Live longer.
Live better.
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Live longer. Live better. For more than a century, medical care at Mayo Clinic has helped millions of people do just that.

If you think that your genes rule when it comes to your health, you’re missing half the picture. Yes, genetics are an important factor, setting the stage for health throughout your lifetime. But the truth is that your health depends just as much on your lifestyle choices — especially in your later years. Research confirms that your weight, activity and stress levels, and health habits play a large role in determining your overall well-being.

Likewise, maintaining an optimistic attitude and a supportive social network can help you live longer and better.

If some of your habits and behaviors are unhealthy, the sooner you change them and adopt healthier ones, the greater your chances of living to a ripe old age and enjoying those years.

So what are risky habits and behaviors? They’re those activities or lifestyle choices that increase your likelihood of developing disease. For some people, a risk to their health may be inactivity or excess weight. For others, it might be a lifestyle filled with too much stress. For yet others, it may be smoking or drinking too much alcohol.

Whatever your risks are, it’s never too late to change them. If you don’t address certain behaviors now, your efforts to ensure that you live longer and live better may be for naught.

Following is a brief overview of common health risk factors, and why these habits and behaviors can put your well-being in jeopardy. If you feel like the time is right to make a healthy change in one of these areas, we’ve included tips to help you get started toward living longer and living better.
Inactive lifestyle

If you aren’t physically active, it’s time to get moving. Only about a quarter to a third of older adults participate in moderate physical activity three or more days a week.

Maybe you think it’s too late to get anything out of exercise. In fact, the opposite is true. Compared with teens and younger adults, older adults actually have more to gain from becoming more physically active. That’s because the older you become, the greater your risk of illness and disease. Exercise can help reduce that risk.

Health risks

Lack of physical activity contributes to many chronic diseases and conditions. Here’s a brief overview.

- **High blood pressure.** Too little physical activity increases your risk of high blood pressure by increasing your risk of being overweight. Inactive people, regardless of their weight, also tend to have higher heart rates. Their heart muscles have to work harder with each contraction — and that results in a stronger force on the arteries.

- **High blood cholesterol.** Lack of exercise can increase your level of low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol, the “bad” cholesterol. It can also lower your level of high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol, the “good” cholesterol.

- **Diabetes.** The less active you are, the greater your risk of diabetes.

- **Obesity.** Sedentary people are more likely to gain weight because they don’t burn calories through activity.

- **Heart attack.** An inactive lifestyle contributes to high blood cholesterol levels and obesity, increasing your risk of heart attack.

- **Colon cancer.** If you’re inactive, you’re more likely to develop colon cancer. This may be because when you’re inactive, waste stays in your colon longer.
• Osteoporosis. Weight-bearing activities, such as walking or lifting weights, help keep your bones strong. If you’re inactive, your bones become less dense and more brittle, leading to osteoporosis and an increased risk of fractures.

**Why change?**

Regular physical activity can improve your quality of life. With increased strength and endurance from daily exercise, routine tasks such as doing yardwork, washing the car, washing clothes or cleaning the house are easier to do.

Exercise will also give you more energy and vitality so that you can enjoy spending time with friends and family, traveling, doing hobbies, or whatever it is that you look forward to.

Equally important, regular exercise can reduce your risk of dying prematurely. Exercise helps prevent, delay or control a number of diseases and conditions that can cause injury or disability and shorten your life.

**Where to start**

If you’re inactive and you haven’t had a physical examination within the past two years or you have a chronic medical condition, it’s generally a good idea to see your doctor for a checkup before beginning an exercise program.

Once you’ve gotten your doctor’s OK, ease your way into exercise. Then you can start working your way up to some healthy fitness goals.
Is obesity an overrated health risk?

In recent years, obesity has been touted as a leading cause of preventable death in the U.S., second only to smoking. In 2004, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) attributed 365,000 deaths annually to obesity. That number was later dropped considerably — to 112,000 obesity-related deaths a year.

Why such a great discrepancy? First, the second estimate uses newer data. Second, somewhat different statistical methods were used. Earlier estimates reflected only obesity-related health risks that people had in the 1970s. The newer data, some with follow-up through the year 2000, appear to reflect a real decline in the risk of dying of obesity-related diseases, such as heart disease.

Big improvements in controlling risk factors for heart disease may have resulted in far fewer people dying of obesity. The new data may also reflect advances in lifesaving interventions for obesity-related diseases.

So, does this mean being overweight is less important than once thought? Not at all. This estimate only relates to deaths. Just as important are the diseases or conditions associated with obesity, including serious chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, arthritis and some cancers. These are typically accompanied by pain and suffering, reduced quality of life, and medical costs.

