



# Healthy At Home

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## Can We Really Avoid the Nursing Home?

The short answer is yes.

But, let's start with who usually needs one and why we might want to avoid ending up there.

As of the last Census, just under 56 million Americans were 65 years and older. That's just over 16% of the population and that number is expected to increase to 85.7 million (20% of the population) by 2050.

It's estimated that 10k baby boomers are turning 65 every day. Why does that matter to you? According to the Administration for Community Living, people who are 65 have a 70% chance of requiring long-term care in their remaining lifetime. The United States will have more seniors than ever before that will need some sort of long-term care in the next 25 years.

What's long-term care? It's a very broad term used to describe a whole list of services that are provided to seniors who can no longer do for themselves. Most of the care is provided in assisted living facilities or nursing homes, or at home with a home health aide, family caregiver, or nurse.

More than likely, you already have a family member who has stayed in or is currently living in a facility. You may be a caregiver of a parent at home who needs assistance. The reason this should really matter to you now, is that at this point in time, there are not enough facilities to house all of the people who are expected to need some sort of long-term care in the next 15 years.



Let's look at why a large number of our elderly are ending up in a long-term care facility.

For most, it's lack of mobility.

Seventy-seven percent need help bathing, 69% need help walking, 62% need help dressing, 49% going to the bathroom, 51% getting in and out of bed and 26% need help eating. Two-thirds of the residents need assistance with three or more of these activities.

Most of the residents are women who no longer have a spouse at home, and are prone to falls and injuries. Many can no longer drive themselves to the grocery store or appointments.

In addition to mobility issues, most residents suffer with the chronic medical conditions that also happen to be the top causes of death in America: heart disease, cancer, diabetes, dementia/Alzheimer's, COPD, and stroke.

Because so many of the residents have these chronic conditions and fail to thrive in long-term settings, they are not living very long once admitted. The average for women is 3.7 years and it's only 2.2 years for men.



All we've done so far is establish the fact that we have a growing elderly population in the U.S. and most of them will require some sort of long-term care, many of them in a facility.

So what?

Why is that a concern and why would you or I try to avoid that? Well, there are several dangers and negative consequences to living in a long-term facility.

One to three million serious infections occur every year in facilities. Over 56% of the residents end up in a hospital for care, many of those because of falls or fractures.

Several studies from 2014 - 2018 have shown that residents in long term facilities are at a higher risk of functional disability, decreased mobility, worsening physical function, cognitive decline, depression, anxiety and social isolation. One from 2004 actually compared people living in a nursing facility vs those living in the community and found that there was significantly more hopelessness, helplessness and depression among those living in the facilities. Malnutrition and/or dehydration, bed sores and overuse or misuse of meds are other common problems. The misuse of meds, also called polypharmacy, is what caused a friend of ours to be hospitalized for 2 weeks for "altered mental state" because she was being given a drug known to cause dementia-like behavior and wasn't being treated for a UTI, which also causes similar behavior.

In addition to the physical and mental decline, one in five residents reported elder abuse in nursing and long-term facilities. The Council on Aging reported in 2021 that half of seniors with dementia experienced some sort of abuse or neglect.



Another reason to avoid a long-term care facility is because they are expensive!

There was a story going around social media a while back, describing an elderly woman who decided to just stay on a cruise for the remaining years of her life, rather than living on her own, because it was less expensive. Although that was probably a joke, it's not far from the truth.

As of 2022, facilities ranged from \$148/day at assisted living facilities to \$297/day for a private room at a nursing facility. I'm going to be that number is not going down.

Although Medicare and Medicaid will cover shorter term stays, especially if they are for rehabilitation after a hospital stay, if someone requires long term care at a facility, the majority of the cost will fall on the individual or family. This can mean thousands of dollars a month in care.



Finally, you might want to stay out of a long term facility because you don't want to die.

