Aging Well: Staying Healthy for Life

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Vibrant Living
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Questions For Our Expert
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Thoughts on Longevity

Most people understand that lifestyle is related to health and longevity—eating healthy, being physically active, managing stress and not smoking are all strategies for good health. However, for a significant segment of the population, good health is simply not important enough to encourage a healthy lifestyle.

If you, or someone you know, has been unable to sustain a healthy change, consider the wide variety of possible motivations that will carry you through the difficulty of making a change. For instance, consider the fun and fulfillment you will experience as you share active times with the young people in your life. Think about the benefits of being a good role model for your family and friends. Remember that being healthy provides you with many options that enrich your day-to-day experience.

Consider that healthy living is an end in itself. Healthy living benefits us from the inside out. Every day with less stress is a better day. Every day with healthy food choices, our bodies feel the benefits of good nutrition, and every day that we are physically active, our body sends “thank you” messages to our brain.

Choose to live healthfully. By doing so, you will enjoy the benefits every day of your journey throughout life.

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Healthy Aging Class
Do we have control over how well we age? If so, what individual choices improve our chances for healthy aging and longevity? Learn more about tools for healthy aging in the class “Physical Activity: The Ultimate Healthy Aging Pill,” offered for $30 by the Health Improvement Program in the Healthy Living section. Eligible employees may use STAP or EA funds. There is still time to register for this powerful course. For more information visit http://hip.stanford.edu.

Employee Wellness Fair
The fifth annual Employee Wellness Fair will be on Wednesday, April 29, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. in the Arrillaga Center for Sports and Recreation. This event—co-sponsored by BeWell @ Stanford, the Department of Athletics, Physical Education and Recreation, the Health Improvement Program and Stanford Benefits—will feature health screenings, information booths and other activities. So mark your calendar today and be sure to set aside some time for YOU!
Aging well may sound self-explanatory. But the term encompasses many aspects of health—among them, eating right, exercising and maintaining mental acuity and social circles.

Of course, it all starts with basic, health-minded decisions. More than one-third of deaths in the United States can be attributed to smoking, lack of exercise or a poor diet, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). In other words, many of us can stand to adopt better habits.

Meeting nutritional needs becomes increasingly important as the years go by. Proper diet as we get older means limiting saturated fat intake and ensuring we get adequate fiber, calcium and vitamin D. The CDC recommends eating five servings of vegetables and fruits each day.

Physical activity should also become a daily habit. If you approach your golden years without it, research shows that you’ll lose about 10 percent of muscle mass per decade between the ages of 50 and 70. Not only does that mean becoming physically weaker, you’re also likely to gain weight faster, become less active, and as a result, be less alert.

“Exercise for the young is important, but exercise for older people is imperative,” says Joyce Hanna, an exercise physiologist at Stanford and Associate Director of the Health Improvement Program. “Our bodies cannot stand the stress of inactivity.”

And while Hanna and other experts on aging agree that time can take its toll on the body, they feel even more strongly that we have the power to stave off those effects with regular exercise.

By exercising, you maintain muscle tissue, which in turn preserves your figure, strength and your body’s ability to burn calories—instead of storing them as fat. Exercise also boosts quality of sleep, cardiovascular health, self-esteem and, recent studies indicate, cognitive abilities.

“If there’s one thing that older people fear the most,” Hanna said, “it’s losing their mental ability.”

Yes, scientists now believe that exercise benefits our brain as well. But jogging around the lake everyday is not the only way to maintain your mental edge. Nor do you have to fuss over crossword puzzles or Sudoku—both of which mostly involve the retrieval of stored information—in order to stay sharp. Learning anything new from reading or practice can challenge the brain in novel ways and improve mental resiliency. Learning to play a musical instrument or speak a new language are good examples. Also, controlling high blood pressure and cholesterol and taking a daily multivitamin may prevent mental decline.

Interaction with others cannot be neglected, either, if we are to maintain a good quality of life in our later years. Having a social network has been shown to reduce depression and stress. Staying embedded in a family or group can actually slow disease.

So, don’t wait until you start seeing gray hair to address these areas. Eating right, exercising and staying socially connected and mentally engaged are all habits you can commit to today.

“There’s so much we can do to control how we age,” Hanna says. “It’s all about the choices that we make everyday.”

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Stanford to Host Senior Games

This summer, from Aug. 1 to 15, Stanford will welcome the largest multi-sport event in the world for people over 50: the Senior Games. This Olympics-style competition will include 25 events, ranging from archery to water polo, and an estimated 14,000 athletes will participate.

“At Stanford, we love athletic competitions,” says Ray Purpur, Deputy Director of Athletics, Physical Education and Recreation. “The 2009 National Senior Games is part of a continuing age spectrum of athletes competing in our exceptional athletic facilities. Stanford is the perfect place for amateur athletes to compete and to achieve their personal best!”

