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Tips on living to 100 from the *real* experts

Making it to 100 birthdays is no piece of cake - but it can be done

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By MELISSA T. SHULTZ / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

You're a busy mom. To stay fit and healthy, you squeeze in time to exercise, don't smoke, say no to that second brownie, and take time out to enjoy the little things in life. So what's the long-term payoff? You may live to be 100 years old, and dance at your grandchildren's weddings. And you won't be alone.

By 2050, U.S. centenarians are projected to number around 1.1 million, up from about 48,000 in the year 2000, according to the U.S. Administration on Aging, a division of the Department of Health and Human Services. That's an increase of nearly 23-fold. Have the centenarians stumbled onto the fountain of youth? Researchers say it's more a matter of genetics, marked improvements in preventive medicine and healthy lifestyle choices. And though old age and sickness are thought to go hand in hand, for those living to 100 or older, disease is not only less prevalent, but long-term illnesses are rare.

By taking a closer look at why centenarians age so well, scientists are gleaning vital information about how to help younger people avoid the cancers and heart disease that can cut their lives short. In fact, some experts say that aging well depends on lifestyle factors rather than genes.

Growing old can be a very positive experience, says Dr. Thomas Perls, associate professor of medicine at Boston University Medical Center, where he directs one of the National Institute on Aging's Long Life Family Study Centers. "Getting to an older age is a benefit and something to strive for."

Many Americans ages 50 to 89 agree. In a survey published by the nonprofit National Council on Aging, 67 percent of those participating felt they were experiencing the best years of their lives. Their main concerns? Losing their memory and suffering uncontrollable pain. Financial issues, except in the case of spending on long-term care, were low on their worry list.

Dr. Perls uses a mnemonic, AGEING, to identify the traits common to centenarians, and offers these tips for aging well:

A is for attitude. Stay positive. Those who are optimistic about their aging have a longer life expectancy. Dr. Perls says it's not really the amount of stress you have, but how you manage it. Try stress reduction techniques such as tai chi, yoga, meditation or some form of exercise. The National Council on Aging notes, "Experts in ancient Chinese wellness exercises, tai chi and qigong, say that if more seniors engaged in these body-mind exercises, older Americans would live longer and healthier lives."

Exercise helps reduce the buildup of cortisol, a stress-related hormone made by the adrenal glands. Cortisol aids in maintaining blood pressure, immune function and the body's anti-inflammatory processes. People with high levels of cortisol face an increased risk of developing health problems, especially memory loss.

G is for genetics. Look at your family tree. If family members live "into their 90s and 100s, that's incredibly good news for you," he says. "You might even be able to indulge a bit." On the flip side, if people in your family are passing away in their 60s and 70s, then you need to be more cautious and look at contributing factors. Work with your doctor to identify areas of concern.

E is for exercise. Thirty minutes per day is ideal, at least five days a week. As we age, we lose muscle tone, which is vital to maintaining an active lifestyle. Strength training and muscle building are essential, and you can build muscle at any age, even in your 90s. Aerobic exercise is fine, Dr. Perls

says, though as we get older, it's much tougher on the joints, so beginning in your 40s, limit high-impact aerobics, such as running, to twice a week.

I is for interests. Do things that are new and different, such as Sudoku puzzles. "Anything that is cognitively challenging could delay the onset of Alzheimer's or any form of cognitive impairment for five years," Dr. Perls says. Games such as Scrabble or bridge have the added benefit of being social activities, and researchers have found that social interaction decreases loneliness and subsequent depression. Having an active and clear mind can make a difference in whether a senior lives dependently or independently.

One way to combine social and cognitive activities is volunteering. "People who have made it to the century mark are redefining a healthy retirement," says Molly H. Bogen, executive director of the Senior Source, an agency that specializes in helping older adults in the greater Dallas area. "A life of simple relaxation is not what the doctors are now ordering," she says. "Instead, we need to be engaged in something, and volunteering ranks at the very top of the value-added list."

