

The Heart healthy Lifestyle – How to make your life longer and better

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By Dr. Bob Bernstein.

My mother was right. Eat plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables, get lots of fresh air and sunshine, and exercise. Okay, in the age of ozone layer thinning and climate change, forget the sunshine.

Woody Allen said, “I don’t want to achieve immortality through my work... I want to achieve it through not dying.” Since we can’t live forever, how about living as long as we can in as good shape as possible? It’s not about preventing death, it’s about preventing deterioration and disability.

The most common cardiovascular diseases are heart attack, stroke, and peripheral vascular disease. Each of these has one thing in common—a narrowed or blocked artery; in heart attacks, it is an artery that supplies the heart muscle with blood (and oxygen), in stroke it is an artery that supplies blood to a part of the brain, and in peripheral vascular disease it is an artery that supplies blood to a leg muscle.

We are all at risk of developing cardiovascular diseases. Just because you may have none of the acknowledged risk factors does not mean that you can’t have a heart attack or stroke. Indeed, a 60-year-old man with normal cholesterol, normal blood pressure and no other risks has an 11% chance of having a heart attack by 70, and a 60-year-old woman has a 6% chance. The risk factors are just life alone, though arguably, being a man is a risk factor in itself.

So I don’t want it construed that if you are not “high risk,” then you don’t need to do anything. But pay particular attention if you have

- impaired fasting blood sugar or “pre-diabetes”
- obesity
- a family history of diabetes (type 2 or adult-onset) which is a BIG risk factor for vascular disease
- a family history of heart attacks or strokes in first degree relatives younger than 60
- borderline or high blood pressure
- low “good” cholesterol and high triglycerides
- an unbalanced blend of total cholesterol and good cholesterol
- the NUMBER ONE risk factor—the habit of smoking! If you smoke, stop reading this article at once and go buy a nicotine patch or gum, and see your doctor for support. If you smoke, then treating cholesterol is like the proverbial re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. You’ll think you are doing something useful but the ship is going down.

“What can I do to live longer?” My wife asked me that question a couple of months ago.

“The first and most important thing,” I said, “is exercise. The second is.... exercise, and the third....” By now you are getting the picture.

So far, the only thing we know of that prolongs the human lifespan is exercise. Sorry, it is the cold, bitter truth. Here's the good part. One hundred fifty minutes of exercise a week is enough. Do the math... 30 minutes a day for 5 days a week.. Now that is an attainable target.

People like to exercise in different ways. Some need company to spur them to action and go to a gym with friends or jog in a group. Others have a home gym. I don't really care as long as the exercise is something that raises your pulse for a sustained period of time, like running, fast walking, cycling, swimming, or using an elliptical machine. Yoga or lifting weights won't do. My recommendation (in spite of all the people who love jogging out there) is to choose something that doesn't jar the feet, knees, hips, and back. I've never felt "runner's high" but I have felt knee and back pain, and they are worth preventing.

My dad lived to 93 and never "exercised." He also never took elevators. He "exercised" by building physical work into his day. Up and down the stairs to his third storey architecture office a few dozen times a day, clambering over partially finished buildings, doing carpentry and starting flower boxes in his basement. He had an active lifestyle. I bike to work and back, others walk to work, some get off the bus 10 blocks before work and walk the rest of the way. It doesn't matter, as long as you are active for 30 minutes, 5 times a week. Just do it. Make it fun, playful, social or make it work if you like. You don't have time not to.

Low carb, Atkins, the other Dr. Bernstein's diet, Dr. Poon's diet, The GI diet, the DASH diet, the American Heart Association diet, Canada's food guide, the Mediterranean diet... how do we ever know what is right, what works, or what to do? How do we separate fads that provide no lasting benefit from diets that help keep weight and cholesterol under control?

The problem is that we tend to rely on hype we hear from celebrities rather than evidence. Fortunately, in the dietary area the evidence is reasonably clear. When the major diets are pitted against each other in head-to-head competition, one is consistently better. Guess...

When my wife was traveling as a young woman, she stayed with a family in Italy and was exposed to the diet of the people. Her host put liberal amounts of olive oil on everything. "Isn't it too greasy?" she asked.

"No, it's good for you!" she was told. And so it is.

The Mediterranean diet consists of lots of fresh vegetables, fruits, lean protein like fish, seafood and poultry, and complex carbohydrates like whole grains and beans, with up to a liter of olive oil per week per person!! Fish contains heart-healthy omega-3 fats. Throw away the butter and use a sprinkle of olive oil with a bit of balsamic vinegar on your whole grain bread... just like in good Italian restaurants. Other sources of good (monounsaturated) fats are the cheaper, but also healthy canola oil, and nuts, which are great for high energy snacks. Limit red meats to three or four times a month. Use less salt for seasoning and more herbs and spices. Drink red wine in moderation. If you don't normally drink alcohol, then red wine is not an essential component, but only two things raise your good cholesterol—red wine and ... guess again... exercise!

Here is a link to more information about the Mediterranean diet:
<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/mediterranean-diet/CL00011>

Omega-3 fats found in fatty fish and dietary supplements have been in the news lately, having been associated with prostate cancers. The jury is out on this. The correlation of high omega-3 blood levels with prostate cancer does not mean that omega-3s cause prostate cancer. But there have been two studies now suggesting the correlation is real. My best advice is that if you don't already take omega-3 or fish oil supplements, don't start, and if you do, maybe cut down. We just don't know. Meantime, follow the issue closely. There will be more research in the fullness of time.

You may have medical conditions that require other special diets, but for the vast majority of us, the Mediterranean diet is best. It's not "diet", it's a way of eating for the rest of your life. If you look at it as a "diet" that you have to follow, you're dead in the water. It is a question of understanding how to eat properly, and making that your life choice. I don't go off my diet. My diet is whatever I eat. Sometimes I'll indulge in something I know isn't good for me—who can resist ice cream at a party? But it is in my control; it's my choice, so to speak. In other words, perfection is the enemy of action. Don't be perfect, be good enough.

Lastly, there's modern medicine. Have your blood pressure checked once a year or two, more if you have a family history of high blood pressure. If it is consistently elevated, then treat it. Blood pressure is the next most important risk factor after smoking.

Test your cholesterol at least once. Your doctor can advise you how often to measure it, but healthy people with no other risks don't need it repeated until menopause in women, and sometime in the middle 40's for men. If you have high cholesterol, get it treated. Diet and exercise can make it better but if it is truly up, then diet alone isn't enough.

The metabolic syndrome is a cluster of risk factors that indicate a higher risk of developing diabetes, such as obesity with low good cholesterol and high triglycerides. Some research has shown that treating people with a drug that improves your body's response to its own insulin can delay or prevent diabetes. Worth a chat with your doctor.

Putting it all together, you should

1. exercise 30 minutes a day, 5 days a week,
2. quit smoking. Better still, never start,.
3. measure your blood pressure and control it with blood pressure medication if it is high (There is no room for naturopathy or homeopathy here.),
4. eat like a Mediterranean,
5. treat cholesterol problems first with diet, then with medications if necessary,
6. watch for new evidence about Omega-3s.

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