

HEALTH BEHAVIORS II

6.1 CONDUCT HARMFUL TO HEALTH: How Common Behaviors Affect Your Health

What comes to mind when you think of taking risks with your health—driving recklessly, or maybe abusing alcohol or illegal drugs? Those behaviors are certainly risky. However, many people have less dramatic behaviors that are just as dangerous in the long run. Tobacco use, unbalanced nutrition (too many calories and/or too much of one food group and not enough of the others) and a lack of physical activity are some of the key risk factors for the most common causes of death.

What are the most common causes of death?

Heart disease, cancer and stroke are the most common causes of death in the United States. Nearly 1.5 million people in the United States die each year from one of these diseases, or from complications of these diseases. That's more than the number of American soldiers who died in the Civil War, the Korean War and the Vietnam War combined, and it happens every year.

Don't these diseases run in families? How much control do I really have?

It's true that heart disease, stroke and some kinds of cancer tend to occur more often in people who have a family history of the disease. However, your genes are only part of your risk for these diseases. In many cases, your behavior is at least as important to your health as your family history. If you choose unhealthy behaviors, you are at greater risk of having a serious health problem.

What can I do to reduce my risk?

The following are 3 of the most important ways to reduce your risk of the top 3 causes of death:

1. Quit smoking, or don't start.
2. Eat fewer high-fat foods and more fruits and vegetables.
3. Be more physically active.

Even by doing just 1 of these things, you will improve your health and reduce your risk of heart disease, cancer and stroke.

I know why I should eat fewer high-fat foods, but why bother eating more fruits and vegetables?

Fruits and vegetables are important sources of vitamins, minerals and fiber. To improve your eating habits, you'll want to cut down on foods that are high in fat and calories, such as soda pop and hamburgers. By replacing those foods with healthier choices, such as fruits and vegetables, you'll get better nutritional quality from the foods you eat. Also, adding fruits and vegetables—and learning new ways to prepare them—can keep you from getting bored with a more healthy diet.

Sugar-sweetened drinks, such as fruit juice, fruit drinks, regular soft drinks, sports drinks, energy drinks, sweetened or flavored milk and sweetened iced tea can add lots of sugar and calories to your diet. But staying hydrated is important for good health. Substitute water, zero-calorie flavored water, non-fat or reduced-fat milk, unsweetened tea or diet soda for sweetened drinks. Talk with your family doctor or a dietitian if you have questions about your diet or healthy eating for your family.

Is it better to have an exercise plan instead of just trying to be more physically active throughout the day?

Ideally, we would all get enough exercise in our daily lives to burn the energy that we get from eating food. Unfortunately, many things about modern life let people avoid being physically active. For example, many people drive almost everywhere they go, and many jobs require people to sit at a desk for much of the day.

One obvious way to burn more energy is to participate in structured exercise, such as aerobics or basketball. However, you can also burn energy by adding more movement to your everyday activities. For example, try walking in place or riding a stationary bicycle while you watch TV. Take the stairs instead of the elevator or squeeze in a couple of 15-minute walking breaks during the day.

I've tried to make these kinds of changes before and I wasn't successful. How can I do better this time?

Unhealthy behaviors become habits, so changing them can be very hard. You're more likely to make changes in your habits if you set a specific goal for yourself. The kind of goal you choose and how you think about it is very important. If you set a goal that focuses on an outcome—for example, losing 20 pounds—it can be hard to know where to start or what to do. Instead, set a goal that focuses on a specific behavior. For example, choose one specific thing to change about the way you eat, such as adding a piece of fruit to one meal each day. This type of goal is easier to think about and plan for. Once your new healthy behavior becomes a habit, you can move on to another goal.

If you set a goal to be more physically active, you can improve your chances of success by exercising with other people. For example, set up a walking group at work or in your neighborhood, or ask a friend to be your exercise buddy. This will provide you with support and make physical activity more enjoyable.

Make essential health benefits and preventive care services work for you.

Essential health benefits are a set of health care service categories that must be covered by certain plans, beginning in 2014.

