
Healthy Habits

You're Never Too Old

by Michael Castleman

You might think: I've made it this far without paying much attention to my health. I'm too old to become a "health nut" now.

There's no need to become a health-obsessed "nut." But the fact is, you're never too old to adopt some healthier habits. If you do, you'll add years to your life and zest to your remaining years.

Alzheimers or Unhealthy Habits?

Consider the case of painter Willem de Kooning [1] (1904-1997), a towering figure in modern art. In the early 1970s, the then-70-year-old artist began showing signs of what his doctors called "Alzheimer's disease." De Kooning forgot people's names and recent events. He covered up his obvious confusion with lies and wisecracks, sometimes bursting into rages, while at other times, lapsing into extended silences. He had increasing difficulty working. His output declined, and eventually, he stopped painting altogether. As the news spread, the art world mourned the loss of a great painter to Alzheimer's.

But de Kooning's wife, Elaine, refused to believe that he had Alzheimer's. The couple had been separated for many years, but Elaine re-entered de Kooning's life, and discovered that it was a mess. Instead of buying into his diagnosis, she shepherded him through a major lifestyle-improvement program.

De Kooning had been drinking so heavily that he suffered blackouts. Elaine insisted that he lay off alcohol. He had been eating very poorly, which is common among heavy drinkers. She improved his diet. He had become almost completely sedentary. She insisted he take daily walks. And he had been sleeping erratically. She regularized his sleep schedule, and made sure he got at least seven hours a night. Slowly, de Kooning's mental acuity returned, and eventually, he began painting again. (Ironically, de Kooning developed true Alzheimer's disease 10 years later in the early 1980s. He died in 1997.)

Learn From 90-Year-Old Weight Lifters

Mistakes like de Kooning's original misdiagnosis are less likely today. Since the 1970's, physicians' ability to diagnose Alzheimer's disease accurately has improved considerably. But his story illustrates the dramatic effects that can be realized through a modest program of lifestyle health enhancement. De Kooning's wife wasn't a health nut and didn't turn him into one. All she did was help him stop drinking, eat regularly, and get adequate exercise and sleep.

More evidence that it's never too late to adopt healthier habits has come from a gym in Boston where the weight lifters are as serious as Arnold Schwarzenegger ever was. But these iron pumpers averaged 90 years old, and since news of their muscle development first hit the media in the early 1990s, they've been turning more heads than Mr. Universe.

The elderly weight lifters resided at the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center for the Aged. Throughout their long lives, none had been particularly physically active until gerontologist Maria Fiatarone, M.D., an instructor in Medicine at Harvard Medical School, began wondering if there were any upper age limit to muscle development. For a pilot study, she recruited 10 residents, aged 85 to 96, and measured the strength of their front-thigh leg muscles (quadriceps). The average participant's "quad" could lift 16 pounds. Dr. Fiatarone then placed the residents on a weight training program specially designed to challenge but not overtax their elderly quads.

After eight weeks," she explains, "their lifting ability almost tripled to 42 pounds. Their quadriceps size increased 10 percent, and their walking speed also increased significantly. The study proved that you can increase strength and muscle size at any age. The physical deterioration we have traditionally associated with aging has nothing to do with years, and everything to do with lack of use."

One of the participants was Emil Forster, 87 years old at the time of the study: "I was a toy manufacturer until I retired 10 years ago. I never exercised, but when the doctor asked me to be part of the study, I thought I might do me some good. It has. It's given me a feeling of youth. I'm stronger than I was before. My advice is: Don't wait till you're in your 80s to exercise. Start earlier. But even if you're my age and never exercised, you should start."

Another was Sara Chiller, 85 years old, at the time of the study: "I worked all my life in an office and never exercised. As I got older, I had problems with my hip. I broke it twice, and now have a stainless steel pin, and a limp. I joined the study because I wanted to improve my gait. And I did. My advice is: Exercise helps at any age."

A subsequent study by Dr. Fiatarone confirmed the pilot study's findings. The second study included 100 men and women, average age 87. Half enrolled in the weight-training program, while half did not. After 10 weeks, the control group's muscle strength increased 3 percent. But among weight-lifters, the figure was 113 percent. The exercisers also showed a significant improvement in walking speed.[2]

How About Tai Chi?

If you don't care for weight lifting, how about the gentle, dance-like movements of tai chi? Visitors to China are often amazed when they look out their hotel room windows early in the morning and see large groups of Chinese, particularly the elderly, filling parks, squares, plazas, and schoolyards, doing slow, graceful, beautiful tai chi routines. Over the last 25 years, tai chi has become increasingly popular in the U.S., particularly among the elderly.

At Emory University in Atlanta, researchers worked with 200 men and women, average age 76, many of whom had never been exercisers. One-third learned a tai chi routine. One-third learned deep relaxation. And one-third took a class on balance and fall prevention. Then, for four months, all the participants reported their falls. The tai chi group averaged the fewest falls--and went an average of 48 percent longer than the other two groups before falling at all.[3] The gentle movements of tai chi makes this form of exercise particularly appropriate for older adults. And your balance is not the only thing that will improve. Other studies have shown that tai chi elevates mood,[4] reduces blood pressure,[5] improves osteoarthritis,[6] and aids in post-heart attack cardiac rehabilitation.[7]

Start a New Habit

Here's a list of good health habits supported by a great deal of research. Pick JUST ONE of them, the one you think would be easiest to incorporate permanently into your life. Three to six months later, select JUST ONE MORE, and commit to incorporating that one into your life as well. Add additional good health habits one at a time every three to six months, and in just a year or so, you'll be significantly healthier--without becoming a health nut.

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Have two kinds of fruit at breakfast--juice, fruit on cereal, sliced fruit, or a fruit salad.

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Have a vegetable salad at lunch and dinner.

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Have two fruit or vegetable snacks daily.

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Take a multivitamin-mineral formula daily.

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Take a 30-minute walk daily. Work up to a brisk 60-minute walk.

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Lift weights while watching TV or talking on the phone. Canned foods make convenient weights.

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Quit smoking. Ask your doctor for help.

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Limit consumption of alcoholic beverages to one or two drinks a day. Ask your doctor for help.

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Get at least seven hours of sleep a night. If you sleep poorly, exercise more during the day.

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Get a flu shot every autumn.

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Practice a deep relaxation program: meditation, biofeedback, massage, or self-hypnosis. Ask your doctor for a referral to a practitioner who can teach you how.

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Spend more time with friends and family.

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If your spouse or friends tell you to "lighten up," do so.

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Get a dog or cat.

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Volunteer in a program that helps those less fortunate than you are.

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Enjoy regular sex.

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Seek out opportunities to laugh. Rent comedy videos. Attend comedy shows.

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Count your blessings daily when you wake up and before you go to sleep.

Which one of these good health habits can you permanently incorporate into your life starting today? Congratulations. You're never too old to take a step toward becoming healthier.