It should be noted that obesity-related deaths don’t adequately represent overall deaths related to poor nutrition and physical inactivity. People who are a normal weight can also die of heart disease caused — at least in part — by poor diet and lack of physical activity.
Being overweight

As you know only too well, over time it can be more difficult to keep the pounds off. As you get older, you gradually lose muscle mass, which decreases your metabolism. If you don’t also decrease the number of calories you eat or increase your activity level, you gain weight.

Having excess body fat is a serious threat to your health and future happiness. If you’re overweight or obese, you’re more likely to develop a number of potentially serious health problems.

Losing weight isn’t easy, but it can be done — regardless of your age or weight. And doing so will greatly improve your quality of life during the years ahead.

Health risks

Here are conditions commonly associated with obesity.

- High blood pressure. As fat cells accumulate, your body produces more blood to keep the new tissue supplied with oxygen and nutrients. More blood traveling through your arteries means added pressure on your artery walls. Weight gain also typically increases insulin, a hormone that helps control blood sugar. Increased insulin is associated with sodium and water retention, another contributor to increased blood volume. In addition, excess weight is often associated with increased heart rate and reduced transport capacity of your blood vessels. These two factors can increase your blood pressure and may lead to a burst blood vessel.

- Diabetes. Excess fat makes your body resistant to insulin, the hormone that helps transport sugar (glucose) from your blood into individual cells. When your body is resistant to insulin, your cells can’t get the sugar they need for energy, resulting in diabetes. In fact, obesity is a leading cause of type 2 diabetes. If you’re at risk of developing diabetes, you may be able to avoid the disease by losing weight.
• Unhealthy cholesterol levels. The same dietary choices that lead to obesity often result in elevated levels of low-density lipoprotein (LDL, or “bad”) cholesterol and reduced levels of high-density lipoprotein (HDL, or “good”) cholesterol. Obesity is also associated with high levels of triglycerides, another type of blood fat. Abnormal blood-fat levels can cause buildup of fatty deposits (plaques) in your arteries, putting you at risk of heart attack and stroke.

• Osteoarthritis. Excess weight puts extra pressure on your joints and wears away the cartilage that protects them, resulting in joint pain and stiffness.

• Sleep apnea. Most people with sleep apnea are overweight, which contributes to a large neck and narrowed airways. In sleep apnea, your upper airway becomes intermittently blocked, resulting in frequent awakening at night and subsequent drowsiness during the day. Left untreated, the condition can lead to a heart attack.

• Cancer. Several types of cancer are associated with being overweight. In women, these include cancers of the breast, uterus, colon and gallbladder. Overweight men have a higher risk of colon and prostate cancers.

Why change?

Losing weight will help you feel better. You’ll feel better physically and have more energy for things such as travel, hobbies and spending time with your grandchildren. And you’ll feel better about yourself. If you’ve been frustrated because of your weight, the boost in self-esteem that comes from losing a few pounds can be a welcome change.

Reaching and maintaining a healthy weight will also improve your health over the long term. And remember, you don’t have to lose a lot of weight to enjoy health benefits. Modest losses of just 10 to 20 percent of your body weight can bring significant benefits, including lowering your blood pressure and reducing your risk of cardiovascular disease, stroke and diabetes. If you weigh 200 pounds, that’s losing as few as 20 pounds.
Where to start

Slow and steady weight loss of 1 or 2 pounds a week is considered the safest way to lose weight and the best way to keep it off.

Begin by eating more healthy foods and fewer unhealthy foods and by getting some exercise every day. If you’re worried that you can’t lose weight on your own, talk with your doctor or a dietitian. And tell yourself that you can do it.

Having the right attitude is very important. To lose weight — and to keep it off — you need to address habits, emotions and behaviors that may have caused you to gain weight.

Excess stress

One of the biggest culprits in unhealthy aging is one you may not expect — stress. Increasingly, researchers are viewing stress — how much we face and how well we deal with it — as a critical factor in how well we age. Studies consistently show that people who do best at managing stress also tend to stay the healthiest in older age.

Health risks

Stress occurs when the demands in your life exceed your ability to cope with them. Many things can cause stress — from simple things such as having to stand in line at the checkout counter to more-serious challenges such as caring for an ailing family member or adjusting to retirement.

Whatever the cause of your stress, if it’s overwhelming you, you need to address it. Stress is a serious health risk.

When you experience stress, your heart beats faster, your blood pressure rises and your breathing may quicken. These responses are intended to help you flee from a dangerous situation or fight for your life. After the stressful moment (threat) passes, your body relaxes again.
The problem is, situations that aren’t life-threatening — worrying about finances or an argument with a family member — can trigger this same response. If stressful situations pile up one after another, your body has no chance to recover, making you more vulnerable to long-term health problems.

Stress may contribute to the development of an illness, it may aggravate an existing health problem or it may trigger an illness if you’re already at risk. Here’s a brief overview.