If you buy a plan through a Health Insurance Marketplace, your insurance will cover the preventive services and at least 10 essential health benefits required by the Affordable Care Act (ACA). All private health insurance plans offered in federally facilitated marketplaces will offer the following 10 essential health benefits:

- Ambulatory patient services (outpatient care you get without being admitted to a hospital)
- Emergency services
- Hospitalization (such as surgery)
- Maternity and newborn care (care before and after your baby is born)
- Mental health and substance use disorder services, including behavioral health treatment (this includes counseling and psychotherapy)
- Prescription drugs
- Rehabilitative and habilitative services and devices (services and devices to help people with injuries, disabilities, or chronic conditions gain or recover mental and physical skills)
- Laboratory services
- Preventive and wellness services and chronic disease management
- Pediatric services

State-run marketplaces will also be required to offer 10 EHBs, but the list of benefits may differ.

A preventive service might be a test, or it might be advice from your doctor. Preventive services can detect disease or help prevent illness or other health problems. Some preventive services covered under the Affordable Care Act (ACA) include blood pressure screening, cervical cancer screening, HIV screening, immunizations, and well-woman visits.

6.2 HEALTH HABITS: One of the biggest factors that determines how well you age is not your genes but how well you live. Not convinced? A study published in 2009 in the *British Medical Journal* of 20,000 British folks shows that you can cut your risk of having a stroke in half by doing the following four things: being active for 30 minutes a day, eating five daily servings of fruit and vegetables, and avoiding cigarettes and excess alcohol.

While those are some of the obvious steps you can take to age well, researchers have discovered that centenarians tend to share certain traits in how they eat, move about, and deal with stress—the sorts of things we can emulate to improve our own aging process. Of course, getting to age 100 is enormously more likely if your parents did. (Recent research suggests that centenarians are 20 times as likely as the average person to have at least one long-lived relative.) Still, Thomas Perls, who studies the century-plus set at Boston University School of Medicine, believes that assuming you've sidestepped genes for truly fatal diseases like Huntington's, "there's nothing stopping you from living independently well into your 90s." Heck, if your parents and grandparents were heavy smokers, they might have died prematurely without ever reaching their true potential lifespan, so go ahead and shoot for those triple digits. Follow these 11 habits and check out Perls' [lifetime risk calculator](#) to see how long you can expect to live.

1. Don't retire. "Evidence shows that in societies where people stop working abruptly, the incidence of obesity and chronic disease skyrockets after retirement," says Luigi Ferrucci, director of the Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Aging. The Chianti region of Italy, which has a high percentage of centenarians, has a different take on leisure time. "After people retire from their jobs, they spend most of the day working on their little farm, cultivating grapes or vegetables," he says. "They're never really inactive." Farming isn't for you? Volunteer as a docent at your local art museum or join the [Experience Corps](#), a program offered in 19 cities that places senior volunteers in urban public elementary schools for about 15 hours a week.

2. Floss every day. That may help keep your arteries healthy. A 2008 [New York University](#) study showed that daily flossing reduced the amount of gum-disease-causing bacteria in the mouth. This bacteria is thought to enter the bloodstream and trigger inflammation in the arteries, a major risk factor for heart disease. Other research has shown that those who have high amounts of bacteria in their mouth are more likely to have thickening in their arteries, another sign of heart disease. "I

really do think people should floss twice a day to get the biggest life expectancy benefits," says Perls.

3. Move around. "Exercise is the only real fountain of youth that exists," says Jay Olshansky, a professor of medicine and aging researcher at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "It's like the oil and lube job for your car. You don't have to do it, but your car will definitely run better." Study after study has documented the benefits of exercise to improve your mood, mental acuity, balance, muscle mass, and bones. "And the benefits kick in immediately after your first workout," Olshansky adds. Don't worry if you're not a gym rat. Those who see the biggest payoffs are the ones who go from doing nothing to simply walking around the neighborhood or local mall for about 30 minutes a day. Building muscle with resistance training is also ideal, but yoga classes can give you similar strength-training effects if you're not into weight lifting.

