

Lessons From the "Super-Agers"

Surprising secrets from people who live the longest.

Want to live a long, healthy life? To learn how, just ask a "super-ager."



That was the thinking of researchers at the University of California, Irvine, who recruited more than 1,000 residents from a retirement community to study what *exactly* caused these people to live to age 90 and beyond. Known as the "oldest-old," this group is comprised of about two million Americans and is the fastest growing segment of the US population.

The 90-Plus Study, which is ongoing, holds important lessons for all of us who hope to reach advanced age with our mental and physical faculties intact.

*What's been discovered so far...**

THROW OUT YOUR SCALE

Obesity is harmful for everyone, but older adults who carry a few extra pounds are more likely to live *longer* than those who are lean.

Surprising result: Adults in the 90-Plus Study with a body mass index (BMI), which is weight relative to height, of 25 to 29.9—a range that is considered "over-

weight"—lived longer, on average, than those with BMIs of 18.5 to 24.9, the "normal" range.** (Participants' average age was 72 when their BMIs were measured.)

It is not clear why these extra pounds appear to be protective in older adults. It is possible that people who are somewhat overweight have better nutritional status overall than those who are lean.

In addition, people with extra fat reserves may be better able to circumvent "wasting," the age-related loss of muscle tissue and strength that can lead to frailty and an increased risk for illness.

Caution: In our research, being obese (a BMI of 30 and higher) at any age was not associated with a longer life span. And being overweight or obese at age 21 was associated with a *shorter* life span.

EXERCISE WORKS

Study participants who exercised for 45 minutes or more a day, most days of the week, were 27% less likely to die within an eight-year period than those who exercised less than 15 minutes daily. Their activities included swimming, biking, tennis, vigorous walking and dancing. They also were more likely to retain more of their memory and other cognitive functions.

Striking research finding: Even participants who got very little

exercise—as little as 15 minutes a day—lived significantly longer than those who were completely sedentary.

Dementia risk is quadrupled: Among the oldest-old, those who scored in the lowest 20% in physical performance—which measured such factors as balance and the ability to walk a certain distance—were *four times* more likely to have dementia than those who scored in the highest 20%.

Physical activity not only improves cardiovascular and cerebral blood flow, but also increases circulation so that brain cells receive more nutrients. There is also strong evidence that exercise promotes *neurogenesis*, the growth of new brain cells (neurons) and the connections between these cells.

MONOPOLY, ANYONE?

The onset of Alzheimer's disease is one of the greatest fears of older adults. The incidence of dementia from all causes, including Alzheimer's disease, *doubles* every five years between ages 65 and 85.

Key finding: Participants in the 21-year Bronx Aging Study who spent three hours daily engrossed in mental activities, including playing board games, reading, dancing or playing a musical instrument, were significantly less likely to develop dementia than those who spent less (or no) time doing these activities.

Examples: Specifically, participants who spent hours playing board games had a 75% lower risk of developing dementia...and those who spent a similar amount of time playing a musical instrument had a 70% lower risk.

For optimal results: Aim for three hours of such activities daily. Shorter periods of mental focus can also decrease the risk for dementia, but three hours a day seems to be optimal. 🍎

*To read about other research from the 90-Plus Study, go to www.alz.uci.edu/90plusstudy/papers.html.

Bottom Line/Health interviewed Daniel James Berlau, PhD, an adjunct assistant professor in the department of neurology at the University of California, Irvine, School of Medicine. He specializes in neurobiology and memory and is a principal investigator in the ongoing 90-Plus Study.



**To learn your BMI, go to the Web site of the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, www.nhlbi.support.com/bmi/.