

FEATURE

THE ART OF AGEING WELL



There's a joke that says staying healthy is simply the slowest possible way to die — but that doesn't mean it's not worth it in a world where people are living longer. Veruska De Vita has some tips

Ageing is a funny thing. Some people live in denial of a process that's fundamentally tied to being alive, others choose the "you only live once" mantra and care less about their health. Then there are those who grow old before their time. While the denials are constantly seeking the elixir of eternal youth, others understand that preparing for old age will stand them in good stead. Ageing well isn't simple, with genetics, disease and factors beyond our control determining how well and how long we live.

Statistics show that more people are living longer. By 2030, one in six people in the world will be aged 60 years or over. The number of those aged 80 and over is expected to triple before 2050. While there is little doubt that Covid put a dip on that graph, the trend towards blowing out more candles on the birthday cake continues.

South Africans seem to be living longer too, especially in rural areas. An ongoing study by Agincourt, which began in 2013, shows that in Limpopo more people are making it past 65. The necessity of travel — which provides both a challenge and a purpose — along with access to healthcare and a better quality and variety of food seem to be determining factors.

Apart from moving to Puerto Rico or Limpopo, what can be done to ensure that you reach a ripe old age and are composed enough to tell the tale?

Dr Hanneetje Edeling is a counselling psychologist with a special interest in positive ageing and retirement. For her, maturing well is an art and a science involving nutrition, exercise, mindset and the social and physical environment.

HEALTHSPAN VS LIFESPAN

"Ensuring a positive old age is fully in our grasp. But, there's a caveat. To do this we need to take excellent care of our physical body and take charge of our thoughts, beliefs and habits. Biological age is heavily dependent on our psychology. Genetics impact ageing less than you think, only 10 to 15% of the process," says Edeling.

She believes it's not about lifespan but rather healthspan. "Your faculties need to be sharp, otherwise it's just existence. Bad nutrition is linked to health-related illnesses and breakdown of health. There's a massive resurgence of awareness that insulin is a big problem. Insulin resistance develops because of bad eating, so it is best to avoid sugars, processed foods and fructose syrups used as sweetener. Good gut flora is linked to not getting Alzheimer's."

But it's not just the body that needs to be kept in good shape, the brain needs to be maintained. Good sleep is high on the living-longer-better scale. "Bad sleep seriously impacts the brain. The brain cleans out at night when the glymphatic system gets to work on removing plaque and tangles. Sleep is needed to destress and reorganise information so that the brain can store memories in the right way. Most people know by now that avoiding blue light from screens at night will help to maintain a good circadian rhythm and ensure good quality sleep," says Edeling.

ELIMINATING STRESS

Stress contributes to premature ageing. Humans aren't built to endure chronic stress. "Almost all breakdowns into infirmities of old age are exacerbated by stress. Under stress, nutrient needs increase dramatically and people don't replenish in the right way. One needs to take supplements that help the body and also find ways to destress regularly."

Emotional trauma has long-term exhaustive effects on the body and this dampens perspective. People with a positive outlook tend to live 19% longer than those carrying a lot of emotional baggage. "Travel light, sort out issues, and don't let yourself get into a permanent physical or emotional stuckness caused by a stress state. What you think about ageing is what you're going to get. See ageing as progress, not as loss, and don't compare yourself to what you used to be," suggests Edeling.

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Counselling psychologist

LOOKING AFTER THE BRAIN

Practising relaxation is another key to mental health. Edeling is a follower of this practice as it helps to move her brain from a "too wired" state — the mode we're in when working and learning — to lower frequencies, the place where we feel creative and the mind opens up. The more she does it, the easier she can control her brain waves and bring herself into a state of relaxation, which is essential to mental clarity. Regular practice creates neural pathways that make it easier to relax — eventually the pathways are so well formed that it's simple to arrive at a state of calm.

Binaural music is a hack to achieving this state and you can find it on Spotify, SoundCloud or the Insight Timer app. The sound slows down brain frequency, which can progress to sleep. Listening to binaural tracks during the day for 20 to 30 minutes is similar to a power nap on steroids.

Edeling recommends keeping your brain in shape. "The brain keeps making new stem cells, but one needs to harness these through physical exercise and then learning something new afterwards."

With more studies being done on cognitive decline and dementia, there's hope for prevention and reversal. Doctors are now able to identify the many causes of the illness. There is a swing towards functional medicine approaches, including biochemical testing, diet and supplements, non-invasive neurostimulation, physical therapy and occupational therapy. Dr Dale Bredeken, an expert in the mechanisms of neurodegenerative diseases, compares

Alzheimer's to having 36 holes in a roof, plugging some of the biggest ones can begin to reverse symptoms.