4. Eat a fiber-rich cereal for breakfast. Getting a serving of whole-grains, especially in the morning, appears to help older folks maintain stable blood sugar levels throughout the day, according to a recent study conducted by Ferrucci and his colleagues. "Those who do this have a lower incidence of diabetes, a known accelerator of aging," he says.

5. Get at least six hours of shut-eye. Instead of skimping on sleep to add more hours to your day, get more to add years to your life. "Sleep is one of the most important functions that our body uses to regulate and heal cells," says Ferrucci. "We've calculated that the minimum amount of sleep that older people need to get those healing REM phases is about six hours." Those who reach the century mark make sleep a top priority.

6. Consume whole foods, not supplements. Strong evidence suggests that people who have high blood levels of certain nutrients—selenium, beta-carotene, vitamins C and E—age much better and have a slower rate of cognitive decline. Unfortunately, there's no evidence that taking pills with these nutrients provides those antiaging benefits. "There are more than 200 different carotenoids and 200 different flavonoids in a single tomato," points out Ferrucci, "and these chemicals can all have complex interactions that foster health beyond the single nutrients we know about like lycopene or vitamin C." Avoid nutrient-lacking white foods (breads, flour, sugar) and go for all those colorful fruits and vegetables and dark whole-grain breads and cereals with their host of hidden nutrients.

7. Be less neurotic. It may work for Woody Allen, who infuses his worries with a healthy dose of humor, but the rest of us neurotics may want to find a new way to deal with stress. "We have a new study coming out that shows that centenarians tend not to internalize things or dwell on their troubles," says Perls. "They are great at rolling with the punches." If this inborn trait is hard to overcome, find better ways to manage when you're stressed: Yoga, exercise, meditation, tai chi, or just deep breathing for a few moments are all good. Ruminating, eating chips in front of the TV, binge drinking? Bad, very bad.

8. Live like a Seventh Day Adventist. Americans who define themselves as Seventh Day Adventists have an average life expectancy of 89, about a decade longer than the average American. One of the basic tenets of the religion is that it's important to cherish the body that's on loan from God, which means no smoking, alcohol abuse, or overindulging in sweets. Followers typically stick to a vegetarian diet based on fruits, vegetables, beans, and nuts, and get plenty of exercise. They're also very focused on family and community.

9. Be a creature of habit. Centenarians tend to live by strict routines, says Olshansky, eating the same kind of diet and doing the same kinds of activities their whole lives. Going to bed and waking up at the same time each day is another good habit to keep your body in the steady equilibrium that can be easily disrupted as you get on in years. "Your physiology becomes frailer when you get older," explains Ferrucci, "and it's harder for your body to bounce back if you, say, miss a few hours of sleep one night or drink too much alcohol." This can weaken immune defenses, leaving you more susceptible to circulating flu viruses or bacterial infections.

10. Stay connected. Having regular social contacts with friends and loved ones is key to avoiding depression, which can lead to premature death, something that's particularly prevalent in elderly widows and widowers. Some psychologists even think that one of the biggest benefits elderly folks get from exercise is the strong social interactions that come from walking with a buddy or taking a group exercise class. Having a daily connection with a close friend or family member gives older folks the added benefit of having someone watch their back. "They'll tell you if they think your memory is going or if you seem more withdrawn," says Perls, "and they might push you to see a doctor before you recognize that you need to see one yourself."

11. Be conscientious. The strongest personality predictor of a long life is conscientiousness—that is, being prudent, persistent, and well organized,

according to *The Longevity Project*, coauthored by Howard Friedman and Leslie Martin. The book describes a study that followed 1,500 children for eight decades, collecting exhaustive details about their personal histories, health, activities, beliefs, attitudes, and families. The children who were prudent and dependable lived the longest, Friedman says, likely because conscientious types are more inclined to follow doctors' orders, take the right medicines at the right doses, and undergo routine checkups. They're also likelier to report happier marriages and more satisfying work lives than their less conscientious peers.