- **Immune system.** Chronic stress tends to dampen your immune system, making you more susceptible to colds, the flu and other infections. In some cases, stress can have the opposite effect, making your immune system overactive. The result is an increased risk of autoimmune diseases, in which your immune system attacks your body’s own cells.

- **Cardiovascular disease.** If you exhibit extreme increases in heart rate and blood pressure in response to daily stress, this may add to your risk of a heart attack. Such surges may gradually injure your coronary arteries and heart. Increased blood clotting from persistent stress also can put you at risk of a heart attack or stroke.

- **Gastrointestinal problems.** It’s common to have a stomachache or diarrhea when you’re under stress. Stress may also trigger or worsen symptoms associated with conditions such as irritable bowel syndrome or nonulcer dyspepsia.

- **Depression and anxiety.** Stressful life events — such as the death of a loved one — may trigger depression. So can chronic stress if you’re prone to the disorder. Stress may also worsen the signs and symptoms of other mental health disorders, such as anxiety.

- **Other illnesses.** Stress worsens many skin conditions — including psoriasis, eczema, hives and acne — and can be a trigger for asthma attacks. Stress can also heighten your body’s pain response. This may make the chronic pain associated with conditions such as arthritis, fibromyalgia or a back injury more difficult to manage.
Exercises to help you relax

Following are some techniques you can use to calm your mind and body. Pick one or two and practice them so that they become natural, and you can apply them when you need them.

Relaxed breathing

This form of relaxation focuses on deep, relaxed breathing as a way to relieve tension and stress. Before you begin, find a comfortable position. Lie on a bed or couch or sit on a chair. Then do the following:

- Inhale. With your mouth closed and your shoulders relaxed, inhale slowly and deeply through your nose to the count of six. Allow the air to fill your diaphragm — the muscle between your abdomen and chest — pushing your abdomen out.
- Pause for a second.
- Exhale. Slowly release air through your mouth as you count to six.
- Pause for a second.
- Repeat. Complete this breathing cycle several times.

Progressive muscle relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation is a technique that involves relaxing a series of muscles one at a time. Begin by sitting or lying in a comfortable position. Loosen tight clothing and close your eyes. Tense each muscle group for five seconds then relax for at least 30 seconds. Repeat once before moving to the next muscle group.

- Upper face. Lift your eyebrows toward the ceiling, feeling the tension in your forehead.
- Central face. Squint your eyes and wrinkle your nose and mouth, feeling the tension in the center of your face.
- Lower face. Clench your teeth and pull back the corners of your mouth toward your ears.
- Neck. Gently touch your chin to your chest, feeling the stretch in the back of your neck.
- Shoulders. Pull your shoulders up toward your ears, feeling the tension in your shoulders, head, neck and upper back.
• Upper arms. Pull your arms back and press your elbows toward the sides of your body. Try not to tense your lower arms. Feel the tension in your arms, shoulders and back.

• Hands and lower arms. Make tight fists and pull up your wrists. Feel the tension in your hands and lower arms.

• Chest, shoulders and upper back. Pull your shoulders back as if you’re trying to make your shoulder blades touch.

• Stomach. Pull your stomach toward your spine, tightening your abdominal muscles.

• Upper legs. Squeeze your knees together. Feel the tension in your thighs.

• Lower legs. Flex your ankles so that your toes point toward your face. Feel the tension in your calves.

• Feet. Turn your feet inward and curl your toes outward.

Visualization

Also known as guided imagery, visualization involves lying quietly and picturing yourself in a pleasant and peaceful setting.

• Allow thoughts to flow through your mind. But don’t focus on any of them.

Tell yourself that you’re relaxed, that your hands are heavy and warm — or cool if you’re hot — and that your heart is beating calmly.

• Breathe slowly, regularly and deeply.

• Think of a calming setting. Once you’re relaxed, imagine yourself in a favorite place or in a spot of beauty and stillness.

• Let go. After five or 10 minutes, rouse yourself gradually.

Brain studies of people undergoing guided imagery sessions show that visualizing (imagining) something stimulates the same parts of the brain that are stimulated during the actual experience. If sitting by the ocean relaxes you, you may achieve the same level of relaxation through visualization as you would if you were actually there.
Why change?
Reducing stress can help you become a more productive and happy person. As you learn how to relax and manage stress, you may even find yourself enjoying things that once seemed burdensome. Just as important, letting go of stress can often improve your physical health.

Where to start
There are many ways to deal with stress. Experiment with the following strategies to help you better manage stress.

• Learn to relax. Learning how to relax is an important first step in managing stress. Seek out activities that give you pleasure, be it exercise, art, music or some other hobby, and devote at least 30 minutes to these activities every day. You may also want to experiment with other relaxation techniques, such as deep-breathing and muscle relaxation exercises, yoga, or meditation.

