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How to Live Forever

Four ways to increase your life expectancy.

BY KIM MUELLER



Modern medicine has worked miracles as life expectancy has nearly doubled since 1900, when the average American lived to the ripe old age of 49, according to the National Institute on Aging.

Today, Americans can expect to live 78.6 years, dipping slightly from last year's rates due to increased deaths from opioid overdoses and suicides, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The good news is that fewer people are dying from heart disease and cancer, which remain the leading causes of death in the United States.

The key to healthy aging is a healthy lifestyle, doctors agree. Younger bodies tend to gracefully absorb unhealthy choices. But as the body ages, it rebels against this toxic burden through pain, inflammation, fatigue, chronic illness and disease.

“It’s human nature to get away with what you can for as long as you can,” says Dr. James O’Keefe, a cardiologist at Saint Luke’s Mid America Heart Institute. “I’m convinced that prevention is the future of medicine.”

Staying forever young means prioritizing diet, sleep, social connections and exercise. And in that order, the doctor stresses.

1 Move More



Everyone agrees that exercise is good. But what is the magic number?

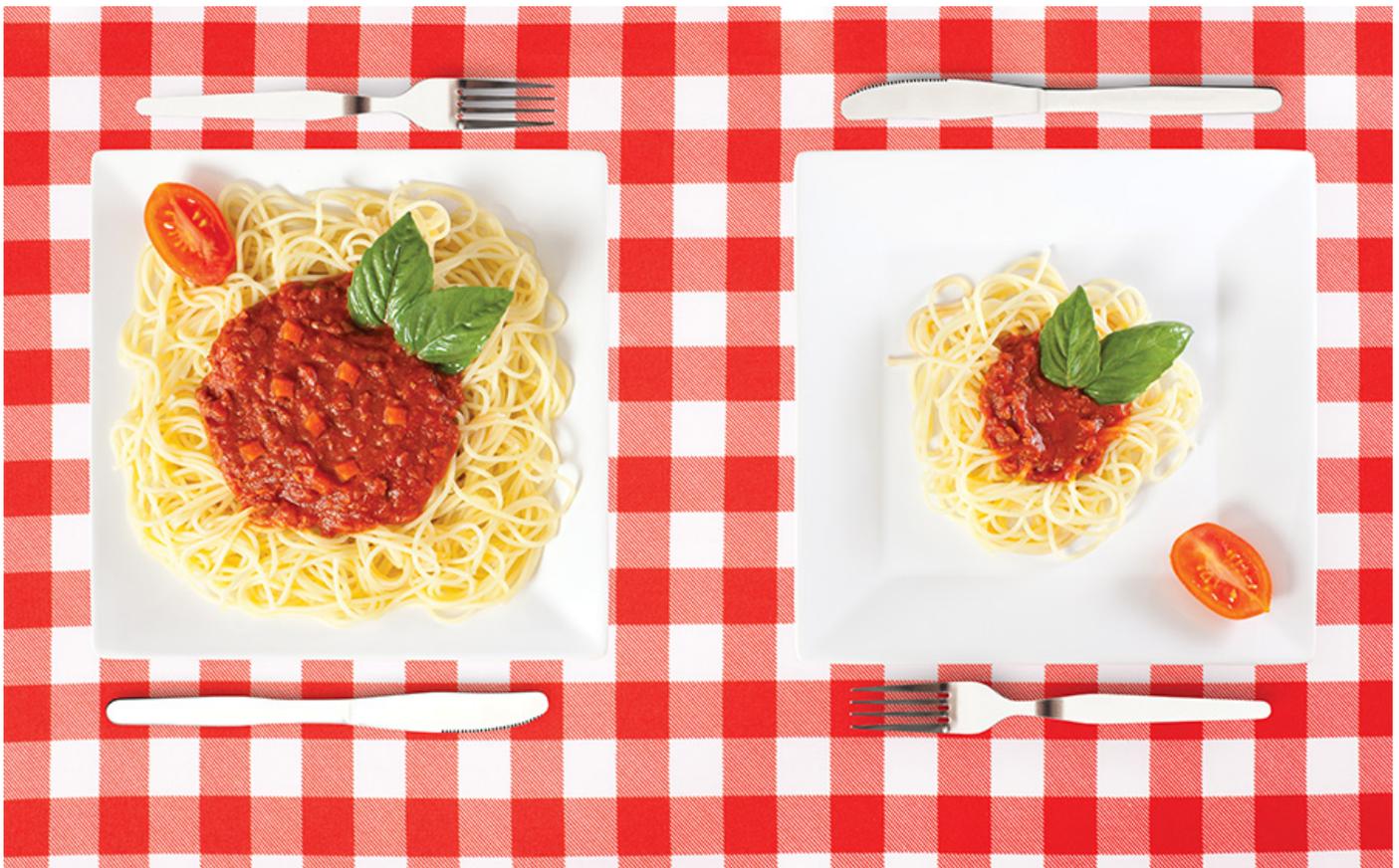
The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends that adults exercise moderately for 2.5 hours each week, which will increase life expectancy as much as 4.5 years.