Eligibility to compete in the 18 medal sports is limited to athletes who passed their state qualifying rounds. However, if you are just learning about the games and want to enter, there are seven demonstration sports that have no qualifiers and are open to anyone age 50 and over: soccer, lawn bowling, fencing, sailing, rowing, equestrian and water polo. If you are interested in participating in these events or would like more information visit http://www.2009seniorgames.org.

Screenings: The Search Tool For You and Your Doctor

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. This is the mantra for many conditions and diseases, including lung, breast, cervix, colorectal and prostate cancer, diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

In the early stages of many diseases, you are unlikely to experience symptoms, but early screenings will enable their detection. In fact, regular screenings can be life saving. In particular, regular check-ups should include:

- Physical exam and health counseling
- Blood pressure, cholesterol and BMI (body mass index) measurements
- Immunization update
- Cancer and diabetes screening
- Glaucoma and bone density tests
- STD prevention screening

By asking your doctor to run routine tests, you can learn about your general state of health. Often, this will allow you the time you need to make lifestyle changes and/or receive the treatment you need in the early stages of the condition or disease.

What you should be screened for depends on your gender, age, co-existing clinical conditions, lifestyle and other factors. Check with your physician to see which ones are recommended. You can also visit this website for recommended screenings: http://epss.ahrq.gov/ePSS/search.jsp.
We Are Meant To Move

If you ride the Marguerite shuttle service’s Palm Drive Express, this should sound familiar: late comers cutting it close at the end of the day and running up to the bus just as it pulls off the curb, hopping on board and breathing heavily through a huge grin. For that brief moment, your co-worker is a kid again, giddy to get on the school bus and head for home.

By itself, bolting from the office to the Oval will not keep you young. But opportune moments throughout the day that get you moving can keep you spry. “Over a lifetime, regular physical activity helps maintain mobility, which is critical to quality of life,” says Dr. Anne Friedlander, Director of the Mobility Division at the Stanford Center on Longevity. Recent research also suggests that exercising regularly is one of the best ways to slow the progression of Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s diseases.

Our bodies are built to move. Yet many of us still aren’t active enough. Friedlander suggests that part of the problem is modern life itself: driving to work, taking the elevator, sitting at a computer all day and watching television before bed. So we schedule an isolated event during the day to squeeze in physical activity—in other words, “getting in a workout.”

That’s why, all too often, you hear people complain about having to “drag” themselves to the gym. The workout feels forced, not particularly enjoyable and before long, it may become associated with discomfort or even pain. So instead of back to the gym, we may start going straight home.

Now, no one is suggesting a mad dash to the bus everyday. But there are other ways to get moving: Choose the stairs over the elevator, forgo the golf cart and bike across campus, and at home, embrace housekeeping and gardening. Remember: You won’t always feel up to the more active alternative, but you will feel better after you’ve done it.

And if your lifestyle now is mostly sedentary, here’s the good news: You have the most to gain when you start making changes to your daily routine. World-class athletes have to train hard for incremental improvements. Meanwhile, the couch potato—perhaps ironically—sees results once he turns off the TV, starts washing the plates by hand and takes an after-dinner stroll around the block. And, while these changes to lifestyle activity won’t maximize his physical fitness, they may provide a practical target for health improvement.

“Over a lifetime, regular physical activity helps maintain mobility, which is critical to quality of life.”

Flexibility also plays a large role in maintaining mobility. Granted, when done improperly or overzealously, stretching can do a number on tendons and muscles. But doing moderate flexibility exercises to maintain range of motion means you’ll still be able to reach for that top shelf and clip your own toenails as you get older. Another truism: It’s much easier to maintain range of motion than to get it back.

Lastly, a strategy to keep in mind is “training your deficits.” If you have parents or older siblings who have become physically slower or weaker over the years, take note of specifically how—and then train those specific attributes while you still possess them. As a bonus, you can share what you’ve learned with your family.

“Remember,” Friedlander says, “every step counts, and over the long run, small, consistent changes can make a big difference.”
Jack Laird is living proof that you can be active throughout your life. At 92, he comes to the gym regularly to do cardio on a treadmill or stationary bike.

He has to, but not just because he feels that exercise will keep him healthy. It’s a habit: The man has been active his whole life. It started with basketball when he was young, and he continued to play as a student at Stanford in the late 1930s—shooting hoops until he was 86. That was when his doctor suggested a hip replacement and advised him to walk away from the court.

So instead, Jack began stepping into the gym three days a week. He recently stopped lifting weights because of shoulder surgery and frayed tendons, but cutting out exercise altogether was simply not an option. “Whether it was playing a sport or staying active, I was always doing something,” he said.