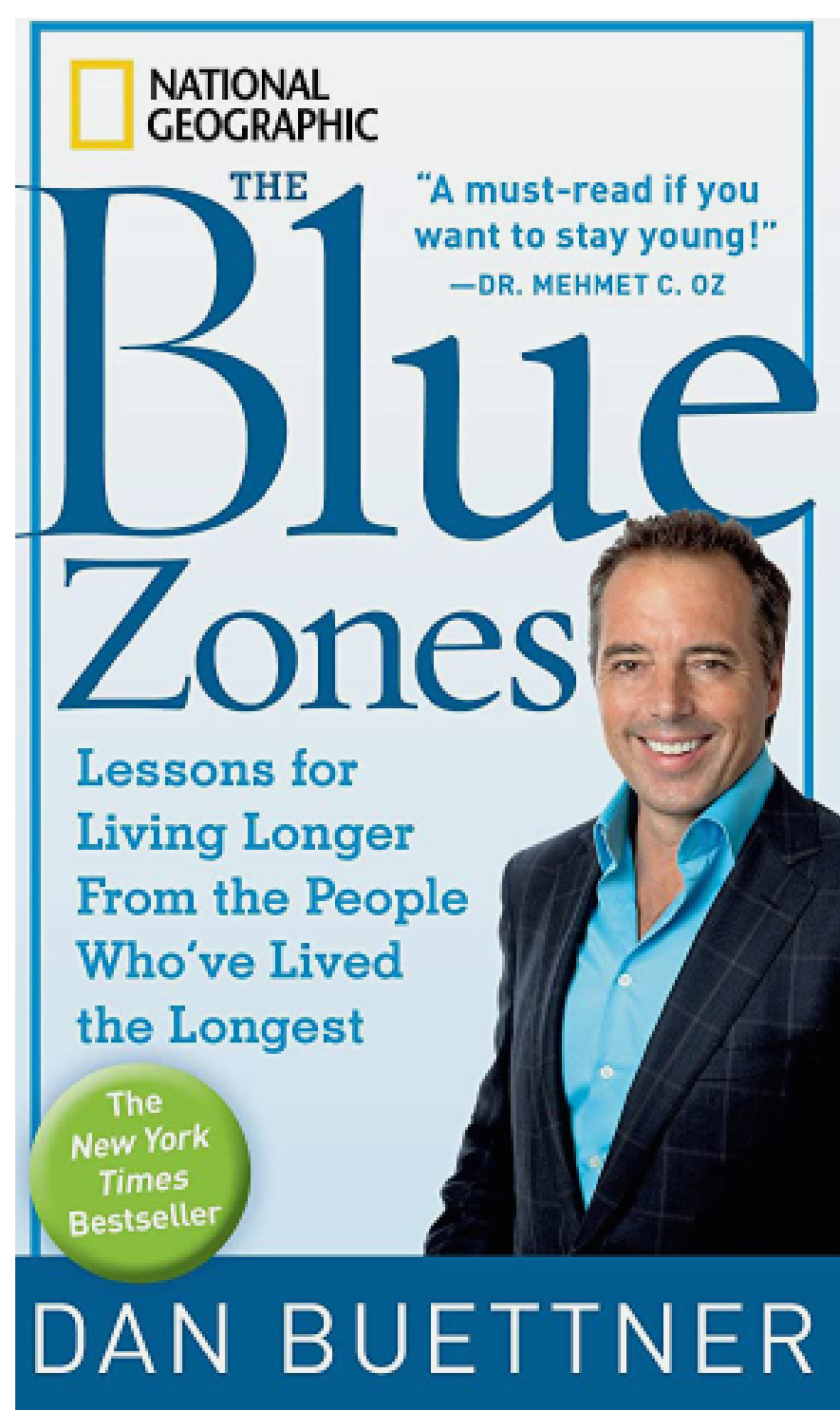
The yearly mortality rate of nursing home patients is about 32% and the median survival rate was only 2.2 years.

Most die of acute onset of pneumonia and other lower respiratory tract infections because of being institutionalized and sedentary.

So, how can we prolong our ability to stay at home, or avoid needing to be in a facility at all?

Many people believe it's just part of the aging process. That's not true. We just reviewed the reasons for needing long-term care. They included lack of mobility, chronic health conditions, social isolation and lack of a caregiver. Well, if we can do something about the first three reasons, then we won't need the caregiver.

Let's start by looking at the regions of the world with the oldest populations that are largely independent. If they have it figured out, maybe we can do what they do. These people live active lives into their 90s and 100s, continuing to find purpose and value in each day.



Dan Buettner, a writer for National Geographic, studied the 5 regions with the most centenarians and coined them The Blue Zones.

He found that they all ate whole foods diets, rich in plants, legumes and tubers (think potatoes and sweet potatoes), and had not yet succumbed to the western diet of highly processed foods with everything doused in sugar or oil.

They also walked most everywhere they went, had strong social networks, spent time every day in some sort of prayer or meditation, and had relatives close by.

These folks all maintained gardens and small flocks of animals, made food from scratch, had businesses, and spent time every day with friends and family.

These were not habits that they started at age 65.

They lived their whole lives this way, which set them up for a great experience in their final years.

Staying connected to your purpose is a great way to insulate yourself against needing to live in a long-term facility. Once someone retires from a career, they often make the mistake of retiring from life. We have to have a reason to get up every morning and have a cause or passion that drives us forward each day.

Finding a passion project in the community, or within your family, is important. My dad did this. He retired from his career in insurance at 65, but picked up painting as a hobby during the Summer when golfing in south Florida was too hot. Turns out, he is really good. He became involved in the local artist community, spearheaded a fundraising campaign to raise money for the art programs at local public schools, and at 80 years old opened an artists studio and gallery where he and 7 other artists paint and show their work.

Several other key behaviors that are paramount to staying out of a long term facility and living independently have to do with diet and lifestyle choices that you make today:

- Stop smoking. This is really non-negotiable. It's tied to higher risk of heart disease, stroke, cancer and COPD. There are so many programs to help, so if this is something you're still doing, find a method that works for you and stop.
- Reduce alcohol intake. You don't have to be alcohol free, but save it for special occasions. Even though red wine has received some good press in the past few years for helping reduce heart disease...1-2 drinks a day of any type increases a woman's risk of breast cancer by 33%. Alcohol actually causes increased risk of all cancers - the risk is greater with higher intake.



