

12 Secrets

to Feel Younger & Live Longer



*"We don't stop playing because we grow old.
We grow old because we stop playing."*

George Bernard Shaw



A long, healthy life is about much more than good genes; it's highly dependent on building healthy habits. Habits—both good and bad—are integral to everyday life. Part of forming healthy habits is to become intentional with them until they become ingrained into your daily routine. It will take effort on your part, but if the payoff could be a more youthful, longer, healthier life, then it's worth it, right?

So what's the formula for success? Well, what better way to find and adopt healthy habits than learning from those already practicing them? Let's take a look at the daily habits practiced of people living happily into their hundreds, in parts of the world known as "Blue Zones."

THE STUDY

In 2004, author and explorer Dan Buettner rounded up a bunch of anthropologists, demographers, epidemiologists, and other researchers to travel around the world to study communities with surprisingly high percentages of centenarians. Funded in part by the U.S. National Institute on Aging, the study's findings, highlighted in *National Geographic* by Buettner, discussed five hot spots—called “Blue Zones”—where there is a high rate of centenarians who enjoy a healthier lifestyle. These places were:

- Loma Linda, CA, U.S.
- Nicoya, Costa Rica
- Sardinia, Italy
- Ikaria, Greece
- Okinawa, Japan

Buettner and the researchers found that seniors in these widely separated regions share a number of key habits, despite many differences in backgrounds and beliefs. These universal healthy habits include a healthy diet, regular physical and mental exercise, focus on family and community, and a purpose.

With all the new diet trends and research, it can be difficult to figure out just *exactly* what living a healthy life means. Another complication is that each of us is unique—we each have individual tastes, physical capabilities, dietary restrictions and allergies, and cultural influences.

With that said, the Blue Zone study found that the majority of centenarians practice similar lifestyle habits. Here are some centenarian best practices to try.



1. GET PHYSICALLY ACTIVE

Blue Zone residents are active in their everyday lives, whether they're walking around town or gardening. Low-intensity exercise can keep heart disease and cancers at bay.

The USDA recommends adults at any age should get at least 250 minutes of exercise each week. This can include gentle activities, such as walking or swimming, which are also beneficial because they minimize the impact to your joints. Some types of weight-bearing activity—like weight lifting, dancing, step aerobics, or basketball—may also help preserve lean muscle mass.

Those who practice yoga—especially restorative yoga—can benefit in a host of ways. Here are six ways a daily yoga practice can help you stay younger and healthier.

- **Yoga Improves Balance and Stability:** Strengthening your muscles and improving your balance through yoga prevents the likelihood of falls, which can be an increasing concern as you age. If a fall should

occur, an increase in strength and stability also helps seniors bounce back and recover more quickly.

- **Yoga Improves Flexibility and Joint Health:** Flexibility exercises such as yoga are great if your joints tend to be achy or stiff, and one study found yoga suggested them to be therapeutic in managing osteoarthritis in elderly women. Not only can these low-impact moves loosen your muscles, they can also tone your supporting muscles and help prevent injury.
- **Yoga Improves Respiration:** With age comes respiratory limitations and reduced tolerance to physical exertion. Recent studies have shown that a 12-week yoga program significantly improved respiratory function in elderly women. As we know, breathing is the foundation of life, so it's a good idea to keep your respiratory system in tip-top shape at any age.
- **Yoga Reduces High Blood Pressure:** Hypertension, or high blood pressure, can lead to cardiovascular disease. Recent studies have found that yoga reduces oxidative stress in the elderly. Oxidative stress is one of the underlying causes of high blood pressure and, especially for seniors, is a strong risk factor for heart attacks.
- **Yoga Reduces Anxiety:** When practiced regularly, calm and restorative yoga that focuses on the breath and slow movements can reduce your sympathetic nervous system's fight-or-flight response, which lowers stress, anxiety, and disease-inducing inflammation.
- **Yoga Encourages Mindfulness:** Since so much of yoga is focused on breathing and listening to your body, an added benefit is the expanded awareness of Self. As you practice yoga and become more aware of not just your body, but also your thoughts and emotions, you will become more connected to and mindful of your environment, your community, and the world around you.



