

Young at Heart

As of yet, no one has found the fountain of youth to keep you forever young. But we can keep our bodies strong and healthy as we get older. Lifestyle changes you make in your 20s, 30s, 40s and beyond could help keep you strong and healthy as you age.

It's up to you

Making healthy choices starting in your 20s and sticking with them could reduce disease risk when you reach middle age. Even if you have a family history of chronic disease such as diabetes, high blood pressure, or heart disease! These healthy lifestyle choices include:

- Not smoking
- Limiting alcohol, if you choose to drink at all
- Getting enough sleep
- Being physically active
- Eating a healthy diet
- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Having a strong support network

But don't despair if you're already past your 20s. It's never too late to reap benefits from adopting a healthy lifestyle.

Eat a healthy diet

A healthy diet matters as well. Here are the basics from the Dietary Guidelines for Americans:

- Eat a variety of veggies and fruits.
- Choose whole grains for at least half your grains.
- Minimize highly processed foods.
- Eat lean protein like skinless chicken. Try to include 2 servings of fish per week.
- Choose low-fat or fat-free dairy products.
- Snack on nuts and seeds for healthy fats.
- Use olive oil in place of solid fats when cooking and for salad dressing.
- Limit foods high in saturated fat and/or sodium.
- Minimize sweets and added sugars.

Move more

Being a couch potato isn't going to keep you strong and healthy no matter what age you are. Regular physical activity has been long known to enhance health. How much exercise do you really need? Here are some guidelines from the 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans:

- Adults: Aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic activity or a combination of the two every week.



- Older adults: Still aim for at least 150 minutes per week if you are healthy. Be sure to include exercises that help to improve or maintain your balance. Did you know that you can still build muscle well into your 80s and 90s? It's true, and it may help keep you mobile and independent throughout your life. So, in addition to your aerobic activity, the Guidelines also recommend adding strength training to your routine at least 2 days per week!

Manage stress

You can't hide from stress. We all face challenges and changes that can bring on stress. Since we can't avoid stress, it's important to find tools to deal with it. Things like meditation, exercise, or spending time with a good listener could help to prevent the harmful side effects of stress. If you've tried these tools and they don't work for you, consider talking with a trained counselor.

Get enough sleep

Sleep has an impact on your mood and physical health. Adults should aim for 7-8 hours of sleep every night. Losing just 1-2 hours of sleep several days per week can have negative effects on your body and mind. Naps and sleeping in on the weekends do not make up for not sleeping enough during the week. If you are having difficulty falling or staying asleep and you are not sure why, talk to your health care provider.

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Don't put off health screenings

Health screenings could save your life. Talk to your health care provider so you know which screenings you need and when. Some are recommended before you're even 20 years old. In addition to regular health screenings, make sure you are up to date on vaccines.

Oral health: How often you see the dentist depends on your age and the health of your teeth and gums. During a typical exam, your dentist will check for tooth decay, gum disease and signs of mouth cancer.

Eye health: Some health issues can also affect your eyes and may lead to vision problems or permanent vision loss. As you get older, your eye doctor will check for cataracts and eye disease such as glaucoma or macular degeneration.

Exercise your brain

Have you ever walked into a room to get something and forgotten what you needed? Anyone can have these experiences at times. It may not have anything to do with your age! If you are lacking sleep, stressed or just trying to do too much, your focus and memory could suffer. Other factors may be medications you're taking, poor dietary habits, lack of activity, or changes in your health status such as diabetes or heart disease. If you forget things often and you're concerned about the cause, see your health care provider.

Pay attention to emotional health

The support of friends and family is important at any age. Strong social ties may help to reduce stress and give you some extra emotional support when you're going through tough times. Also, being part of a network of people can give you a sense of belonging and could increase your self-confidence. Surround yourself with people you enjoy spending time with.

Summary

You can learn habits that will keep you strong, healthy and vibrant throughout your life. It's never too late (or too early) to start!

Sources

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- Healthy lifestyle through young adulthood and the presence of low cardiovascular disease risk profile in middle age: the Coronary Artery Risk Development in (Young) Adults (CARDIA) study. 2/2012

This handout contains general health and wellness information and is not a substitute for your doctor's care. You should consult an appropriate health care professional for your specific needs. Some treatments mentioned may not be covered by your health plan. Please refer to your benefit plan documents for information about coverage.