• Simplify and organize your day. If your busy lifestyle seems to be a source of stress, ask yourself if it’s because you try to squeeze too many things into your day or because you aren’t organized. If you’re overextended, cut out some activities or delegate some tasks to others. If your home or work environment is so cluttered that it’s causing you stress, take the time to organize it.

• Practice tolerance. Try to become more tolerant of yourself and of situations over which you may have little control. Change is constant, and certain changes — losses, disappointments and events that you can’t control — will continue to occur, like it or not.

• Learn to manage anger. Anger can significantly increase and prolong stress if you remain angry for an extended period. Anger can even trigger a heart attack. Identify your anger triggers and find ways to release the energy produced by your anger. Exercising, writing in a journal or listening to soothing music are some ways to let go of anger.
• Think positive. In many cases, simply choosing to look at situations in a more positive way can reduce the stress in your life. Throughout the day, stop and evaluate what you’re thinking and find a way to put a positive spin on any negative thoughts.

• Seek professional help. If these simple measures aren’t helpful, don’t be afraid to seek guidance from your doctor, a counselor, psychiatrist, psychologist or member of the clergy. These people can provide you with additional and more-personalized tools for recognizing and managing stress. Many people mistakenly believe that seeking outside help is a sign of weakness. To the contrary, it takes strength to realize that you need help and good judgment to seek it.
Excessive alcohol use

Alcoholism and alcohol abuse are less prevalent among older adults than among the general population, but that doesn’t mean older adults are immune from this problem. Among adults who abuse alcohol, one-third develop the problem later in life, perhaps in reaction to retirement, failing health or the death of a spouse. Your body also seems to become more sensitive to alcohol as you become older. If your drinking habits don’t change to compensate for that, you may find that you have a problem on your hands.

How much is too much?

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism recommends that men who are age 65 and younger should have no more than two drinks a day. Women and anyone older than age 65 should have no more than one drink a day. The stricter amounts for people age 65 and older reflect the fact that, with age, your body processes alcohol more slowly.

Each of the following is the equivalent of one drink:

- 4 to 5 ounces of wine
- 12 ounces of beer
- 1 to 1 1/2 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits

Health risks

Drinking too much alcohol produces several harmful effects:

- Sleep. Alcohol causes sleeplessness and shallow sleep. Alcohol may help you fall asleep, but it frequently wakes you up in the middle of the night. Even moderate amounts of alcohol can disrupt normal sleeping patterns.

- Brain and nervous system problems. Excessive drinking can cause short-term memory loss and extreme fatigue. If you...
abuse alcohol and are deficient in nutrients, particularly thiamin, you may develop weakness and paralysis of your eye muscles, severe amnesia, and hallucinations.

- Liver disorders. Drinking heavily can cause you to develop an inflammation of the liver (alcoholic hepatitis). Hepatitis may lead to the irreversible and progressive destruction of liver tissue (cirrhosis).

- Gastrointestinal disorders. Excessive alcohol can cause inflammation of the lining of the stomach (gastritis), as well as stomach and esophageal ulcers. It can also interfere with the absorption of nutrients, and it can lead to inflammation of your pancreas (pancreatitis).

- Cardiovascular system disorders. Too much alcohol can lead to high blood pressure and damage your heart muscle. These conditions can put you at increased risk of heart failure or stroke.

- Sexual disorders. Alcohol abuse can cause erectile dysfunction in men. In women, alcohol abuse can interrupt menstruation.

- Cancer. People who abuse alcohol have a rate of cancer that’s higher than that of the general population. This is especially true of cancers of the mouth, larynx, esophagus, stomach and pancreas.

- Drug interactions. Alcohol can have dangerous effects when it interacts with numerous medications.

**Why change?**

You may be reluctant to seek treatment for alcohol abuse or alcoholism. But by confronting your problem, you’ll be taking the first step toward a healthier, more positive future. In addition to reducing your risk of serious health problems, seeking treatment likely will improve your relationships with family and friends. You’ll also be able to think more clearly. Studies show that older adults benefit from alcohol treatment just as much as do younger adults.
Where to start
If you feel guilty about your drinking, talk with your doctor. Even if you don’t think you have a problem, if your friends and family are worried about your drinking, take their concerns seriously.

If you’re dependent on alcohol, cutting back isn’t an option. Abstaining from alcohol must be part of your treatment goal. There are many options to help people with alcohol problems. Treatment is typically tailored to your individual needs and may include counseling or a brief intervention — drafting of a specific treatment plan, which may include behavior modification techniques, participation in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) or follow-up care at a treatment center.

