

What Habits Can You Build by Middle Age to Prevent Disease?



By [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#) | mercola.com

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Harvard researchers say five healthy habits may increase the number of years you are disease-free; these are related to exercise, nutrition, body weight, alcohol and smoking
- The percentage of the population in the U.S. who are obese rose from 37.7% in 2014 to 42.4% just four years later. Nutrition is at the center of maintaining a

healthy weight

- High-intensity exercise may reduce blood pressure, but it's important to include a variety of exercise and nonexercise movements each day to stay healthy
- Smoking and alcohol can shorten your life and damage your brain. Start choosing healthy habits slowly and work to maintain each one before adding another

Researchers have long known that healthy habits can lengthen your life,^{1,2} while unhealthy ones can increase your risk for disease and illness. Sometimes an unhealthy habit is a result of trying to do the right thing – like avoiding the [sun](#) – and other habits may be the result of a hectic lifestyle – such as lack of exercise and movement.

Worldometers records life expectancy in 191 countries, which ranges from 54.36 to 85.29 years.³ There are 39 countries where life expectancy is greater than 80 years, and the United States is not one of them. In fact, the U.S. ranks 46th with an overall life expectancy of 79.11 years.

This was one observation of an international team of researchers in 2018 when they used data from the Nurses' Health Study and the Health Professionals Follow-up Study to determine the impact that lifestyle factors have on premature mortality and life expectancy of people in the U.S.⁴

The factors included never smoking, body mass index, physical activity, moderate alcohol intake, and a healthy diet. Using the data, they estimated that those who did not adopt any of the identified healthy lifestyle factors would live an additional 29 years for women and 25.5 years for men, beginning at age 50.

However, those who adopted all lifestyle factors might enjoy a life expectancy of an additional 43.1 years for women and 37.6 years for men over age 50. This represented an additional 14

years for women and 12.2 years for men over the average lifespan.

Healthy Habits Lengthen Disease-Free Life

You may be familiar with the quote, “And in the end, it’s not the years in your life that count; it’s the life in your years.” This is what researchers from Harvard University were interested in determining. If healthy habits could extend the number of years in your life, could they also extend the number of healthy years in your life?

The same international team, led by a scientist from Harvard, later expanded their study to determine whether the same lifestyle factors could increase the potential for a person to enjoy more years of good health.⁵ They analyzed 34 years of data from 73,196 participants in the Nurses’ Health Study (all females) and 28 years of data from 38,366 participants in the Health Professionals Follow-up Study (all males). They defined the five lifestyle parameters as:⁶

- Diet – A high score on the Alternate Healthy Eating Index (AHEI)
- Exercise – At least 30 minutes each day of at least moderate activity
- Bodyweight – BMI of 18.5 to 24.9 kg/m²
- Alcohol – Up to one serving for women and two for men per day
- Smoking – Never smoked

The researchers used the AHEI to determine whether a person’s dietary habits were healthy.⁷ It was developed by researchers as an alternative to the Healthy Eating Index based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans:⁸

“Higher scores of dietary quality based on AHEI are strongly associated with lower risks of chronic diseases, cancer, and all-cause, cardiovascular, and cancer mortality.”⁹

The objective of the study was to determine how these five lifestyle factors could relate to living free of major [chronic diseases](#), which they defined as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer.¹⁰ These chronic diseases are related to five of the 10 leading causes of death in the U.S., including Alzheimer’s and stroke.¹¹

The data showed that women who maintained four or five healthy lifestyle habits by age 50 had an average of 34.4 years free of the chronic diseases in the outcome measurement. This is more than 11 years greater than the 23.7 healthy years for the women who maintained none of the habits.

Men had 31.1 chronic disease-free years when they maintained the five healthy habits by age 50, as compared to 23.5 years in those who did not practice any. Additionally, the researchers found that men and women who were obese had the “lowest disease-free life expectancy.”¹² One of the authors commented:¹³

“Previous studies have found that following a healthy lifestyle improves overall life expectancy and reduces risk of chronic diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer, but few studies have looked at the effects of lifestyle factors on life expectancy free from such diseases. This study provides strong evidence that following a healthy lifestyle can substantially extend the years a person lives disease-free.”

Healthy Food Choices Often Lead to Healthy Weight

Data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) in 2014 showed that one-third of all the people in the U.S. were obese, and 1 of every 13 adults was extremely obese.¹⁴ Data from the NHANES in 2016 showed the number was rising, having reached 39.8%.¹⁵ By 2018, the most recent year for which the statistics have been published, the rate had reached 42.4%.¹⁶

This means that in four short years, another 4.7% of the population in the U.S. had made the leap from being overweight to being obese. As I've written before, you'll never be able to out-exercise the food you eat, so maintaining a healthy weight is highly dependent on eating healthy foods.

Many of the processed foods in the grocery store are loaded with endocrine-disrupting chemicals, also known as [obesogens](#), which can trigger permanent changes to fat cells. It's important to eat highly nutritious foods you'll find at local farmers' markets or around the outside aisle of your grocery store. Produce at farmers' markets is fresher and often lasts longer than what you'll find at the grocer.

You may also find local dairy and egg distributors who use regenerative farming practices, without GMO feed or antibiotics. London-based cardiologist Dr. Aseem Malhotra is the latest in a line of doctors (including myself) who warn of the dangers associated with processed and [ultra-processed foods](#).

He tweeted, "The government and public health England are ignorant and grossly negligent for not telling the public they need to change their diet now."¹⁷ During an interview with the BBC, Malhotra further defined the risks associated with the

cluster of conditions in metabolic syndrome, including insulin resistance, obesity, and high blood pressure, saying:¹⁸

“It goes way beyond obesity. Essentially all of the conditions we call part of the metabolic syndrome ... all of these are linked to poor diet. And the increased mortality – from a cluster of these conditions we call metabolic syndrome – from COVID-19 is 10-fold higher.”

