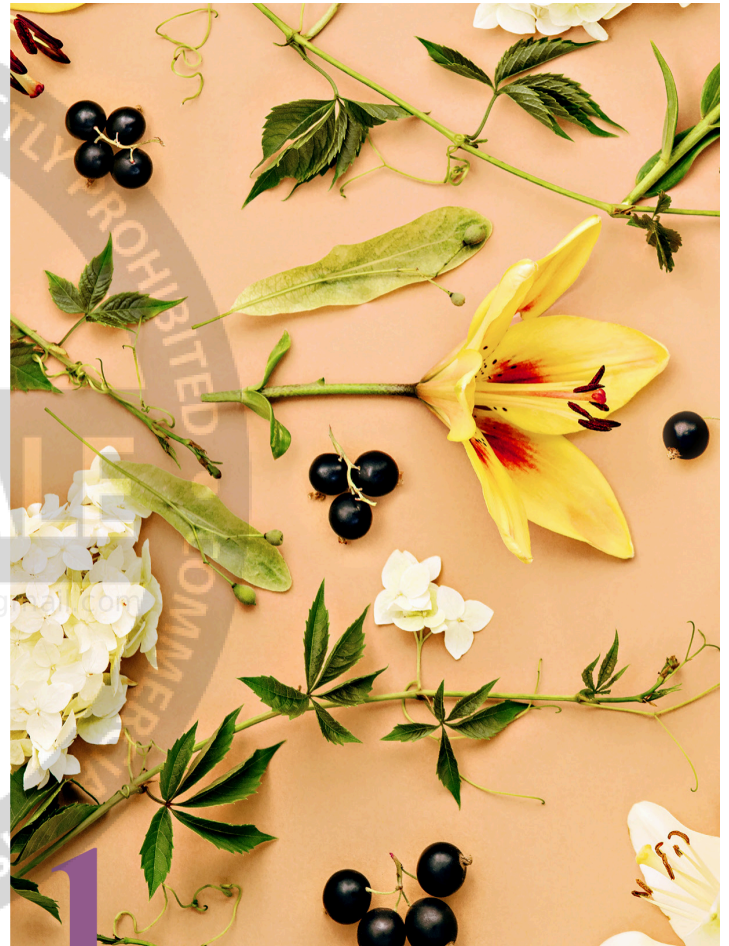
A couple of definitions: Your life span is how many years you're alive. Your health span, though, is how many of those years you are alert, engaged and active, says Stephen Kopecky, M.D., a cardiologist at the Mayo Clinic and the author of *Live Younger Longer*. With a longer health span, you still may get sick or develop a chronic condition at some point, but if you do, it won't put too big a crimp on your later years.

What Makes Us Feel Elderly?

Conditions we associate with aging typically start in our cells and tissues before they become visible, and health span scientists are trying to figure out what causes these to get so messed up as we get older. The list so far includes dysfunctions of mitochondria, the engines of cells; shortening of telomeres, substances at the ends of chromosomes that act like shoelace tips to keep them from fraying; and glitches in info transfer between parts of a cell.

A bunch of factors affect cellular aging, including the environment we live in and our genes. But lifestyle is a big part of it, and it's become clear that things we know are bad for us, such as the high sugar intake that can increase the risk of type 2 diabetes and the lack of exercise that can lead to heart disease and stroke, do their dirty work by causing cellular dysfunction. The upside? The same things known to help prevent conditions like diabetes, stroke and heart attacks are effective at influencing the biology of aging and keeping cells healthy, says Kaerberlein. The ideal result: We feel good, even as the years tick by.

As experts learn more about how to expand health span, some advice may evolve. For now, these are the best tools to keep you at your healthiest, now and well into the future.



HEALTH SPAN STRATEGY

Address your stress

Being worried is human, but feeling chronically stressed speeds up aging, says Elissa Epel, Ph.D., director of the Aging, Metabolism and Emotion Center at the University of California, San Francisco. Among its other effects, stress fuels low-grade inflammation that damages cells and affects the length of chromosome-protecting telomeres, she says. Four strategies to ease it:

Take nature breaks.

Even short ones are great for reducing angst, according to a research review—one study showed that there were benefits to spending just 20 to 30 minutes in nature a few times each week.

Time-travel mentally.

One quick stress reducer is “time distancing,” a way to develop perspective that Epel recommends (and often uses). Think about your biggest

worries and ask yourself how much they will matter in a week, a month or a year, or decades from now. Things we're sweating over today will almost always seem meaningless later (or at least not like the pivotal moments we currently imagine they are)—and it can be a real relief to remember this.

Schedule “inner-me” time.

Meditate, write in a journal or go for a brisk walk or run



2

HEALTH SPAN STRATEGY

Watch your blood sugar

Having consistently high levels of blood glucose, or levels that frequently swing between high and low, damages many cells. That sets the stage for diseases like diabetes and heart disease that can shorten health span. Try these ideas:

Eat a Mediterranean diet. This style of eating—full of vegetables, fruits, high-quality fats (from foods like olive oil and nuts) and protein (particularly from fish)—is not only ideal for overall health but also a great way to keep blood sugar in check, Dr. Kopecky says. Start by adding some of these foods to each meal.