N is for nutrition. You want a diet that keeps you lean. People who live to be centenarians usually are not overweight, and many don't consume red meat. A 2001 Loma Linda University study of Seventh-day Adventists in California found that life expectancies for 30-year-old, vegetarian Adventists were 85.7 years for women and 83.3 years for men.

Though women are living longer than men, today's average U.S. life expectancy is 77, according to the U.S. Administration on Aging.

G is for getting rid of smoking and "anti-aging quackery." Beware of promises that seem far-fetched or too good to be true. Many companies that market pills or growth hormone as a way to stop or reverse aging are selling potentially dangerous and overly expensive dreams, not real treatments. A much more reasonable approach, says Dr. Perls, is to think about putting your money into prevention and screening.

There are other indicators that you might live to be 100. If you're a woman who has had children in your 40s without fertility assistance, your reproductive system is aging very slowly, which is a good sign that you will

age well. Scientists caution, however, that you should not wait until you are in your 40s to have children because that comes with its own risks.

Eighty percent of centenarians are women, according to the National Institute on Aging, and Dr. Perls says there may be several reasons:

Estrogen. For women of childbearing years, it serves as a natural protector against disorders of the heart and circulatory system.

Chromosomes. Women have the edge, with two X chromosomes; men have only one. When genes on one X chromosome don't work well, women have a backup; men don't.

Iron. It's thought to be a contributor to heart disease and stroke because of its role in our cells' production of cell-damaging free radicals. "Men usually begin to have strokes and heart attacks in their 60s to 70s ... about 10 years sooner than women," says Dr. Perls. "Some believe that the delay in women is related to the fact that they are relatively iron-deficient compared to men for about 40 years of their lives when they are menstruating." After menopause, however, the iron-deficiency advantage begins to disappear. Unlike children and young women, seniors should take iron supplements only if their doctors have determined they are losing iron for a particular reason.

Psychological component. Researchers have found that women tend to be more social than men, and social connections give people a reason to wake up each morning.

Until scientists identify longevity genes, key to developing drugs that reduce or delay the onset of age-related diseases, how long you live is in your own hands. So, rather than look for the magic bullet, adopt healthy lifestyle choices. By taking on new interests and making modest changes in diet, exercise and attitude, the years you gain may not only be numerous, but gratifying.

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IF YOU WANT TO KNOW MORE

•For information about how you can work with seniors locally, or to receive assistance with nursing homes, free prescriptions for seniors, community education and more, contact The Senior Source, theseniorsource.org.

•For help with food stamps, Medicaid and other state of Texas services and benefits, call 211.

•If you or a family member has at least two siblings who are living and in their 90s and would like to participate in Dr. Thomas Perls' current centenarian study, call 1-888-333-6327 toll-free.

FACTS ON OLDER TEXANS

Of Texans, ages 60 or older, who were surveyed:

•Eighty-two percent feel that having a rich spiritual life is very important to having a meaningful life.

•Almost three-quarters report having a recreational hobby or interest.

•Nearly 60 percent currently participate in organized volunteer programs or have in the past.

•More than 25 percent report that loneliness is a problem.

•Only 5 percent said they eat the recommended five fruits and vegetables each day.

SOURCES: Aging Texas Well Indicators Survey Results, September 2005, Texas Department of Aging and Disability Services; www.dads.state.tx.us

GET BETTER AT GETTING OLDER

Learn how to age well at a Texas Department of Aging seminar on Thursday. "Aging Texas Well" starts at 7 p.m. in the second-floor classrooms at Medical Center of Plano, 3901 W. 15th St. Call 972-519-1437 for reservations.

MEET THE CENTENARIANS

MARY PINKSTON

Born: May 27, 1904, DeKalb County, near Atlanta.

Siblings: She is the seventh of 10.

Children: Three

Grandchildren: Six

Great-grandchildren: 10

Great-great-grandchildren: Two

Longevity gene: Daughter Jacquelyn says to the best of her knowledge, no one else in her mother's family has lived to 100 or more.