Smoking
If you’re like many adults who smoke, you probably picked up the habit before its harmful health effects were widely known. Now that the facts are available, you may be so dependent on nicotine that quitting smoking seems impossible. Whatever your reason for continuing to smoke, it’s never too late to stop. Even if you don’t quit until later in life, doing so has proven health benefits.

Health risks
When you inhale tobacco smoke, you’re ingesting a toxic combination of more than 4,000 chemicals. This includes 63 cancer-causing agents (carcinogens) and trace amounts of such poisons as cyanide, arsenic and formaldehyde. The negative health effects throughout your body are numerous:

• Cancer. Smoking is a major risk factor for cancers of the mouth, larynx, pharynx, esophagus, lung, stomach, pancreas, kidney, bladder and cervix. It’s the cause of almost 90 percent of all lung cancer — the most deadly form of cancer in the United States.
• Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Tobacco smoke damages or destroys tiny air sacs in your lungs called alveoli. The majority of deaths from COPD are related to cigarette smoking. The more years you smoke and the more packs you smoke, the greater your risk.

• Cardiovascular disease. The nicotine in tobacco smoke triggers your adrenal glands to produce hormones that stress your heart by increasing your blood pressure and heart rate. At the same time, the carbon monoxide in tobacco smoke binds to hemoglobin in your blood, taking the place of valuable oxygen and reducing the amount of oxygen available to your heart and other vital organs. Smoking also contributes to the buildup of fatty deposits in your arteries (atherosclerosis). These changes all increase your risk of heart attack and stroke.

• Other conditions. Smoking increases your risk of respiratory infections, gum disease, cataracts and peptic ulcers. In men, it increases the risk of erectile dysfunction. In postmenopausal women, it increases the risk of osteoporosis and hip fracture.

**Why change?**

When you stop smoking, your health will improve almost immediately. Within 24 hours, the levels of carbon monoxide and nicotine in your system will decrease significantly.

Within a few days, your senses of smell and taste should improve. You may breathe easier, and your smoker’s cough will begin to disappear.

Within 20 minutes of a last cigarette, your heart rate drops. Within a year, your risk of heart attack is cut in half. Within two to three years, your risk is the same as that of a nonsmoker.

You’ll also rid yourself of the unpleasantness associated with smoking — bad breath, yellow teeth, and smelly clothing and hair. And you’ll set the right example for your children, grandchildren and friends.
Where to start

Stopping smoking can be very difficult, especially if you’ve been smoking for many years. However, with today’s medications and other smoking cessation strategies, your chances of success have never been greater. Talk with your doctor, and the two of you can work on a plan tailored to your needs and lifestyle to help you quit.

Generally, quit plans combine several different strategies, such as using a nicotine replacement product, attending a smoking cessation support group, or seeking individual counseling with a doctor, psychologist, nurse or counselor. Studies show that using more than one strategy increases your chances of becoming smoke-free.

Many smokers try to quit cold turkey — making a sudden, decisive break from smoking with little or no reduction beforehand. If this strategy appeals to you, make sure you’re both emotionally and physically prepared to withstand the strong desire to smoke. Quit-smoking medication is usually recommended when using this method, to ease the withdrawal symptoms of nicotine addiction.

Other medications include nicotine patches, gum and lozenges, as well as prescription nasal sprays, inhalers and pills. These medications help control nicotine cravings and reduce the pleasurable effects of smoking.

If you don’t succeed in quitting the first — or any — time, it’s worth trying again. Your doctor may be able to help by adjusting the dose of your medication, recommending a different medication or simply by providing support.
Resources for quitting smoking

Toll-free tobacco quit lines are available in every state in the United States and many countries throughout the world. Call the National Cancer Institute Smoking Quitline at 877-448-7848 to find the best fit for you. These online resources also can help you:

American Cancer Society
www.cancer.org

American Lung Association
www.lung.org

Mayo Clinic Nicotine Dependence Center
www.mayoclinic.org/ndc-rst

Nicotine Anonymous
www.nicotine-anonymous.org

Smokefree.gov
www.smokefree.gov

American Heart Association
www.heart.org

Ex
www.becomeanex.org

National Cancer Institute Free Help to Quit Smoking
www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/tobacco/smoking

QuitNet
www.quitnet.com
The genes you inherit from your parents can increase your risk of developing certain diseases or disorders. Are there diseases that run in your family for which you may be at risk?

Key features that suggest an illness may be passed from one generation to the next (genetic) include:

- Early onset of symptoms
- The same disease in more than one close relative
- Certain combinations of diseases, such as breast and ovarian cancers within the same person or family

You can’t change your family history; however, genes aren’t destiny. In many cases, whether you’ll actually develop a condition to which you may be genetically predestined depends to a great extent on your health habits.

**Health risks**

Here’s an overview of diseases and disorders that can run in families, resulting from one or more flawed genes passed from one generation to the next.

