

Keep Body, Mind Fit To Prolong Life

By Jennifer M. Grow

In 2002, more than 70,000 Americans were 100 years or older, according to Harvard Medical School, Cambridge, MA. By 2050, the number of centenarians in the United States could reach 800,000.

What's the secret? A number of factors may contribute, including genetics and advancements in medicine and public health. However, researchers from the Administration on Aging and Harvard Medical School have identified a number of health practices that all senior citizens — and future senior citizens — can use to prolong their lives, and maintain their independence and quality of life.

These practices include:

- Don't drink excessively or smoke.
- If you do smoke, quit as soon as possible.
- Exercise regularly.
- Eat a healthy diet rich in fruits and vegetables and low in saturated fat.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Challenge your mind. Read, play a musical instrument, paint, or perform some other regular, stimulating mental activity; it may help prevent age-related memory loss.
- Learn to manage stress effectively and keep a positive outlook.
- Maintain long-term healthy relationships with family and friends.

Stay active

Engaging in regular exercise is one of the most beneficial things a non-smoker can do for better health. According to the National Safety Council, regular exercise can help you increase your energy level, reduce stress, help you fight disease and get a good night's sleep.

According to the Administration on Aging, the majority of older Americans don't get enough exercise. Lack of physical exercise and poor dietary habits, taken together, have become the second largest underlying cause of death in the United States. (The No. 1 underlying cause is smoking.)

According to experts at the Mayo Clinic, Rochester, MN, regular exercise can reduce your risk of heart attack, stroke, high blood pressure, diabetes, osteoporosis, depression and anxiety, osteoarthritis, falls and broken bones, and some types of cancer.

Anyone older than 35 should consult a physician before beginning an exercise program. Ease into your program gradually. Set reasonable goals, and monitor your progress carefully. Be careful not to do too much too soon.

According to Harvard Medical School, you can benefit from increasing all-around physical activity in addition to a regular exercise regime. For example, keep up with the gardening and yard work, rake leaves, go for walks. Even a moderate level of sustained activity helps. Strong

muscles can help you remain independent longer and can help prevent injuries from falls. In 2002, more than 4,900 Americans older than 65 died as a result of a fall, according to National Safety Council statistics.

Don't smoke

The most beneficial thing a smoker can do to improve his or her health is to quit smoking. Smoking brings an early death to 400,000 people each year and reduces the life span of the average smoker by 12 years, according to the National Institute on Aging.

According to the institute, as soon as you stop smoking, the health of your heart and circulatory system improves. While lung damage due to smoking is permanent, quitting may slow further damage.



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