2. PRACTICE PORTION CONTROL

Consuming excess calories leads to weight gain and potential health risks. Learning to control your portions like many centenarians can be a healthy eating habit.

For example, Okinawans practice “Hara hachi bu,” a Confucian mantra said before a meal that reminds them to stop eating when their stomachs are 80 percent full. The 20 percent gap between not being hungry and feeling full could help with losing weight. “Rituals like this and other forms of saying grace also provide a pause in everyday living, forcing people to slow down and pay attention to their foods,” says Buettner. “Ikarians, Sardinians, Costa Ricans, and Adventists all begin meals by saying a prayer.” Adventists here refer to the high population of Seventh Day Adventists that make up the healthy population of the Blue Zone, Loma Linda.

The Okinawans also eat off small plates to limit the amount of food consumption. Take a look at what size dishes are in your cupboard—you may want to invest in smaller plates to help with portion control.



3. HAVE A PLANT SLANT

There is a clear theme across the Blue Zone communities to eat fresh, organic food, high in proteins and healthy fats. In general, the centenarians eat a large amount of vegetables and fruits, and small amounts of red meat. Fruits and vegetables tend to be high in antioxidants and fiber, such as tomatoes, onions, squash, roots/tubers, and beans. Whole grains are also often included in the Blue Zone diets in the form of breads or cereals.

4. EAT LOCALLY/HOME-GROWN FOOD

The majority of centenarians eat fruits and vegetables that are home-grown or locally grown organic products. Picking up food at local farmers' markets not only fosters a sense of community (another factor in longevity), but also allows you to eat seasonally, which means the fruits and vegetables will be more nutritionally dense. The same principles apply for growing your own food—a little more work, but you will be able to control what goes into your food—and what does not (i.e., pesticides).

5. SOCIALIZE

The Blue Zone regions have this in common—they gather together. If you spend quality time with like-minded people in your community, you'll feel happier and have a sense of purpose.

Close relationships, in fact, seem to be a vital key to longevity. A 2010 meta-analysis study examining over 300,000 individuals concluded that social relationships can influence mortality as much as risk factors like smoking and drinking and actually have a greater impact than risk factors like physical inactivity and obesity.





6. HAVE A MEAL ROUTINE

When you eat is also important because it can help with digestion and ensure your body gets the energy it needs to perform. People in the Blue Zones tend to eat three meals a day and don't make a habit of snacking. Their smallest meal is usually dinner and then they don't eat anything after dinner, but adopting this habit will depend on your life schedule (dinner may be your first meal of the day, depending on your work hours).

7. PRACTICE MODERATE ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

American alcohol consumption is on the rise—including increases in its abuse. Drinking alcohol in excess can cause liver damage, cardiovascular disease, cancer, and other health risks. It can also increase the chance of violence, motor vehicle accidents, and injuries due to falls.

That's not to say alcohol consumption is off the table—just that the health risks of alcohol consumption tend to outweigh the benefits. If you drink, do so in moderation. Many centenarians in Okinawa, Sardinia, and Icaria enjoy a moderate amount of alcohol (wine and sake), while others such as the Seventh-day Adventists in Loma Linda refrain from drinking all together.



8. VOLUNTEER

Offer to help your neighbors, volunteer time and energy at a nonprofit, or organize a food drive. A study out of the University of Buffalo indicates that whether a person helps others affects morality rates even more than whether or not the person encounters a stressful life event.

9. EAT WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Eating is best as a social experience where you can slow down, be present, and connect with others. "I've eaten countless meals with people in the Blue Zones, and they were often three-hour affairs with a succession of many small plates punctuated by toasts, stories, jokes, and conversation," says Buettner. "Mealtimes are celebrations, a time to give thanks, talk out problems, and bond as a family. As a rule, people in the Blue Zones never eat alone, never eat standing up, and never eat with one hand on the steering wheel."



10. STAY HYDRATED

Hydration is important at any age, but it is particularly key for older adults. Older individuals tend to retain less water than younger people, mostly due to decreased lean body mass, though also related to decreased fluid intakes or a decline in kidney function. This factor may increase your risk of chronic dehydration.