- Alzheimer’s disease. Your risk increases if you have a parent, brother or sister with the disease, but usually there isn’t a clear hereditary pattern.
- Breast cancer. If you have a first-degree relative (mother, sister or daughter) or other close relative (grandmother or aunt) with breast cancer, you may be at increased risk, especially if your relative was diagnosed before age 50.
- Colorectal cancer. Risk increases if you have a parent, sibling or child with colon or rectal cancer. If two or more first-degree relatives have it, the risk is even greater. Two hereditary conditions — familial adenomatous polyposis (FAP) and hereditary nonpolyposis colorectal cancer (HNPCC) — also may predispose you to colon cancer.
• Depression. You’re at increased risk if a parent, sibling or child has depression. But other factors, such as stressful life events or a serious medical condition, also play a role for many people.

• Diabetes. You have a greater chance of developing type 1 or type 2 diabetes if a parent, brother or sister has one of the conditions.

• Eye disease. A family history of macular degeneration, cataracts or glaucoma can increase your risk of developing these conditions.

• Heart disease. Your risk of heart disease is greater if you have a parent, grandparent or sibling with the condition. This is especially true if it developed at an early age.

• High blood pressure. If one of your parents has high blood pressure, you’re at increased risk of developing the condition. If it affects both of your parents, your risk increases substantially.

• Ovarian cancer. Your risk increases if you have a mother, sister or daughter with ovarian cancer. If two or more first-degree relatives are diagnosed, the risk is even greater. A family history of breast or colon cancer also may increase your risk of ovarian cancer.

• Parkinson’s disease. Studies show that people who have a parent or sibling with Parkinson’s are at greater risk of developing the condition.

• Prostate cancer. Your risk is substantially increased if your father or brother has prostate cancer. Your risk is even greater if your relative’s cancer occurred at a younger age.

• Stroke. Your risk of stroke may increase if you have a parent or sibling with a history of stroke. In some types of hemorrhagic strokes, you may inherit artery abnormalities that put you at risk of an aneurysm, which could rupture and cause bleeding into the brain.
Lapses and relapses

A lapse occurs when you revert to old behaviors once or twice. It’s temporary, common and a sign that you need to get back in control.

A relapse is more serious. After several lapses have occurred in a short span of time, you’re at risk of completely reverting back to your old behavior. You panic, afraid that you’ll undo all your good efforts. You may give up and say, “I guess I just can’t do it.”

When lapses and relapses happens, calm down. Take a deep breath. Consider these tips for getting back on track:

- Don’t let negative thoughts take over. Remember that mistakes happen and that each day is a chance to start anew.
- Clearly identify the problem, then create a list of possible solutions. Pick a solution to try. If it works, then you’ve got a plan for preventing another lapse. If it doesn’t, try the next solution and go through the same process until you find one that works.
- Get support. Talk to family, friends or a professional counselor.
- Work out your guilt and frustration with exercise. Take a walk or go for a swim. Keep the exercise upbeat.
- Recommit to your goals. Review them and make sure they’re still realistic.

What if you do relapse? Although relapses are disappointing, they can help you learn that your goals may be unrealistic, that certain situations create challenges for your plan or that certain strategies don’t work.

Above all, realize that reverting to old behaviors doesn’t mean that all hope is lost. It just means that you need to recharge your motivation, recommit to your plan and return to healthy behaviors.
Why change?

True, you can’t change your genes. But you can change your attitude toward diseases and disorders that may run in your family. Instead of simply waiting for a disease to develop for which you may be at risk, you can take steps to prevent it, slow its onset or reduce its severity. Being proactive, instead of reactive, may result in a better quality of life — and could even save your life.

Where to start

If you don’t know your family health history, contact your relatives and ask about their health. In addition to your parents, brothers, sisters and children, be aware of diseases affecting your aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents and grandchildren.

For each family member, record his or her relationship to you, sex, year of birth, any illnesses, and the age at diagnosis. If anyone in your family has died, note the age at death and the cause of death.

Also try to include information about lifestyle factors, such as smoking, alcohol use or obesity, that may have affected a family member’s health.

Use this information to construct your pedigree. A pedigree is a chart that shows your family tree and indicates illnesses each family member developed and at what age. Begin with yourself, then move on to your parents and branch out from there.

Once your family health history is complete, take it with you to your next doctor’s appointment. Together, you and your doctor can look for and analyze disease patterns throughout your family and discuss your particular risks. Your doctor can also make informed recommendations about screening tests you should have — and when. Earlier screening for a particular disease may result in early detection, when the odds for successful treatment are greatest.

