



SCIENTISTS SAY THESE 5 HEALTHY HABITS EXTEND YOUR HEALTHSPAN BY 10 YEARS

GOOD ADVICE

by KARA JILLIAN BROWN, JANUARY 10, 2020

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As humans strive to live longer and healthier lives, longevity experts are on a mission not only to prolong your lifespan, but to increase the number of years you'll live free of debilitating disease. Scientists at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health assembled an international research team to discover how healthy lifestyle habits you adopt now can extend your healthspan by up to ten years.

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The study, published in *The British Medical Journal* on January 8, looked specifically at years lived without diabetes, cardiovascular disease, or cancer. Researchers examined self-reported data collected every other year since 1980 from nearly 175,000 healthcare professionals age 30 to 75. They found that people over 50 who had never smoked, maintained a healthy weight, ate a healthy diet, exercised regularly, and drank only a moderate amount of alcohol lived about 84 healthy years—a full decade longer than those who did not.

“In many ways, these health behaviors are interconnected,” says XinQi Dong, MD, a gerontologist and director of Rutgers University’s Institute for Health, Health Care Policy, and Aging Research. “This study enables people to better quantify the years added. The message is laudable.”

While the study suggests practicing all five of these habits provides maximum benefits, Ross Arena, PhD, a physical therapist researching rehabilitation and prevention says adoption of just one can be helpful. “What are you willing to do? Can you go for a walk a

couple times per week? Something is better than nothing when you talk about healthy lifestyle habits,” he says. According to the study, adopting just one of these habits puts the expected healthspan at 77 years, with each subsequent habit practiced adding an additional three years.

5 lifestyle habits scientists say increase your healthspan by ten years

1. LIMIT YOUR ALCOHOL INTAKE

The researchers define moderate as one glass per day for women or two for for men. This is especially important considering research recently published in the journal *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research* which found that alcohol-related deaths have more than doubled in the past two decades. Excessive alcohol intake is also linked to early-onset dementia. Limiting your drinking lowers your risk for heart attacks, strokes, or death from heart disease, thereby extending your healthspan. The key is moderation. If you’re following the Mediterranean diet, you’ve already got a handle on this.

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2. MAINTAIN A HEALTHY WEIGHT

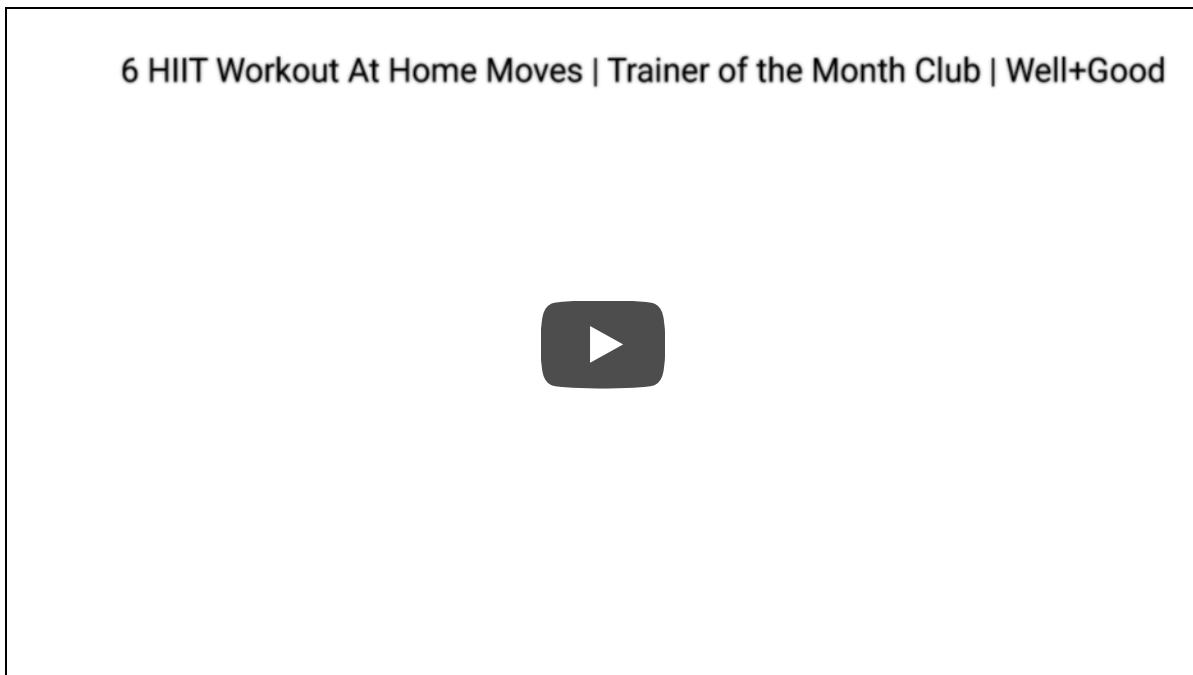
A healthy weight is defined in this study as a body mass index between 18.5 and 24.9. A BMI between 25 and 29.9 is considered overweight and over 30 is considered obese. Although society has become more accepting of all body types, Shauna Levy, MD, MS, a surgeon and assistant professor at Tulane University Medical Center, previously told Well+Good that obesity is still a serious medical issue. The World Health Organization says that obesity majorly puts people at increased risk for chronic diseases.

