

LIVE till you're 100 and LOVE it

If you're planning a detox, think again. There's evidence that self-denial is bad for us, and it's bursts of joy and indulgences that help us thrive and flourish into those later years, as Louise Atkinson discovers

It's the start of a new year and you have two options. You could stay in, virtuously nursing a salad and cardboard health bar, washed down with a brown tincture from a health-food shop. Or you could catch up with your friends or family for some laughter and, perhaps, a glass of wine. It's pretty obvious which might be more enjoyable, but what might surprise you is that the second option could actually be better for your health and wellbeing in the long term, too.

There's a wealth of new studies showing that, if you want to live a happier and longer life, it's not necessarily diets, deprivation or dawn workouts that are the answer. Instead, they're finding that cultivating happiness, laughter, movement, sex, eating good food and filling your day with passion and purpose is what helps us thrive and flourish for as long as we possibly can.

THE BEST IS YET TO COME

People in the UK are now living significantly longer than we were a few generations ago. In fact, life expectancy has increased by 30 years over the past century. But let's be honest – we don't just want to live longer, but live *better*.

'Our society spends a fortune on healthcare, fad diets, drugs and a variety of short-term remedies, but there is often disappointingly little effect on our long-term health and longevity,' says psychologist Dr Howard Friedman. He is co-author of a book called *The Longevity Project*, analysing a long-term study of more than 1,500 people that followed them over 80 years of life.

'Advice can backfire, leaving us overweight and overstressed as we struggle to follow specific commands,' he explains.

The study concluded that the

most effective ways to add quality years to your life revolved around social networks and spending time with friends and family, as well as giving back to your community, enjoying and thriving in your career. Physical activity is good, too, as long as it's something you enjoy rather than having to force yourself to do it.

The more positive lifestyle tweaks you make, the better – and the earlier you put them into play, the quicker they start to have a positive effect on your wellbeing. But the good news is that it is never too late to bring in healthy new habits. The Longevity Project study found that sedentary children who got active in later life were able catch up to or even surpass the health of their more naturally active peers.

Meanwhile, US research shows that switching to an optimal diet at the age of 60 (even if you've eaten unhealthily





your entire life) could increase your life expectancy by eight years, with each portion of salmon (with its healthy omega-3 fat) potentially adding an hour to your lifespan, and a 30g handful of nuts tacking on another 25 minutes.

There's robust science to back the idea that a cheery outlook can make all the difference. One study, published in the journal *Neuropsychiatric Disease And Treatment*, found that feeling good about yourself as you get older is twice as good for you as exercising, keeping your weight down and even giving up smoking – potentially adding up to seven years to your life.

Here are some of the reasons why harnessing the healing power of happiness might be so effective...

PLAY FOR TIME

The playwright George Bernard Shaw said: 'We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing.' Research backs up his hunch, showing that fun and laughter release

endorphins that keep you and your brain young.

'When we do things that are fun, silly, make us laugh, or bring joy to our souls, it enhances our mental health, our mood and our enjoyment of life,' says Dr Julie Hannan, a chartered psychologist and psychotherapist

(drjuliehannan.com). When we laugh, a wave of electricity washes over the outer layer of our brain, activating immune cells, reducing stress hormones and releasing feelgood endorphins. Muscles relax and blood flows more freely.

Doing things that are fun enhances our mental health

STAY CONNECTED

Swathes of research have shown that staying sociable and active with others is a great way to fend off the ageing process. This doesn't mean throwing crazy cocktail parties every weekend, but it does mean cultivating and nurturing a good social network, and that includes keeping in regular contact online.

Academics at UCL found online surfers aged 50+ live happier lives if they spend time every day online. Emailing family and friends, posting on Facebook or sharing an Instagram story appeared beneficial.

Nurturing family connections is also key. A huge 85-year Harvard study, published in 2023, highlighted the value of great relationships. The lead author, psychiatrist Dr Robert Waldinger, says people who are more socially connected to family, friends and community are happier, physically healthier, and live longer than those who are less well connected. The research found it is not the number of friends you have (and it doesn't even matter whether you're in a committed long-term relationship), but the quality of those close relationships that really counts.





Growing your own veg
is good for you in
more ways than one

PICK A PASSION

A sense of purpose is so crucial for healthy ageing that the Japanese have a word for it: *ikigai*. So whether you find purpose in growing your own vegetables, baking with your grandchildren or crocheting covers for postboxes, the Japanese research shows you could be reducing your risk of early death or dementia.

You'd think activism might be a risky pastime, but studies also show standing up for something you strongly believe in – experiencing both passion and purpose – can be life-enhancing and possibly even life-extending. So whether it's climate change or local issues that you're passionate about, make yourself heard.