Creating a pedigree can also help your children, grandchildren and other relatives track their own health.
How to change behaviors

Making the decision to adopt a healthier lifestyle isn’t easy. But the real challenge comes in putting your words into action. According to psychologists who study behavior change, quitting an unhealthy behavior can take anywhere from three to 30 tries. And there’s no magic bullet for adopting healthier habits. Different techniques work for different people.

But there is good news. By planning your behavior change carefully and taking small steps, you increase your chance for success. Consider the following strategies.

• Be specific. State exactly what you want to do, how you’re going to do it and when you want to achieve it. Start with goals you can achieve within a week or a month. If you have a big goal, such as stopping smoking, break it down into a series of smaller weekly or daily goals you can measure. “I want to look better” isn’t a good goal because it’s not specific and it’s hard to measure. “I want to lose 5 pounds this month” is a better goal.

• Make it reasonable. You may be setting yourself up to fail if you resolve never to eat chocolate again or to follow a two-hour-a-day fitness regimen. Can you do this regularly over the long haul? If not, ratchet your goal down a notch.

• Share it. Going public can give you the peer support — or pressure — you need to succeed. So let friends and family know what you want to accomplish, from managing stress to avoiding alcohol. Tell them how they can support you.

• Schedule it. You have a better chance of accomplishing your goal — whether it’s attending a yoga class or running 2 miles — if you make time for it on your calendar.
Can you become an optimist?

People generally don’t choose to be optimists or pessimists. The attitude you take toward life events is likely a combination of genetics, early environment and life experiences.

But that doesn’t mean you’re stuck with your attitude. Pessimism may be changeable to some degree. By being mindful of the ways in which your viewpoint brings you down or influences how you think, you may be able to view some events in a different manner. Here are some suggestions:

- Be aware of negative thoughts. When you catch yourself thinking that life is terrible, stop the thought in its tracks.
- Put things in perspective. Remember, everyone has ups and downs and nobody’s life is perfect.
- Try reframing. Find the good in a bad situation. If you’ve lost your job, for example, look at it as an opportunity. A job change can allow you to learn new skills and meet new people.
- Count your blessings. Gratitude can help you focus on what’s right in your life. Look around you and make a mental list of all the things you take for granted but for which you are truly grateful.
- Forgive and let go. Learn from your mistakes, forgive yourself and move on. Also try to forgive others. Hanging on to a wrong done to you by someone else only gives that hurt more power over you.
- Savor the good times. Good memories can get you through the bad times, so savor the moments when all is well with the world.
- Pursue simple pleasures. If you find satisfaction in the small things in life — a sunny room, a relaxing cup of coffee, time spent with friends or family — you won’t need spectacular events or extravagant purchases to make you happy.
- Be kind. Turning toward others can make you forget about yourself. Being kind to friends and strangers can relieve some of the tension in their lives and make you feel better about your own.
- Focus on things that give life meaning. This may include a spiritual journey or greater involvement in your faith community.
• Find a partner. You’re more likely to show up for that smoking cessation class or AA meeting if a friend is there waiting for you.

• Record your progress in a journal or activity log. People who write down their accomplishments are more likely to keep moving toward their goals.

• Reward yourself when you reach your goal. A night out at the movies, a massage or a new tool for your garage can encourage you to keep up the good work.

Keep in mind that it takes about three months to develop a healthy habit. If you continue faithfully for that long, you’ll be more likely to stay with it for the long haul.

Optimism and your health

As you make your way through life and the various transitions it brings, you’ll find that an optimistic attitude can make your days more enjoyable and less stressful. But did you know that your attitude also plays a role not only in how well you’ll live but also in how long you may live? Your mind and your body are closely intertwined.

Optimists live longer

Increasing evidence suggests that being an optimist or a pessimist has an effect on your health. One particular Dutch study found that older adults with an optimistic disposition — people who generally expected good things rather than bad things to happen — lived longer than did those who tended to expect doom and gloom.

At the beginning of the study, more than 900 participants filled out surveys that assessed their well-being, including their sense of optimism. The survey asked participants to respond to statements such as “I often feel that life is full of promises” and “I do not make any future plans.” After accounting for factors such as age, sex, smoking, alcohol consumption, physical
activity, socio-economic status and marital status, those who scored high on the optimism scale had a 29 percent lower risk of early death than did participants who scored low.

In this study, a positive outlook appeared to be particularly protective against death from cardiovascular problems. Highly optimistic participants were 77 percent less likely to die of a heart attack, stroke or other cardiovascular event than were highly pessimistic participants. These results held true regardless of whether the participants had a history of cardiovascular disease or high blood pressure.

A study conducted at Mayo Clinic reported similar results. Researchers examined the relationship between explanatory styles — how individuals explained the causes of life’s events — of more than 800 participants and the group’s mortality rate during a 30-year period. The researchers found that individuals who had a more pessimistic explanatory style died younger than did those who were more optimistic.