The greatest benefits from exercise, however, come when people triple the recommended levels of exercise, working out moderately for 7.5 hours each week, according to a National Cancer Institute study. People who exercise slightly more than an hour each day, mostly by walking, are 39 percent less likely to die prematurely than people who never exercise. At that point, the benefits plateau, the researchers found.

Swerdlow is not surprised. Exercise maintains healthy body weight, keeps bones, muscles and joints healthy, maintains good cholesterol and normal blood sugar, promotes psychological well-being and reduces blood pressure and the risk of certain diseases, including some cancers, he says.

“Exercise helps retard things that contribute to aging,” he says. “The biggest impact on longevity is to choose your parents wisely and take good care of yourself.”

2 Eat Less



“Seventy percent of body composition is diet, not exercise,” O’Keefe says. “Exercise is important, but a big part of fitness is eating that healthy diet.”

What you eat is important.

“Sugar is Public Enemy Number One,” O’Keefe says.

A recent study also points to the positive benefits of following a ketogenic diet, which is a high-fat, adequate-protein and low-carbohydrate diet, says Dr. Russell Swerdlow, director of the University of Kansas Alzheimer’s Disease Center. Although the study didn’t reveal an enhanced lifespan from ketogenic diet, the mice in the study aged more healthily than mice who were fed a diet low in fats and high in carbohydrates.

“It’s become very controversial,” Swerdlow says. “The nutrition field still argues this. But if you eat a lot of fat and don’t reduce your carbs dramatically, that is horrible for you.”

How much you eat is also important, he says. As a general rule, you should eat about one-third fewer calories than you typically consume.

In addition to restricting calories, you should eat a moderate breakfast, a big lunch and a small dinner, O’Keefe says. Stop eating by late afternoon or early evening, and make sure not to eat any calories for 12 to 16 hours.

“It’s very different from our modern eating style,” he says. “But it works like magic for improving overall health and longevity.”

Calories can be cut at every meal or through intermittent fasting, Swerdlow and O’Keefe agree. Yes, fasting.

The 5:2 Diet, also known as The Fast Diet, involves eating normal, healthy meals five days a week and consuming only 500 to 600 calories for two non-consecutive days. Many people find fasting easier to follow than cutting back on calories every day, according to a University of Illinois study.

“When you fast, you change your metabolism,” Swerdlow explains. “You force the body to become more efficient in making energy.”

Make Friends or Get a Dog



Longevity has also been linked to the social fabric surrounding people, according to a Brigham Young University study. Having friends, family, neighbors or colleagues improves life expectancy by 50 percent, according to the study.

When someone is connected to a group and feels responsibility for other people, that sense of purpose and meaning translates to taking better care of themselves and taking fewer risks, the study's co-author Julianne Holt-Lunstad concluded.

Subsequent studies have shown that the quality of the relationship is more important than the quantity, O'Keefe says.

"My patients that are aging well are not lonely, selfish, self-centered, greedy people," he says. "They have passions that are bigger than themselves, whether that is gardening or taking care of their dogs, their cats or their family or their friends. They feel like they are making a difference."

4 Sleep Longer



Set a consistent bedtime before 10:30 p.m., and rise with the sun. Sleeping 7 to 8 hours each night reduces the risk of obesity, promotes robust health and improves mood, O’Keefe says. A night-owl schedule raises blood levels of insulin and cortisol.

“When these potent hormones are jacked up, you have irresistible cravings for junk food,” he says. “Living like this is at odds with your natural biorhythms, and it will suck the joy out of life, sap your energy, pack on belly fat and age you prematurely.”

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