- Slow down or stop the progression of chronic diseases through diet and lifestyle. For some this sounds like it's not possible. Many people think that part of getting older is having high blood pressure, high cholesterol, requiring stents, battling Type 2 Diabetes, and eventually having dementia. Again...not true, even if you have a family history. I've written about this before in my blog. Genetics may load the gun, but diet and lifestyle pull the trigger. None of these things are pre-destined IF you stay away from high fat, heavily processed or sugary foods. Adding greens and fiber to your diet and reducing those other items may just cause you to have to get your doctor to reduce or stop some meds. This is a topic that could never be fully explored in this article, but there are dozens of studies that point to dietary choices being key to improved health. Several of those are unpacked in my Intro to Staying Healthy and Living Longer class.
- Another critical piece to staying out of the nursing home is to strengthen your bones, maintain balance and mobility through exercise. Since 80% of long-term facility patients got there due to mobility issues and many of those started with broken bones, this is critical to your maintaining independence. I'm not talking about CrossFit for Seniors. I'm talking about daily low impact cardio, like walking, and then strength training 2-3 times a week. If you want to add in pool aerobics or tai chi classes, all the better. But you have to stress your muscles in order to get the bones to regenerate and strengthen. Exercise also helps reduce dementia risk. The hippocampus - the part of your brain that is key for memory - is stimulated by types of exercise that increases heart rate.
- Reduce inflammation through diet. Systemic inflammation can cause fatigue and joint pain. But that is not all. It's also a key risk factor for cancer, heart disease, Type 2 diabetes and asthma. Chronic inflammation is actually the primary cause of joint damage - not wear and tear, like most assume. Osteoarthritis is the leading cause of chronic disability in the U.S. Diet is also important for joint pain caused by inflammation. Eating more fiber can lower your chance of osteoarthritis of the knee by over 60%.

- Avoid dehydration through adequate water intake. Water isn't my favorite drink, but I make sure to drink 64 ounces a day because I know that it keeps me hydrated. That results in more energy and alertness during the day. For people entering their older years, it's even more important. Not having enough water will cause cystitis and UTIs, as well as dementia-like behavior. Maybe sending grandma to the nursing home because she was sick and confused could have been avoided if she was hydrated properly for her adult life. Additionally, higher water intake is directly associated with lower risk of heart attacks, when 5 glasses a day are consumed.



- Improving cognitive health and slowing mental decline is critical to living independently as we age. This can be done through diet, exercise and involvement in something that requires critical thinking, creativity, etc. There is so much to unpack here - way more than I can cover in this blog - just understand that the way we eat and our exercise level has direct impact on the thickening of our arteries and veins. Vascular dementia is a by-product of thickening and clots, as are strokes. Intellectual stimulation can even help someone avoid dementia because the stimulation causes connections to grow in the brain. Those with higher education usually remain sharp as they age, but someone with no higher education can reduce their risk with cognitive exercises like cards, crossword puzzles and reading. Your risk can be reduced by as much as 66% with daily participating in cognitive challenges. The worst thing you could do is retire from life when you retire from a job.

- Sleep is another key ingredient in helping you age well and stay alert. Some reasons are more obvious than others. When you are tired from a lack of sleep, you make errors in judgment while walking and driving. You also eat more junk food and tend to not be as active. However, there are some real physiological reasons why getting enough sleep at night needs to be a priority for aging well. At night when you sleep is when your body regenerates cells, lowers cortisol levels, and clears itself of amyloid. That's the stuff that becomes plaque on your brain which can lead to dementia. Another side effect of deficient sleep is being overweight, which is a risk factor for several other ailments, like Type 2 Diabetes, cancer, heart disease and metabolic syndrome.
- Maintain strong social circles and involvement in group (and religious) activities. This is going to sound crazy, but having a rich social life may have a better result on overall health than quitting smoking. A review of over 100 studies was done, and the conclusion was that a strong social network that included getting together and enjoying each other's company could reduce all-cause mortality by 50%. Unfortunately, many people find that their social circles naturally lessen as they age, when they are no longer involved in their children's activities and especially after they retire. Think back to the Blue Zones research. Involvement in strong friendships and activities was a pillar of the healthiest and longest living communities.



So, this has been quite a lot to digest.

There are tens of thousands of us in the next 10-15 years that will be reaching the age at which many start needing care. You just learned about the issues with long-term facilities and what you can do to delay or avoid needing one.

Imagine living independently well into your 90s, in your own home.

But, how? Could you really make the changes needed to change the trajectory of your health?

It's really quite simple and depending upon your lifestyle choices up to this point, it may not be that difficult. Hopefully you are willing to explore your options and take on some new habits.

I believe you can do this and do it on your own. But, if you think you need help getting started, let me know. There may be some services I can offer that will help.

Here's to an amazing future!

- Kelli

*(on the next page is a list of references for all of the stats that you just read...just so you know I didn't just make it all up.)*



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