

HOW TO  
**LIVE TO  
100  
AND  
LOVE  
IT!**

—  
by Lisa Bendall  
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**WE'RE LIVING LONGER** than ever before, thanks to healthier lifestyles and medical advancements such as vaccines and antibiotics. The average life expectancy in Canada, currently 82 and rising, has increased by 11 years since 1960. Of course, reaching a ripe old age is significantly more rewarding if you feel fit and healthy, and your life is full.

Researchers who study longevity and health have concluded that people who live the longest share some common characteristics in where and how they live, and how proactively they take care of themselves. "Longevity is useless if it means more years incapacitated in a home," says Benjamin Zendel, a professor at Memorial University of Newfoundland and Canada Research Chair in Aging and Auditory Neuroscience.

Follow these 45 proven—and often surprising—habits to get the most out of life.

## **RULE #1: TREAT YOUR BODY RIGHT**

### **Watch your weight**

An analysis in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* of three long-term studies found that being overweight at any time in adulthood can shorten your life significantly. If you're heavy, losing just five to 10 per cent of your body weight will help prevent life-threatening chronic diseases such as diabetes.

### **Brush your teeth**

"There's a correlation between poor oral health and the risk of other conditions, such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes," says Dr. Howard Tenenbaum, the dentist-in-chief at Toronto's Sinai Health System. Bacteria from the mouth can enter the bloodstream and spread. Even the molecules involved in fighting oral infection appear to exacerbate inflammation elsewhere in the body.

### **Get your eyes checked**

According to a 2014 study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, the reduction in independence from vision loss has an impact on lifespan. In the study, seniors who were gradually losing their vision—that is, by one eye-chart line per year—were 16 per cent more likely to have died eight years later. The researchers believe that correcting vision or learning strategies for adapting to vision loss, like how to read a grocery list with a magnifying tool, can reduce this risk.

### **Breathe deeply**

Lung capacity begins to decline around age 35 as your airways lose elasticity, your posture changes and your diaphragm loses strength, making it more difficult to take in the oxygen your body needs to stay active and healthy. Slow these changes by exercising your lungs for five or 10 minutes a day: breathe deeply, concentrating on lowering your diaphragm—the muscle under

your lungs that allows these organs to expand. Gradually extend the time it takes you to inhale and exhale.

### **Don't overmedicate**

A 2015 study of over 5,000 Spanish seniors revealed that patients on the most pills died the earliest. Although it doesn't prove that multiple prescriptions (known as "polypharmacy") are the cause of an earlier death, what's known is that we're more vulnerable to drug interactions and side effects as we age. Even common medications like ibuprofen can lead to ulcers, kidney disease or cardiovascular events if taken long term. Bring a list of all your prescriptions to your next GP appointment and find out if you can reduce or eliminate anything.

### **Tend to your tootsies**

A potential complication of diabetes, a disease shared by 2.3 million Canadians, is open sores on the feet. A 2019 Australian study linked diabetic foot ulcers to a death up to 15 years earlier than the average. Check your feet regularly for redness or breaks in the skin, and see a health-care professional if you have concerns.

### **Strengthen your skeleton...**

New research from the Garvan Institute of Medical Research in Darlinghurst, Australia, suggests that when we slow our age-related bone loss with

nitrogen-bisphosphonate medications, it lowers the rate of early death by as much as 34 per cent.

### **...and replace worn hips**

If you've been advised to have hip surgery but put it off because you don't relish the long recovery, you might reconsider. In Sweden, almost 132,000 patients who had a total hip replacement had a higher chance of being alive 10 years later. The researchers couldn't pinpoint the reasons but believe many factors are at play, noting that a hip replacement typically improves mobility and lessens pain.

### **Book a flu shot—every year**

Over 83,000 people in North America died last year from catching the flu, and about 912,000 were hospitalized due to flu complications such as pneumonia. Even if you recover, you can have lasting scar tissue in your airways, making it harder for your lungs to oxygenate your tissues.

### **Reconsider HRT**

Before going on hormone replacement therapy, ask your doctor about the risks. According to authors of a 2019 study in *Preventive Medicine Reports*, women who enter menopause before age 45 raise their mortality risk by 31 per cent if they take hormones. Previous studies linked this therapy to cancer, heart attack, stroke and bone fractures.

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### Don't neglect your rump

Colorectal cancer is one of the most common cancers in Canada (the second for men, after lung). The new fecal immunochemical test (FIT) for precancerous changes is a simple diagnostic kit that can be used at home, with no special preparation. Ask your doctor to help you order your own.

## RULE #2: EAT RIGHT

### Never skip breakfast

According to the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*, people aged 40 to 75 were 87 per cent more likely to be dead of cardiovascular disease a couple of decades later if they never ate breakfast—even though they had no sign of the disease at the start of the study.

### Prioritize plant protein...

A Japanese study following over 70,000 people found that the more plant protein (like beans, seeds and whole grains) they included in their diet, the longer they stayed alive.

### ...and cut back on red meat

According to the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, eating just one extra half-serving of red meat a day increases your risk of premature death by nine per cent over eight years. The risk is 13 per cent if the half-serving is processed.

