

Tips for improving your lifestyle and ageing more healthily

Thanks to decades of biomedical research, there are some clear pointers as to how to stay fit and well throughout later life. Our chances of ageing successfully are affected most by lifestyle.

Take more exercise. Studies have shown that 'exercise deficiency syndrome' is the biggest risk we face as we get older. Regular exercise not only makes us feel fitter, more alert and younger, it also helps to prevent high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, poor circulation, depression, obesity, joint and bone problems - in fact a very long list of the ailments of later life!

Give up smoking. It's the biggest single risk to your health after inactivity. Smokers have shorter lives due to lung cancer, cancer of the bladder, mouth and other organs, heart disease, bronchitis, asthma and other conditions.

And it's not just lungs and hearts that are at risk - smoking will also slow down your rate of healing. That's bad news if you need an operation or injure yourself.

It is by no means easy to give up smoking, but doing so gives immediate benefits, no matter how old you are or how long you have been a smoker (benefits only really seen after two years abstinence). Call the NHS smoking helpline on 0800 169 0169 for help and advice.

Keep socially and mentally active. Having a strong network of family and friends and a range of activities is vital to your health, and best remedy we have for some of the mental problems of older age is to keep on challenging the grey matter.

Research shows that our cognitive functions can be kept agile by doing regular mental gymnastics. Crosswords and puzzles are excellent mental gyms, as are discussion groups and many kinds of voluntary work. Brain power can last as long as we do, but appears to work best when it's stretched.

Drink more water. Many of us are slightly dehydrated. This interferes with digestion (leading to constipation) and other processes, and it fogs up the brain.

Drink a variety of drinks to keep your water intake up (you can't beat water itself!). Alcohol and caffeine are diuretics so they increase the amount of water that you excrete - however you still take in more liquid than you lose from a cup of tea, coffee or a cola-type soft drink.

Get outdoors as often as possible. For exercise and because exposure to light - especially sunshine - is vital for our body clocks and vitamin D levels. Lack of vitamin D makes development of the bone disease osteoporosis more likely. Getting outdoors is important for social reasons too - it keeps us in touch with the world.

Eat a good, balanced diet. This is vital to good health. Our food does not just provide the energy we need for daily living, it also provides the raw materials for healthy cell turnover and fuels our natural repair system.

Fruit and vegetables are nature's anti-ageing remedy, protecting us from many of the diseases we associate with later life. We can't stress how vital this is.

Being overweight will seriously reduce the chances of a healthy older age as there is a greater risk of heart disease, stroke, arthritis and diabetes. If you have a weight problem, talk to your doctor about ways to tackle it.

If you drink alcohol - little and often will do you the most good! People who regularly drink small amounts of alcohol tend to live longer than people who don't drink at all. Alcohol helps prevent coronary heart disease in people who are at a stage of life when coronary heart disease is a risk. For men this is over the age of 40 and for women it's after the menopause. The health benefits come from regularly drinking small amounts; the maximum benefit is achieved by drinking between one and two units of alcohol a day.

Make your home safe. There is no point in living a healthy lifestyle if you're surrounded by risks like loose rugs and dodgy wiring. Clear your home of things that can trip you up. Increase the level of lighting everywhere (you should have 400 watts in every room) - especially on the stairs - so you can see properly. Always get gas and electric appliances installed or checked by a qualified person.

See your GP when you are not well. Don't put up with health problems on the grounds of 'age' or assume that older age means nothing can be done. Age is no more the 'cause' of illness than youth is the cause of, say, chickenpox. Don't be fobbed off with a second-rate service either - we are entitled to good healthcare at any age, including a second opinion. Doctors are not magicians but they can cure or alleviate most things. See your dentist and optician regularly too.

Be positive. This gives us a rosier view of life, and boosts our immune system as well. Every day, spend 20 minutes focused on a really uplifting thought or memory - you will feel better and your immune system will get a boost. Be positive about your wants and needs too - studies show that longevity appears to be linked to a determination to stay in control.

Source and Courtesy: <http://www.helptheaged.org.uk/en-gb/AdviceSupport/HealthAdvice/HealthyAgeing/TopTenTips/>