In 1962, he found himself back on the Farm, where he got a job in athletics. Fitness and performance now figured centrally in his personal and professional life. Over his 27-year career at Stanford, he played noontime hoops religiously.

Another of Jack’s passions has been climbing, and he’s quick to point out his treks up Mt. Fuji (Japan), Mt. Kilimanjaro (Tanzania), Mt. St. Helen, the Grand Tetons (Wyoming), Mt. Hood and climbing to the bottom of Mt. Everest.

Is Jack obsessed with perfect health? Not really. Might genetics have played a role as well? Probably. For most of his life, he says he ate and drank as he pleased. “I was primarily a bacon-and-eggs man my whole life,” he said.

Now, no one is suggesting that you work out just so you can indulge. But even if your eating and drinking habits are about average, regular physical activity can help ensure a long, healthy life. Just ask Jack.

Consider entering your workout in your daily calendar—Jack played basketball every day at noon. Look at your schedule and decide on a time you can set aside for exercise, then mark it down like you would for any other important meeting. This way, when obligations begin to fill up your day, exercise will not get lost in the shuffle.

Send us your real life wellness stories!
BeWellBulletin@stanford.edu

Photo credit: Alex Oppenheimer

Jack and his buddy, Thunder, enjoy an active life together.
Questions for Dr. Laura Carstensen

Professor of Psychology and Director of the Stanford Center on Longevity

Q: What is the biggest misconception about aging?

A: (Laughter) Clearly that it is all downhill—and that it is an intrac-
table process. Many people believe that nothing can be done and
they should just brace themselves for the worst.

Q: Why are researchers so confident that people can influence
their own aging?

A: If you measured 6 month olds, you’d find a very small range in
what they can and can’t do. We are able to predict a lot of things
about them (sitting up, smiling, etc). If you looked at two 80 year
olds, it becomes more difficult. That person could be severely
demented or be a Supreme Court justice. That person could
be a marathon runner or in a wheelchair. There is an enormous
amount of variability, and research has shown that it is mostly due
to lifestyle.

Q: Are you saying that our individual outcome is in our hands?

A: Genes only predict 20 or 30 percent of outcomes when we
talk about a full life course. By the time people reach 70, genes
have done much of their work, good or bad. Once you get to 70,
it looks like exercise, diet and mental stimulation predict how well
people will do.

Q: What attracted you to the field of longevity?

A: An accident (laughter). I was in an accident when I was 21 and
broke many, many bones. I spent four months in an orthopedic
ward. Orthopedic wards have bimodal age distributions, young
people from automobile accidents and old people with broken
hips. So, I was surrounded mostly by old women, and I noticed
the stark difference in the way we were being treated. I was being
rehabilitated, and they were being maintained. It made me begin
to think about how much of aging is biological and how much of it
is social.

Q: How has your work affected the way you live?

A: I study how time horizons influence goals. As people age,
they see time as more scarce and consequently more precious.
Under these conditions, people pursue goals that are really
meaningful. Older adults are more likely to do what feels good
because they are unburdened by having to prepare for the future
and all possible outcomes. Knowing that, I’ve taught myself to just
live in the here and now—every once in a while.
The Written Opinions of Sandra Day O’Connor

Former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, who sat on the bench of the nation’s highest court for a quarter of a century, remains one of the wisest minds in all the land. In 1981, she became the first woman appointed to the Supreme Court; and until she stepped down in 2006, O’Connor issued opinions that were increasingly known for their grace, strength and moderation—in the face of some of the most contentious political issues of that era. Her voice is no less powerful at Stanford, where she earned a bachelor’s degree in 1950, and then two years later, graduated from Stanford Law School.

Recently, in response to questions from staff at the BeWell Bulletin, O’Connor offered some thoughts on growing old and aging well. Below are a few of her observations, which we pass along as the distinguished alumna celebrates her 79th birthday at the end of March.

The biggest misconception about aging:
“Society tends to think that old people are frail and crotchety. In fact, a healthy older person can often be much more interesting to be around than a young person.”

Her secret to living a long, healthy life:
“It seems clear to me that to live a long and healthy life, one must eat wisely and consume what I would describe as a Mediterranean diet. Avoid fat and sugars. And, it is clear to me that one needs to exercise frequently throughout one’s life span. These things can help us live longer and better.”

What she would do differently:
“If I could make one change in my lifestyle, it would be to make sure always that I had sufficient exercise—even in my 70s and 80s.”

The best aspect of growing older:
“The best thing about growing older is that one is no longer afraid to speak one’s mind. As we age, we no longer worry about what others may think.”

A few parting words of wisdom:
“One constant in life is to keep working at work worth doing.”

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