

Research: These 5 Habits Could Give You Extra Decade of Life

Adults who follow a healthy lifestyle in middle age may extend their lifespan by more than a decade and have a lower risk of dying from cancer or heart disease, a U.S. study suggests.

Researchers focused on five habits long linked to a lower risk of developing or dying from variety of chronic medical problems: not smoking, limiting alcohol, exercising, eating well, and maintaining a healthy weight.

During more than three decades of follow-up, people who followed all five of these habits were 74 percent less likely to die from all causes, 82 percent less likely to die from heart disease and 65 percent less likely to die from cancer.

At age 50, women who followed all five of these healthy habits had a life expectancy 14 years longer than women who adopted none of these habits, the study found.

And 50-year-old men who had been following all five healthy habits could expect to live 12 years longer than men who hadn't followed any of them.

"Although we already know that healthy lifestyle habits can reduce risk of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease and cancer, few studies have quantified the benefits of these lifestyle factors on prolonging life expectancy," said senior study author Dr. Frank Hu of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health in Boston.

Even though the U.S. is one of the wealthiest countries in the world, Americans have a shorter life expectancy than people in many other high-income countries due in part to higher rates

of many preventable diseases, researchers note in *Circulation*.

The study involved almost 79,000 female nurses, with data collection starting in 1976, and more than 44,000 male health professionals, starting in 1986. Half of the women were followed for at least 34 years and half of the men for at least 27 years.

Altogether, 42,167 people died, including 13,953 who died from cancer and another 10,689 from cardiovascular disease.

Examined separately, each of the five individual healthy habits was associated with a lower risk of premature death, but the effect was biggest for people who adopted all five health habits, the study found.

The study wasn't a controlled experiment designed to prove whether or how each of these lifestyle habits might directly contribute to longevity, or assess which individual habits might make the biggest impact.

Nevertheless, one habit looms large.

"There is no question that avoidance of smoking is a top priority," Hu said by email.

"Avoidance of smoking and maintaining a healthy weight are critical for prevention of cancer, cardiovascular disease, and other chronic diseases," Hu added. "Eating right and exercising regularly are not only important for maintaining a healthy weight, but also contribute to a lower risk of chronic disease, and not drinking too much is key to reducing risk of cancer and accidental injuries and deaths."

While it's already well known that healthy lifestyle choices can increase life expectancy and lower the risk of chronic disease, the study offers fresh evidence of exactly how many extra years people can add to their lives, said Keith Diaz, a researcher at Columbia University Medical Center in New York

City who wasn't involved in the study.

"This is quite a substantive amount of years and compelling evidence that, in the age of modern medicine, preventive strategies still greatly matter and should still be a focus of patients and their doctors," Diaz said by email.

While the study doesn't necessarily show one lifestyle habit is better than another, it does show that following some good habits is better than adopting none at all, Diaz added.

"Certainly adopting all five healthy lifestyle habits is no small feat and quite a challenge for most adults," Diaz added. "But what this study demonstrates is that even adopting only one to two of these habits will increase one's life expectancy."

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