

# HEALTH | Annual To-Do List

How well you age and how long you live aren't cemented at birth. While genes play a large role—as do environmental influences you can't control—you have tremendous sway, for better or for worse, over your health and longevity. These 26 steps, drawn from the previous chapters, can help you secure a long and healthy life—and avoid expiring before your time.

## ALL AGES

- ☐ Stay active. Cut your chances of being mowed down prematurely by major scourges like heart disease and cancer by exercising regularly. Get your heart rate up for 150 minutes each week through moderately intense aerobic activities, such as brisk walking, or for 75 weekly minutes through more intense activities, such as jogging. Strength training at least twice a week is also important, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- ☐ Stay lean. Packing on extra pounds not only jeopardizes health, but can set the stage for arthritis and mobility problems.
- ☐ Eat wisely. Fruit, vegetables, whole grains, low- and nonfat dairy, legumes, lean meats, and fish are staples of a healthy diet.
- ☐ Limit red meat to no more than 18 (cooked weight) ounces per week, suggests the American Institute for Cancer Research. Harvard School of Public Health researchers recently linked daily consumption of red meat—particularly processed varieties—with increased risk of premature death, especially from cancer and heart disease.
- ☐ Keep alcohol to a minimum: no more than two daily drinks for men and one for women. Certain cancers may be the alternative.
- ☐ Floss daily to prevent the buildup of gum-disease-causing bacteria, which are increasingly being implicated in heart disease.
- ☐ Prioritize sleep. Getting too few winks may lower your immunity and invite everything from obesity to accidents. Aim for a minimum of six nightly hours, says Luigi Ferrucci, director of the Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Aging.
- ☐ Kick the habit. It bears broken-record repeating: Even at older ages, quitting smoking may still add years to your life and health to your years. Up your odds of success with this research-tested trick: When the urge to light up strikes, imagine, say, having to breathe through a tracheotomy tube as opposed to the feel-good sensation of taking a drag. Evoking smoking's serious potential consequences helps quell cravings.
- ☐ Flex your mental muscle by writing, reading, or playing games, such as crossword puzzles. Despite there being no proven way to cut the chances of Alzheimer's, some research suggests that keeping the brain active from childhood on may somewhat armor against the disease.
- ☐ Apply and reapply sunscreen and sport a brimmed hat and UV-blocking shades whenever you're exposed to the sun's harmful rays. Overexposure can lead to skin cancer and cataracts.

## ALL AGES (continued)

- ☐ Get only the healthcare you need. Excessive testing—even preventive screenings—and overreliance on medications, such as antibiotics, can actually be harmful. Before taking any medication or agreeing to any procedure, discuss with your doctor the pros and cons before deciding what's best for you. If you're uncertain, don't hesitate to get a second opinion.
- ☐ Watch out for anti-aging treatments: Nothing can turn back the clock and some therapies can be dangerous. Your money and health are on the line.
- ☐ Get a ballpark idea of how long you can expect to live with centenarian researcher Thomas Perls' Life Expectancy Calculator. The roughly 10-minute, 40-question test helps reveal the affect your health-related behaviors could have on your longevity, and suggests ways to adjust your lifestyle to add years.

## 20s and 30s

- ☐ Remind yourself: These aren't "freebie" decades. Your lifestyle now can affect how well (or poorly) you age.
- ☐ Develop "positive coping skills," or healthy ways to manage life's stressors. Deadline looming? Rather than shoveling chips into your mouth, go on a run or bike ride. Meditate. Now's the time to lay down a lifelong foundation for healthy living.
- ☐ Cultivate a positive outlook on aging. No one wants to grow old, but evidence suggests a link between harboring a negative view and heart attack and stroke susceptibility.
- ☐ Safeguard your hearing. Noises over 85 decibels, roughly the volume of a hair dryer, can inflict permanent damage.
- ☐ Maintain a healthy weight. Tools like the United States Department of Agriculture's SuperTracker can help you plan, log, and analyze your eating and exercise patterns.

## 40s and 50s

- ☐ Beware of creeping weight gain. Obesity is increasingly affecting adults in middle age and beyond. As you enter midlife, you need fewer calories, your metabolism ebbs, and it's harder to drop pounds. Limit processed foods that combine sugar and fat; research suggests this combo is highly addictive.
- ☐ Keep up with weekly strength-training sessions. Lean muscle mass starts disappearing at a rapid clip around midlife.
- ☐ Don't skimp on calcium and vitamin D—both promote bone health. This chart, from the Institute of Medicine (IOM), outlines recommended daily intake by age and gender. Men and women ages 51 to 70 are generally advised to get 1,000 milligrams and 1,200 mg of calcium, respectively, and 600 international units (IU) of vitamin D each day.

## 60s and Up

- ☐ Once you turn 65, make sure to get an annual eye exam. Age-related vision problems can arise slowly, often unnoticed.
- ☐ Take care to avoid falls—the No. 1 cause of injury-related death for the 65-plus set. Potential preventives include balance-building activities such as tai chi, and making practical changes around the house, like installing “grab bars” near the shower.
- ☐ Maintain your fitness to prolong good health and ability to live independently. If 150 minutes of physical activity per week seems daunting, try dividing it into three 10-minute blocks, five days per week.
- ☐ Stay up to date on recommended cancer screening tests, such as colonoscopies, and immunizations, such as flu and pneumonia shots. The majority of adults ages 50 to 65 don’t.
- ☐ Know the warning signs of top killers, such as stroke. Call 911 immediately if you notice symptoms. For stroke, they include numbness in your face and limbs, sudden difficulty seeing or speaking, dizziness, and/or a sudden severe headache.