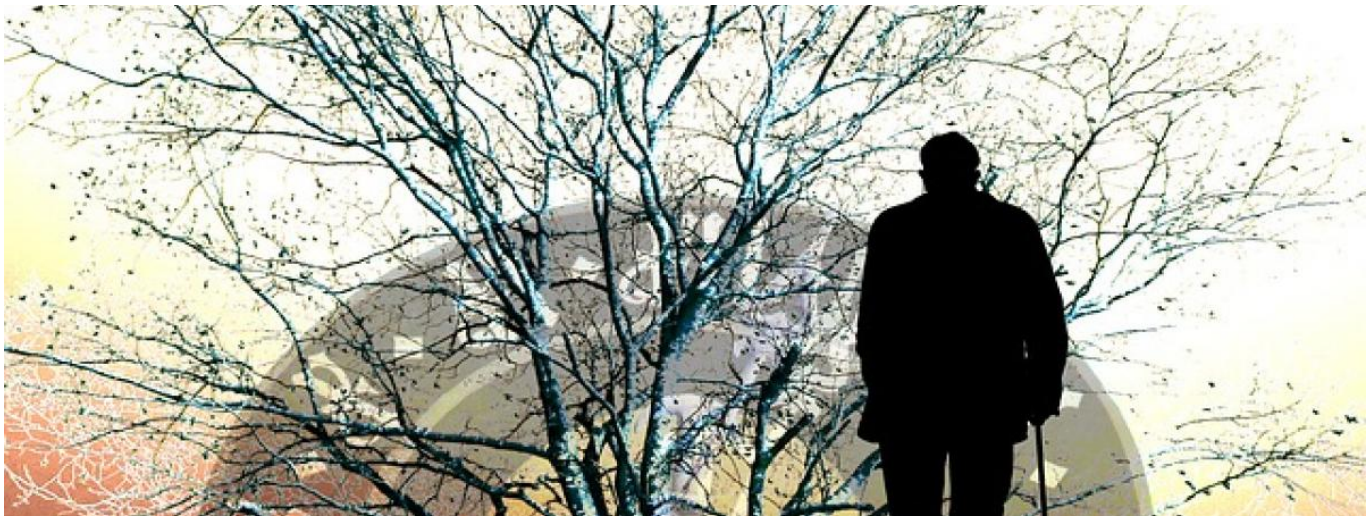
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link to Reader's Digest article [1]

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Becoming a centenarian is not such a long shot with today's modern medicine and dietary tips. Here's how to have a go at reaching the big 100.

According to the Population Division of the United Nations, the global number of centenarians should reach more than 25m in 2100, with females leading the longevity revolution. There are many theories as to the secret of long life, with some being quite surprising.

The three doctors

“The best doctors are Dr Diet, Dr Quiet and Dr Merryman” runs the proverb. Nobody would question that a healthy diet, plenty of rest and some enjoyment are good for the body and soul, but do they help you live to a hundred? And what role does physical activity [5] play in lengthening lifespan?

What’s more, is it really true that married men enjoy better health, and live longer, than their single, divorced, and widowed peers?

Dr Diet?

Experiments as long ago as 1915 showed that restricting calorie intake [6] extended life—in yeast, spiders and rats. But is it that simple in humans?

Humans burn their carbohydrates and fats for fuel, producing dangerous “free radicals” as waste during the process, which charge around the body, damaging cells. The more you eat, the more free radicals are produced; going hungry and choosing calorie restriction used to be thought of as the “gold standard for life extension” in humans—but not anymore.

More important is the composition of your diet. Eating more plant-based foods and less red and processed meat is known to be good for health, with a recent study [7] predicting that 5 million deaths per year could be prevented if dietary animal protein was largely replaced with plant-based protein. Benefits could also be seen for the planet, with the same study predicting a 30 per cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions.

Curbing sugar intake [8], meanwhile, could stave off diabetes, obesity and heart disease.

Dr Quiet?

Whether “Dr Quiet” can grant long life is questionable. Bodily rest needs balancing with physical activity, and when it comes to a quiet mind [9], silence can be golden, but there’s also a time for company.

In humans [10], listening to slow music has been shown to reduce blood pressure, heart rate and breathing rate; inserting two minutes of silence into the music lowered blood pressure and breathing even further.

Prolonged silence can though cause mental anguish, with Nelson Mandela describing mind tricks during his confinement. What’s more, when silence is linked to loneliness, your physical health may suffer. Loneliness [11] is associated with a 29 per cent increase in risk of heart disease and a 32 per cent increase in stroke.

Dr Merryman?

Depression [12] has been linked to diminished lifespan, with the World Health Organization [13] citing a 1.8 times higher risk of dying, due in part to those with severe depression receiving lower quality health and social care than the general population.

Some strange studies [14] have tried to prove, with pictures, the link between happiness and reaching an old age. In 2010, two researchers looked at official photographs of US major league baseball players dating back to the 1950s. They found that those who had “genuinely beamed” in their photographs lived, on average, seven years longer than their less smiley teammates. Years later though, a separate group [15] of researchers tried to replicate these results, and failed. Happiness is hard to measure; conclusions about links with longevity difficult to decide on.

Being married?

Many studies [16] suggest a possible protective effect of marriage [17]—for men—with married men often living longer than men without spouses.

For example, a Japanese study [18] showed that never-married men were three times more likely to die from heart disease than married men, whilst the Framingham Offspring Study showed that married men had a 46 per cent lower rate of death.
When marriage comes to an end for men (through divorce or bereavement), risk of heart disease and even cancer has been shown to increase.

Is marriage protective because a spouse can act as companion and caregiver? Longevity could also be down to improved lifestyle, with Harvard Health [16] suggesting that “unmarried, divorced, and widowed men don't eat as well as married men…. In contrast, married men are more likely to get regular medical care and to benefit from a higher standard of living”.

Be grateful

Walk into any nursing home and meet with a mix of life stories and lifestyles as individual as the residents themselves. There’s no big secret to the longest lives: Drs Diet, Quiet and Merryman have limited power over most diseases—and over your DNA. Interestingly, blood tests from centenarians show cells that are particularly good at repairing DNA.

You can ruin the present by worrying about your future. Live well and make sensible choices, but remember to cherish life, whatever your age or stage.



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