He went on to discuss how even people with a normal BMI can have a metabolic disease, yet just a few weeks of eating well can help start to reverse many of these conditions.

His argument to change your diet is related to reducing your immediate risk of severe infectious disease. However, as the Harvard-led research shows, embracing healthy habits can also reduce your risk of chronic disease and extend your life span.

Consider Using a Variety of Exercise for Overall Benefits

A recent study published in *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise* was designed to investigate how to reduce the risk of stiff arteries and high blood pressure in older adults.¹⁹ While past researchers have shown regular exercise can make an impact on these outcomes, the question the researchers asked was, what type of exercise is best?²⁰

Scientists from Nova Scotia compared the data from observing six weeks of exercise three times per week in older adults using “continuous moderate-intensity cycling, high-intensity (sprint) interval cycling, or whole-body weight training.”²¹ The participants’ average age was 67 and none of them had high blood pressure.

The outcomes suggested that high-intensity interval training,

used regularly, may help prevent high blood pressure and other types of cardiovascular disease. However, it is important to remember that while interval training may have a positive impact on [high blood pressure](#), a variety of [types of exercise](#) will benefit your overall health and wellness.

As you may remember, the Harvard researchers' criteria were 30 minutes of at least moderate activity each day. Developing a well-rounded exercise routine can contribute to other health benefits. For example, in one animal study, researchers found that resistance training improved the cognitive ability of rats with mild cognitive impairment.²² In a human study, researchers proposed:²³

“After a long period of strength training, the oxidative stress can be reduced, the brain-derived neurotrophic factor and insulin-like growth factor I serum concentrations enhance, and the cognitive performance improves. Considering these results, we can infer that strength training can be related to increased neurogenesis, neuroplasticity and, consequently, counteracts aging effects on the brain.”

Muscle mass and strength are needed for mobility, balance, and the ability to live independently. Having sufficient muscle mass also increases your potential for survival during illness and hospitalization. Research has demonstrated that the strongest one-third of the population over age 60 have a 50% lower death rate than the weakest.²⁴

When aerobic exercise is combined with strength training, it reduces your all-cause mortality by 29%.²⁵ One method of strength training that takes less time and uses lighter weight is Blood Flow Restriction Training. This involves slightly restricting arterial inflow to allow moderation of venous outflow at the top of the arm or leg.

The process requires the use of low weights with high repetitions, until the point of failure. This makes Blood Flow Restriction training safer than conventional strength training and available to a broader range of people, including the elderly and those with disabilities or injuries. You can read more at "[What You Need to Know About Blood Flow Restriction Training.](#)"

Include Movement in Your Healthy Lifestyle Habits

Yet another option you can easily fit into four or five minutes a couple to three times a day is using the Nitric Oxide Dump. This exercise stimulates the release of nitric oxide stored in the lining of your blood vessels.

It helps to reduce your blood pressure and is a time-efficient workout that can help boost your sense of well-being. Read more about it, and watch a short video demonstration at "[Fitness Checkup: Why You Need to Try the Nitric Oxide Dump Workout.](#)"

While it's important to exercise at least 30 minutes each day, in one study it was demonstrated that sitting for prolonged periods of time, even for those who exercise heavily, can increase the risk of death.²⁶

To maintain health, you need mild but consistent movement throughout your waking hours. One strategy that has a positive impact is to simply stand up more throughout the day and increase your daily walking. Several scholars have looked at the difference between the number of steps taken throughout the day and the intensity of exercise. Read more about the results at "[Aiming for 10,000 Steps? Here's Your New Target.](#)"

Smoking Adds Risk to Brain Health

The [dangers of smoking](#) have long been researched. Smoking can damage nearly every organ and affects more than 16 million Americans. According to the Centers for Disease Control and prevention, “For every person who dies because of smoking, at least 30 people live with a serious smoking-related illness.”²⁷

Conditions include heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and lung diseases, which includes all the parameters the Harvard team used for chronic disease. One of the vascular conditions smoking may trigger is stroke, which has a damaging effect on the neurological center of the body.

Cigarette smoking is also associated with other neurological conditions such as Alzheimer’s disease and multiple sclerosis.²⁸ In animal studies, scientists have shown that cigarette smoke triggers oxidative damage to the brain. Researchers have also linked lung disease to cognitive decline and impairment.²⁹ That means smoking can affect your brain in more than one way.

Alcohol Is Associated With Neurological Damage

Alcohol also increases the risk of neurological and cognitive diseases. Impairment is not limited to just when a person is drinking, since deficits may persist long after a person becomes sober.³⁰ The damage can range from simple forgetfulness to permanent debilitation that requires custodial care.

A lot of people minimize the risks of alcohol, though, and [public health](#) experts believe there are two reasons for this. One is that the alcohol lobby has purchased favorable media coverage and the other is that a rising problem with

illegal drugs usually gets the brunt of bad publicity, even when alcohol may do more damage.

Making Small Changes May Reap Big Rewards

If you're someone who needs to put a few more good health habits in place, don't despair. As Molhotra said in his BBC interview, the benefits of making dietary changes can start to show in just weeks.

It's important to identify the areas that may benefit from changes, such as more movement during the day, exercise, or dietary habits you'd like to change. Try not to get overwhelmed if the list is longer than you'd hoped. Make one change and commit to make it a habit. Once you've accomplished this, move on to the next.

Making too many changes at once can get overwhelming and may even end poorly. Instead, making small changes over time can reap some big rewards when it comes to your health, wellness, and reducing your risk of chronic disease.