




Health Tips

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Health Tip: Tips for Living Longer



Most people know that good genetics can extend lifespan, and that poor lifestyle habits such as cigarette smoking can shorten one's life. Today's "Health Tip" has to do with some of the less well known correlates of longevity. In some instances, the mechanism for the increased life expectancy is not clear and with others, additional research will be necessary to confirm the association. In any case, these associations are intriguing and some cases, instructive as far as our lifestyle choices are concerned.

Going to church -- or any kind of religious service. A

study published in Psychology and Health showed that older women who regularly attended religious services at least once per week had a 20% mortality risk reduction compared to those not attending services. These findings were part of the Women's Health Initiative Observational Study, a long-term, multi-ethnic study aimed at addressing women's health issues. It was speculated that

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organized religion enhanced well-being through the creation of a social network. Interestingly, this decreased risk of dying was not found to be related to certain, seemingly pious characteristics, such as not smoking or abstaining from drinking alcohol.

Restricting calories. A calorie restricted diet, one that involves eating 15-20% fewer calories than usual, while still receiving adequate vitamins and nutrients, has been shown to extend the life span of a number of laboratory animals. While it has not been confirmed that calorie restriction also increases life expectancy in humans, several factors related to decreased mortality are seen in humans on calorie restricted diets. Specifically, calorie restriction reduces the risk of developing diabetes, heart disease and possibly cancer. It should be pointed out, however, that when being underweight is the result of a nutritionally deficient diet, chronic disease, or as an effect of cigarette smoking, the potential benefit of having a low body-mass index is negated.

Taking cholesterol lowering medication. A class of cholesterol lowering medications known as statins (Lipitor, Mevacor, others) were recently shown to increase the life expectancy of elderly patients. The way that statins work is to decrease cholesterol production by the liver. Less cholesterol in the blood stream means less artery blocking plaque. In this study, the mortality rate of almost 350,000 Veterans Administration patients taking a statin drug was compared to almost 1.5 million subjects not receiving the medication. Most of the subjects receiving the medication also had some combination of diabetes, high blood pressure or coronary artery disease, and so were at greater risk of premature death. Despite this increased risk, the subjects receiving the statin drug outlived subjects in the control group by an average of 2 years.

Getting adequate amounts of vitamin D. For years, people have turned to vitamin supplements to try to improve their health. So long as one does not have a significant deficiency, however, there has been no link found between taking vitamins B, C, or E and increasing life span. It now appears that vitamin D may be the "magic bullet" of the vitamin group. When total mortality was reviewed in healthy subjects participating in studies performed primarily to evaluate fracture risk, the survival benefit of those taking vitamin D became apparent. In addition to lowering the risk of fractures, a 7 to 8 % reduction in overall mortality was noted. This correlates with an increased life expectancy of one to two years.

Eating less meat. Although the jury is still out on this one, there is some research to suggest that eating less meat can contribute to greater longevity. American vegetarians have been shown to have lower cholesterol levels and blood pressure than their meat-eating counterparts which translates into a decreased risk of heart attack and stroke. Strikingly, data from several studies of Seventh-day Adventists living in California strongly suggest that their vegetarian practices contribute to their 4 to 10 years of additional life as compared to non-vegetarians.



Playing golf. In a study designed to evaluate the health benefits achieved from a specific type of leisure-time physical activity, playing golf was found to reduce mortality among a group of Swedish golfers. In fact, this study concluded that playing golf could extend life expectancy by as much as 5 years. While the major effect of playing golf on longevity is most likely due to the physical activity involved, there was also thought to

be important social and psychological aspects of the game that contributed also.

Through the years, there have been a number of "elixirs of life" that have not stood up under scientific scrutiny. In addition to the vitamins mentioned, Human Growth Hormone, DHEA, and high dose antioxidants are other examples of these. It appears that much less exotic measures---maintaining social ties, not smoking, eating properly, exercising regularly---remain the secrets to a longer life.

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