DRESS IN PURPLE (AND ORANGE AND FLUORESCENT GREEN)

In other words, take a tip from the poet Jenny Joseph's poem *Warning*, which begins, 'When I am an old woman, I shall wear purple...' Push those black T-shirts to the back of your wardrobe and ban the beige, because stepping out in brightly coloured clothes will lift your mood. It's been dubbed 'dopamine

dressing' and it's all about sidestepping rigid trends and wearing whatever makes you feel fabulous instead.

Dr Becca Levy, professor of psychology at The Yale School of Public Health and author of *Breaking The Age Code*, says just shifting from an 'age-declining' mindset to an 'age-thriving' one builds mental and physical resilience. This will make us happier, healthier, more relaxed and fulfilled, and could ultimately help us live longer.

She says the key lies in taking steps to strengthen our positive age beliefs (being upbeat and optimistic about getting older) and reducing our exposure to negative beliefs by challenging the status quo and refusing to conform to negative ageing stereotypes. So, go on, wear the sparkly shoes!

WORK TO LIVE

When you're working your socks off, the 'holidays... and more holidays' haze of retirement might seem like a blissful dream, but don't stop too soon, as those

who work longer tend to age better. Instead of retiring, aim to find a part-time work/pleasure hybrid, or consider volunteering. This keeps your brain active, but still gives you extra time for exercise, hobbies and, yes, holidaying.

EMBRACE YOUR SPIRITUALITY



Ditch the black T-shirts and ban the beige



Whatever your devotion, engaging in spiritual practices has been shown to raise levels of endorphins and the 'happiness' neurotransmitter serotonin. What's more, several studies have found a consistent link between

frequent religious attendance and longevity. If religion isn't your thing, you might be able to find your 'church' at a yoga class, a community group, or in the shared euphoria of a sporting event or a music concert.

POWER NAP

Siestas are standard in many parts of the world, and there's scientific evidence that napping may help you live longer.

One study showed that those who had a regular short snooze were 37% less likely to die from heart disease than those who rarely steal a few daytime winks.

And as good sleep extends your lifespan (by five years for men and two years for women, according to recent research), why not treat yourself to crisp new sheets and a fluffy duvet?

MAKE A MOVE

Not keen on jogging and allergic to Lycra? No problem. The big Longevity Project study identified the longest-living participants to be those whose habits, routines and social lives (rather than expensive gym memberships) encouraged movement. The key distinction here is movement rather than exercise, and numerous studies show that just being active benefits your metabolism, bone and

joint health, cardiovascular strength, brain function and more.

In fact, fidgeting is enough to activate genes that promote the production of a chemical called BDNF (brain-derived neurotrophic factor), which acts like

Miracle-Gro for the brain, increasing capacity in the areas that control learning and memory, and protecting you against Alzheimer's.

And one of the most beneficial forms of activity is sex. In a long-term study published in the book *Secrets Of*

The Superyoung, Dr David Weeks, a clinical neuropsychologist at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital, said the stress reduction, heightened levels of contentment and better sleep that comes with regular sex could make you look four to seven years younger.

Sex is among the most beneficial activity types



Sing and you're winning!

SING LOUD, SING PROUD

Although learning a foreign language (or two) and playing a musical instrument have been shown to keep the brain young, they're not everyone's cup of tea. Why not take another path and sing in a choir? Group singing has been shown to stimulate multiple parts of the brain at the same time (as we retrieve the words, speak them out loud, handle pitch, tone and rhythm)

while triggering the release of the anti-anxiety bonding hormone, oxytocin. Studies at University College London have shown that a single session of singing is enough to measurably lower stress levels and, according to Dr Daisy Fancourt – professor of psychobiology and epidemiology at UCL – it reduces inflammation and supports the immune system, too.

Going blue

'Blue zones' are five areas in the world where people appear to enjoy especially long lifespans, including parts of Greece, Japan, Sardinia and Costa Rica. So what can we learn from them?

● GO NUTS FOR NUTS

You won't find many blue zoneers nibbling on biscuits or scoffing crisps. If they do snack, it will likely be on nuts – a great source of fibre and nutrients such as heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids and disease-fighting antioxidants, which could extend your life expectancy.



● BEANS MEANS...

...health. According to educator Dan Buettner, passionate exponent of blue zone lifestyles, beans and pulses form 'the cornerstone of every longevity diet in the world' and just one portion a day could add several years to your lifespan.

● DRINK TO THIS

Excessive alcohol is never going to be good for you. However, in four out of five blue zones, most adults had one or two drinks a day – often red wine, which is rich in flavonoids, a type of antioxidant – typically just a glass or two at dinner with loved ones. So, while moderation is key, the next time you clink glasses and raise a toast 'to your health', there might actually be something in it.



● EAT STRESSED PLANTS

Plants react to stressful situations – drought, excessive sunlight, nutrient changes – by producing defensive chemicals called polyphenols. When we eat, for example, broccoli, cauliflower or kale exposed to these conditions, it's thought these phytonutrients could be used by our bodies to stimulate cellular protective mechanisms, helping us to become stronger and healthier. □