Participants who were classified as optimists tended to believe that the causes of bad events were temporary, not their own fault and limited to the present circumstances. Pessimists, on the other hand, tended to blame things on themselves, felt that the current situation was going to last forever and felt that the bad event would undermine everything.

**Optimists live better**

Using the same group of people for a different study, Mayo researchers examined the association between explanatory style and self-reported health status. Thirty years after filling out the original questionnaire that determined whether they were optimists, pessimists or a mix, a group of the participants answered a series of questions relating to their physical and mental health. Those who had an optimistic explanatory style reported fewer health limitations, fewer problems with work or other daily routines, less pain, more energy, and greater ease with social activities. In addition, they reported feeling more peaceful, happier and calmer most of the time.
Other studies have shown that optimists have fewer incidences of coronary artery disease, and if they do undergo heart surgery, they have a better recovery and better health afterward.

To the contrary, studies during the past few decades suggest that people who have pessimistic views of life events are prone to depression, have a weakened immune system, and use medical and mental health care services more frequently.

**Finding the link**

Scientists aren’t sure exactly how optimism provides the health benefits that it does or how pessimism can translate into poorer health and earlier death. In the Dutch study, optimism was associated with higher levels of physical activity, moderate alcohol use, less smoking, a higher educational level and living with a spouse. But even after adjusting for these factors, optimism still had an independent effect on mortality.

Part of the explanation may be that optimists, by their very nature, tend to report better health. However, in the Dutch study, optimists lived longer than pessimists, even if they had chronic illnesses or physical disabilities.

It’s possible that optimists cope more effectively with life events than pessimists do and have habits that are more likely to promote health and recovery, such as taking medications as prescribed or following a treatment regimen. There also may be biological differences involving factors such as the immune system, genetics and hormones.
Social companionship and your health

Your relationships also play a vital role in your health and sense of well-being.

In a survey done by the National Council on Aging, titled “American Perceptions of Aging in the 21st Century,” nearly 90 percent of respondents thought that having close relationships with family and friends was very important to having a vital and meaningful life, ranking above a number of other factors, including health.

Throughout life, strong family ties and good friendships contribute to mental and emotional well-being. But studies also show that people who enjoy “social support” — strong relationships with family, friends and partners — tend to not only have better health but also live longer.

The health benefits of friendship

Increasing evidence suggests that physical factors such as blood cholesterol levels, heart rate, blood pressure and your immune system are affected by psychosocial factors, such as your attitude and your relationships. Whereas social isolation can contribute to illness and poor health, having strong connections with the outside world appears to reap rewards.

Extends life

More than a dozen studies link social support with a lower risk of early death. In one study, for example, researchers monitored the health of nearly 7,000 Californians for more than 17 years. They found that those lacking social connections were two to three times as likely to die younger as were their more socially connected counterparts.
Boosts recovery
After reviewing more than 50 studies examining the link between social support and cardiovascular disease, researchers concluded that individuals without social support have worse recovery rates after a heart attack. People with social support may be more motivated to recover and adhere better to treatment regimens. Lack of social support appears to carry the same weight as other cardiovascular risk factors, such as high cholesterol, smoking and high blood pressure.

Bolsters immunity
It’s clear that stress can suppress immunity. Love and friendship help reduce stress. Interestingly, one study found that people with more-diverse social networks were less susceptible to the common cold.

Improves mental health
Having people to talk with when difficult times come along provides a psychological buffer against stress, anxiety and depression. Even when you don’t have a crisis in your life, social networks increase your sense of belonging and self-worth, promoting positive mental health.

Reduces anxiety
Studies have found that people hospitalized for heart disease who have strong social and religious ties are generally less anxious about upcoming medical procedures. Individuals with higher support levels are less prone to anxiety in general, which, in the case of cardiovascular disease, is associated with increased risk of death and sudden cardiac death.

Protects against mental decline
One mind can sharpen another. A study involving a group of older adults living in Spain found that having multiple social ties ranging from intimate to extended, maintaining frequent contact with these individuals and playing an important role in their lives help preserve mental ability.
Another study examining the link between social networks and mental sharpness found that study participants who frequently interacted with larger networks, such as civic and church groups, better maintained their mental sharpness over time.

**Finding the link**

Knowing that social support has a positive impact on health raises the questions of how and why.

Researchers suspect that being connected with others protects your physical health in a number of ways:

- Reduces stress
- Motivates you to engage in healthy behaviors, such as walking regularly or quitting smoking
- Allows you to receive direct expressions of affection, esteem and respect (socio-emotional support), which in turn might increase your biological resistance to disease
- Enables you to get better or more prompt medical care, or actually provides you with medical care if needed
- Provides you with practical help when needed — for example, assistance with household chores and transportation

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