Go green (with your tea). Japanese researchers found that drinking green tea regularly lowered blood glucose levels in people without diabetes. One reason: It reduces the amounts of unhealthy bacteria in the gut.

Track your sugar. If you're at high risk for heart disease and prediabetes (meaning, elevated blood sugar levels that don't quite cross the diabetes threshold), you may benefit from extra monitoring to learn how your blood sugar changes based on what you eat. If your doctor has found that your A1C is above 5.7 despite your eating and exercising in what you believe is an optimal way, Dr. Lala suggests asking the doc whether temporarily wearing a continuous glucose monitor and checking it after eating different foods could help you make healthier choices.

to get into a zen-like internal space, suggests Anu Lala, M.D., a cardiologist at Mount Sinai Hospital. This can inspire you to stay on track with other routines that help reduce your levels of stress. "The days I take the time to meditate are the days I do the most healthy eating and exercise," Dr. Lala says.

Designate a phone-free zone. Many of us are conditioned to check our smartphones dozens of times a day, but researchers have linked too much screen time to stress, anxiety and poor sleep. Cutting back—by, say, making Saturday morning a phone-free period in your home—will lower your stress levels, especially when you use that time to move your body, as a study by German researchers showed.

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MAY/JUNE 2025 GH 55

THE FUTURE OF FEELING BETTER LONGER

Longevity therapies have moved from science fiction to scientific fact, says Kaerberlein. "We now know many processes in the body to target," he says. So far the action has been mainly in the lab, but further studies could lead to effective drugs to help people live longer. Here, some things researchers are tinkering with:

The drug **rapamycin** activates natural pathways that protect and rejuvenate cells. In dozens of studies in mice, it delayed age-related decline and sometimes reversed it.

Drugs called **senolytics** act like internal vacuum cleaners, sucking up cells that not only are defective but also deform other cells.

Taurine is an amino acid that small studies have suggested can tame the inflammation behind diseases of aging.

Gene therapy—i.e., inserting a healthy gene into cells to replace a defective one—is being tested to counter certain processes that cause cells to age.

Gene-editing medications (that, say, remove mutations from genes) may one day conquer genetics-based illnesses such as Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases.



HEALTH SPAN STRATEGY

Move your body

Regular exercise, of course, keeps our muscles strong to help us stay active as we get older. But it can also fight inflammation throughout the body and keep insulin levels from going high enough to be cell-damaging. Four ways to get that boost:

Do something extra. We all need formal cardio—say, walking, running, swimming or playing pickleball. Ideally shoot for at least 150 minutes each week—doing it in spurts is fine—but it's wise to move all day long, Dr. Kopecky says. Walk around your office every half hour, sweep your kitchen before plopping down in front of the TV and take the stairs whenever possible.

Add strength training to the mix. Some form of resistance training is crucial, Kaeberlein says. That could be lifting weights, using resistance bands or doing body-weight exercises. “The loss of lean muscle mass is one of the biggest predictors of frailty in the elderly,” he adds.

Up your protein intake. Muscles grow when you feed them protein, but for optimal strength as you age you may need more than the daily recommendations. Kaeberlein suggests 1.5 g of protein per kilogram of body weight, which means that a 150-pound woman would take in 102 g of protein daily. A smart tip: Include some protein in every meal from foods like nuts, eggs, soy protein, lentils, beans, fish and lean meat.

Work on your balance. Yoga is a great way to do this (there are lots of free videos online if you can't get to a studio). “It improves both muscle tone and balance,” says Dr. Lala, which helps prevent falls and lets you move with ease.

4

HEALTH SPAN STRATEGY

Protect your heart

Yes, heart disease is the top killer of women—but even when it's not fatal it can leave people unable to lead active, thriving lives. (The same is true for stroke.) To keep your cardiovascular system in tip-top shape, prioritize exercise and try these tips:

Rediscover your kitchen. It may seem easier to order takeout, but when you cook you get to control portion sizes, use healthy ingredients and limit added sugars and saturated fats. Make cooking fun by trying easy new recipes, and amp them up with spices and flavor boosters like citrus, interesting vinegars, herbs and ginger.

Experiment with fermented foods. Fermented soy products like miso and natto can significantly lower the risk of high blood pressure when eaten regularly, Japanese researchers have found. And drinking the fermented dairy product kefir each day—try it in smoothies!—may lower heart disease risk.

Call your friends. People who feel lonely have a higher risk of heart disease, stroke and depression. Sign up for a group dance class and connect with others there, or start a book club with friends. Just picking up the phone and chatting with someone for 10 minutes a few times a week significantly reduces loneliness, research has found.

Get enough sleep. It's one of the most important things you can do to improve your health span, Dr. Kopecky says. While you snooze, your body repairs crucial tissue, including in your heart. Aim to keep to the same sleep schedule every day, and create a bedtime routine: Put aside your phone an hour before sleep, and do something soothing—maybe take a bath, read, meditate or write down things you're grateful for (or all of the above!).