MIRACLE CURES

Cynthia Kenyon, who heads Calico Life Sciences, a research company launched by Google in 2013, wants to prove that ageing is malleable. For Kenyon, ageing is controlled by genetics, cellular pathways and biochemical signals, which she believes can all be altered so that we maintain our verve for most of a century. With private individuals and companies throwing millions of dollars into the research, she has a buffet of resources to work with to find a cure for ageing.

Kenyon and her team seemed to be onto something when they tested senolytics on earthworms, but the pill fell flat when tested on humans, showing little difference to the placebo. Senolytics refers to a group of drugs that kill cells that have stopped multiplying but continue to release chemicals, causing inflammation. Being able to eliminate those cells would work wonders on decrepit bodily systems.

Metformin, an anti-diabetic medication, is touted by some as a wonder drug. A side-effect of metformin is removing misfolded proteins, so it reduces the incidence of neurodegenerative diseases, cardiovascular disease and cancer. Silicon Valley techies and ageing scientists take metformin for this reason, but there are those who dispute its credibility as a longevity drug.

Researchers at the Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation found that in a study carried out on men and women in their 60s, metformin seemed to block fitness. The volunteers were put on a four-month exercise regime and while those on the placebo showed an increase in fitness, those on metformin upped their endurance by half as much.

An ongoing study by cryobiologist Gregory Fahy provides the tantalising proposition that there is indeed a medical way to lower biological age. His theory suggests that immunological age can be reversed by treating the thymus gland. The thymus stimulates the development of disease-fighting T-cells. Experimenting on himself, Fahy has been taking a cocktail of human growth hormone, metformin and dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA) with seemingly good results. Other men who have volunteered in Fahy's trial have seen remarkable changes in their bodies. One participant said that his white hair is now growing brown.

THE BENEFITS OF HORMESIS

While medication may provide a quick fix to healthy longevity, there are other ways to protect the body from becoming decrepit. Hormesis is when we expose ourselves to mild stress or an enjoyable challenge. Comfort is wonderful, but the mind and body need grind. While some headline-grabbing cryptocurrency billionaires and tech CEOs may take hormesis to extremes by sleeping in oxygen deprivation tents, being injected with their own blood or getting stung by bees, it doesn't mean we can't take a page out of their daily habits book.

Fasting and calorie restriction is not only good for weight management, it stimulates the purging of toxins. Fasting promotes autophagy — the process of reusing old and damaged cell parts, it

enhances the body's defences against oxidative stress. It also regulates circadian rhythms if eating in the evenings is limited.

Cold water plunging is both a mental and physical challenge that builds resilience to stress and diseases. Cold showers, swims in chilly water or dips in an ice bath are known to tighten the skin, heal muscles and clear the mind. People who practice this through the seasons say it calms them and elicits a sense of euphoria.

Exercise falls within the hormesis ambit and is touted by many personal trainers as providing big bang for buck in the longevity stakes. Loss of muscle mass and decrease in flexibility from inactivity can result in poor health later on. It's worth lifting the weights or sweating through a pilates or boxing session if it means you'll still be able to take the stairs or dance with your great-grandchild when you're 95.

YOUNGER-LOOKING SKIN

We all want to look good in our own skin and Dr Sirshah Moodley is an aesthetic doctor who believes in taking a holistic approach to this facet of wellbeing. He suggests using brands and ingredients with research behind them, backed by clinical trials on real skin. These products are tailored to various skin types and conditions, meaning they are more results driven.

The world of aesthetics is constantly evolving, with new trends appearing regularly. Moodley explains that biostimulatory treatments and FSR are now all the rage. "These revolutionary injectable treatments assist the skin with producing more collagen for a lifting and tightening effect. Fractional radiofrequency or FSR is another anti-ageing procedure. This treatment is energy based and stimulates the skin at deeper layers to firm and tighten. It can even treat the eye area and neck."

A buzzword doing the rounds is "no-tox", which refers to skincare treatments made from all-natural ingredients. As consumers

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Dr Sirshah Moodley
Aesthetic doctor

become more aware of ingredients and how they are sourced, products are becoming more precise. Walk into a natural health store and you can choose collagen from porcine, bovine or vegetable sources, or from fish caught off the coast of New Zealand.

THE BIG TAKEOUT

To step onto the good road towards your golden years, start today to look after your mind and body. Chill, eat your vegetables, sleep, play cards, start a communal garden, dance, see your friends, learn tai chi, do something you've always dreamed of doing. It doesn't have to be too big or challenging: make music, cook a Mexican dish.