The best part about living to 100: Being able to have "a happy mind."

The worst part of living to 100: Her inability to hear.

What she does for fun: Mrs. Pinkston enjoys the senior center near her home.

LARA SOLT / DMN

Mary Pinkston, now almost 102, enjoys painting pottery and other crafts at a senior center near her home.

There she meets new people, makes crafts, goes on shopping trips and, now and again, attends a show. She also enjoys traveling, especially to the Black Hills of South Dakota, where the Mount Rushmore carvings of the presidents are a highlight. Today, she mostly sees the world through the magic of the Travel Channel from the comfort of her family's green-striped couch. When she's ready to be entertained, she turns to Vanna White and *Wheel of Fortune*. Daughter Jacquelyn says she's very good at guessing the answers.

Advice: "Live a good life, and anything you want, always ask God for it."

PRINCELLA HARTMAN

Born: July 11, 1906, Cade, Okla.

Siblings: She is the 13th of 15.

Children: Four

Grandchildren: 13, with many more foster grandchildren.

Great-grandchildren: Nine

Great-great-grandchildren: One

LARA SOLT / DMN
Princella Hartman turns 100 in July.

Longevity gene: Mrs. Hartman's aunt lived to be 120 years old, and twin cousins lived to be 105. "I thought when you got past 50 you were old – until I got to 50."

Where she calls home: Dallas. For a while, her Dallas home was a boardinghouse, where black musicians, not permitted to stay in white hotels, found a warm place to lay their head. B.B. King and Nat King Cole were among her most famous guests. She cooked them breakfast, likes to cook still, and, she says, won a few ribbons at the State Fair of Texas.

On outliving her family: "I never felt sad about being alone. I was always taught you would go on to another place. When they passed along, I had to let that go."

On stress: "If I got stressed when I was young, I just did my whole yard, moving dirt and digging weeds." She stopped at 92. "Once a man came up to me and said, 'How can you handle that [pitch]fork?' and I said, 'You ought to see me with a pistol!' "

What she does for fun: She looks forward to finding something new to do every day. "Everything," she notes with a laugh, "but running that Hoover."

Advice: "Life is what you make it. If you cry about what you do, it's not worth doing.

There is nothing about getting old that people should be ashamed of. ...You have to have someone to depend on, though. Remember, reach out to the elderly. Be careful how you treat them, because you will be old one day, too."

JESSIE COMPTON

Born: Sept. 20, 1906, in Wichita Falls.

Siblings: She is one of four.

Children: Two

Grandchildren: Two

Great-grandchild: One

Where she calls home: Dallas

LARA SOLT / DMN
Jessie Compton, who will turn 100 in September, shows off the skirt she danced in for Franklin Roosevelt during the Texas Centennial in 1936.

Longevity gene: Nobody else in her family has lived to 100, and she never thought she would. Had she known, she says, she would never have had an estate sale seven years ago. "But I'm glad I did, so my kids won't have to worry about it when I'm gone."

The best part of living to 100: She's busy. Mrs. Compton graduated from Parkland Hospital in 1929 as one of the first certified registered nurse anesthetists in Texas. She's involved in both the state and national Association of Nurse Anesthetists and is one of the oldest members of both. She volunteers at her local senior center, and is a member of the Silver Serenaders, a choir of senior adults.

The worst part of living to 100: Losing your friends and family.

Goals: To stay healthy enough to get to the American Association of Nurse Anesthetists' 75th-anniversary meeting in Cleveland this August. "Bill

Clinton is speaking. I knew his mom, and I'm going to tell him he needs to set up a scholarship in his mother's name." Her next goal is to make it her 100th birthday in September. "I have decided when I get to 100, I'm going to start to count backward, not forward, as I age."

Advice: "Get educated in everything and stay busy! I think you should give back to your community. It keeps you young and up to date on current events."