The average person requires roughly 1 milliliter of fluids for every calorie consumed. Therefore, if you consume an average of 1,800 calories daily, you require around 1,800 milliliters, or 60 ounces, of fluids.

Concerned about coffee? A study in the *Journal of Human Nutrition and Dietetics* has concluded that daily coffee intake as part of a normal lifestyle is not associated with dehydration. Furthermore, current research suggests that regular coffee consumption may protect against cognitive impairment and decline later in life. This being said, it is good to keep in mind that water is the gold standard for hydration, and should make up a majority of fluid intake.

Aim to consume the majority of your daily fluids as pure water, though feel free to continue—or even consider taking up—your own daily coffee routine.



11. BOOST YOUR MEMORY AND MENTAL AGILITY

Exercising your mind may be just as important as exercising your body. Adding brain teasers and learning activities that support mental agility to your weekly routine not only boosts your memory, but can also protect against aging and certain types of dementia, and improve the quality of life in your mature years.

Staying mentally active throughout your life is essential to keeping your memory sharp and your brain in the best shape possible. There are many activities that can help keep your neurons firing, such as:

- Reading
- Crossword puzzles
- Memory or strategy games
- Brain teasers
- Crafting
- Puzzles

But, if you're looking for something to really make a big impact on your brain, make continued education a habit. Keep challenging your brain by engaging in activities and skills that are entirely new to you, to create brand-new neural pathways. In a word: Cross-train. Here are three ideas to get your brain moving.

Learn Something New

Research has shown that people who continually learn new things throughout life are less likely to develop Alzheimer's disease and dementia, so kick your mental fitness a step up and go outside your comfort zone.

If you can (literally) knit with your eyes closed, try something that requires an entirely different set of skills—like glassblowing, speaking Portuguese, or dancing salsa. Remember: the greater the departure from your normal hobby or activity, the greater the benefit to your brain. If you love to read or have a passion for chess, by all means keep at it. But switching your reading habits from historical novels to essays is probably not going to move the needle much. However, speaking Mandarin instead of English—well, now you're onto something.

Challenge Yourself

Games and activities that involve multiple tasks or require interaction and organization appear to deliver the greatest protection against cognitive decline. Brain teasers and strategy games offer your brain a tough challenge and build your capacity to form and retain cognitive associations. Crossword puzzles and Sudoku also fill the bill. Board games and cards add a social component so you can connect with your loved ones while strengthening your mental muscles.

Add Variety to Your Routine

Even mixing up your normal routine gets those neurons firing in entirely new ways. Take your dog to a different park, shop at a grocery store you're not familiar with, take a different route to work or school. Changing everyday habits on a regular basis creates new brain pathways and strengthens existing connections. It also keeps life fresh, ever-interesting, and uniquely balanced.

In older adults, the kind of boost to mental acuity that comes with just short bursts of mental exercise is huge. It not only helps improve quality of life and problem-solving skills, it can significantly improve important everyday skills, like reaction times (think: driving), accuracy of reading signs and instructions (think: reading medicine bottles and recipe instructions), and memory (think: "Did I already take my pills?")

The best part is: Brain training is fun—so it's not only good for the brain, but also healthy for the heart and soul.





12. GET RESTFUL SLEEP

Getting regular restful sleep is key to staying healthy and vital, yet it is so often neglected. A lack of restful sleep (prevalent in our culture) creates imbalances in the body, weakens our immune system, and speeds up the aging process.

Generally, we need between six and eight hours of restful sleep each night. Restful sleep means that you are sleeping soundly through the night without the assistance of pharmaceuticals or alcohol to help you fall asleep. You know you are getting restful sleep if you wake up feeling energetic and vibrant.

To get the highest quality sleep, follow natural circadian rhythms by going to bed by about 10 p.m. and waking at 6 a.m.

BOTTOM LINE

Don't let your age dictate your youthfulness. By forming healthy habits you can optimize your lifestyle—and may gain an extra decade of good life you'd otherwise miss. Use your lifestyle to create a younger version of yourself, and learn from the Blue Zones to lead a healthy, connected, and purposeful life.

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