Alissa Rumsey, RD, a certified intuitive eating counselor and owner of Alissa Rumsey Nutrition and Wellness, says research shows people can improve their health through behavior change, regardless of their weight. “People at higher weights who change their behaviors see the same positive health outcomes even when their weight remains the same,” says Rumsey. “I think as a culture we have hit diet rock-bottom and are finally coming to understand how the very things we were doing to help our bodies were actually hurting.”

3. EXERCISE REGULARLY

If you’re getting roughly 3.5 hours of moderate to vigorous exercise each week, you’re significantly increasing your healthspan. “Not being active has tremendously detrimental health consequences,” says Dr. Arena. Regularly exercise can positively impact vascular health, risk of dementia, blood pressure, blood sugar levels, and bone health. And while any form of exercise is good, research shows that doing a combo of static and dynamic activities, like strength training and running, has the biggest impact on heart health.

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4. NEVER SMOKE

You already know this, but a reminder doesn't hurt. Smoking kills more Americans each year than illegal drugs alcohol, motor vehicle accidents, HIV, and guns combined, according to the CDC. It harms nearly every organ in your body. A 2015 study in *The Annals of Epidemiology* found that one in three cancer related deaths in the U.S. is caused by cigarette smoking. While tobacco smoking is highly addictive, the CDC also notes that smoking rates declined 7 percent from 2005 to 2018. If you're looking to quit, reach out to

the [American Heart Association](#), the [American Cancer Society](#), and the [American Lung Association](#). All three offer online resources and a helpline you can call to direct you to resources in your area.

5. EAT HEALTHY FOOD

While some diets, like the Mediterranean diet, focus on eating more nourishing foods, others like keto focus on restriction, and are really only suitable for certain populations with doctor supervision, registered dietitian [Brigitte Zeitlin, RD](#), [previously told Well+Good](#). [Experts say the easiest way to eat healthy is to keep it simple with whole foods and lots of fruits and veggies](#). Be mindful of what you're eating, and don't force yourself to eat things you don't like, or deprive yourself of foods you love. "Food should be enjoyable," says Zeitlin. "You should be eating what you like to eat and want to eat."

Listening to your gut and eating what you want can help break down the food shame that comes with diet culture. Language matters, too. Avoid referring to certain foods as "indulgences," "cheating," or "bad."

"There's a moral connotation here that these foods are something that you still shouldn't have often," [Judith Matz, LCSW](#), co-author of [*The Diet Survivor's Handbook: 60 Lessons in Eating, Acceptance and Self-Care*](#), [told Well+Good](#). "When you eat the ['bad'] food, you think of yourself as an unhealthy person, and might internalize the idea that you're not caring for yourself."

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