### Grill or bake your fish

If you're trying to include more fish and seafood in your diet, good for you. But how you cook your meal matters—a lot. Data

from the Nurses' Health Study in the U.S. shows that eating a daily serving of fried fish makes you 13 per cent more likely to die from a heart-related cause. The lesson: opt for less fatty cooking techniques.

### Stay hydrated...

Research shows that many of us underestimate the risk of dehydration, which is linked to health problems and death. The right amount of fluid intake is unique to each individual, but if your urine is dark, you probably aren't drinking enough.

### ...but avoid sugary drinks

A 2019 report from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health suggested that the more sugary drinks people have, the greater their chances of dying earlier, with the difference in risk being 21 per cent greater if you drink two or more of these beverages a day.

### Cook from scratch

A 2019 French study following almost 45,000 middle-aged adults noted that people who consumed ultra-processed foods—that is, ready-to-serve products containing additives—had a higher rate of dying from any cause, not just cardiovascular disease.

### Use a smaller dish

To control calories, you can trick yourself into eating less, says Maureen Dobbins, a professor in the School of Nursing at McMaster University. "We tend to overestimate portion sizes in North America, and it's partly driven by the size of the plate."

### Cut back on booze

Alcohol consumption was blamed for an estimated 14,800 deaths and 88,000 hospital visits in 2014. If you're female, limit yourself to 10 drinks per week, and no more than two a day. If you're male, don't exceed 15 per week, or three a day.

### Add more tomatoes

The lycopene in this red fruit has antioxidant properties. In study findings published on the *Annals of Internal Medicine* website, lycopene lowered the risk of dying over a six-year period by 18 per cent. For cancer-related deaths, it was a 54 per cent reduction.

### Go nuts

In a Harvard-led study, people who ate a few nuts every day—including walnuts, almonds or cashews—were 20 per cent less likely to die over a 30-year period.

### Pop a vitamin D

People with low levels of this vitamin appear to have a higher rate of death. A supplement doesn't guarantee you'll live longer, but a study in *The BMJ* found

evidence that it may lower the risk of death from cancer.

### Go ahead, drink more coffee

This beverage is linked to longer life, possibly because the caffeine content helps our bodies fight chronic inflammation. Count your cups and stop at five per day; otherwise you increase your risk of cardiovascular disease. If you prefer decaf, you won't get the caffeine benefits, but you'll still be taking in antioxidants.

## RULE #3: KEEP ACTIVE

### Embrace housework (you'll thank yourself!)

Even light-intensity physical activity, like sweeping the floor or washing dishes, appears to lengthen your life—with every minute you do, your chances of dying go down, according to a 2019 report in *The BMJ*. "This suggests that older people and those who are not able to be physically active at higher intensities will still benefit from just moving around," wrote one of the report's authors, who was from the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences.

### Take up a new sport

You'll gain more health benefits when physical activity is combined with mental stimulation and social interactions. "In my lab, we use the tag line 'lifestyle cross-training,'" explains psychologist

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Stuart MacDonald at the University of Victoria, where he investigates the neuroscience of aging. “There’s some basic science suggesting that your memory functions better if you’re also physical. And if you choose an activity where you get to see your friends, you’re more likely to keep doing it.”

### Stand when you talk on the phone

Even if you meet your daily physical-activity goals, it won’t eliminate health problems associated with sitting for long periods, including stroke and cancer—you still need to get up regularly. Research led by the American Cancer Society showed that people who sit for at least six hours a day have a 19 per cent greater risk of dying.

### Bring your earbuds for exercise

You’ll gain more of the health benefits of brisk walking, like lower blood pressure and protection for your bones, if you can increase your speed. In fact, walking faster reduces risk of death by almost 18 per cent over eight years.

### Find excuses to walk

Many municipalities offer themed walking tours. Since participants can learn history or view gardens while being physically and socially active, it also counts as a “lifestyle cross-training” strategy. According to research on men and women over 40, published this year in the *British Journal of Sports*

*Medicine*, just one hour of leisure walking per week appears to reduce the death rate by 18 per cent compared to totally inactive individuals.

### Jog up the stairs

Short on time? A 2018 study in the *Journal of the American Heart Association* reported that brief bursts of intense activity have the same benefit to your lifespan as the 10-minute bouts recommended by agencies like Health Canada, as long as you end up getting the same total amount of exercise.

## RULE #4: FIND TIME TO RELAX

### Make friends

“If you’re socially isolated, you tend to have a heightened inflammatory response. Left unchecked, inflammation gets manifested as disease,” says MacDonald. Research at the University of Helsinki in 2018 showed that lonely people tracked over seven years were much more likely to have a heart attack (43 per cent) or stroke (39 per cent).

### Get enough sleep

People who don’t sleep enough—seven to eight hours is optimal for most—are more likely to develop conditions like



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diabetes and mental illness. If you can’t resist using your electronic devices before bed, special glasses can minimize the effects of artificial blue light on your sleep.

### Turn up the heat

The more often middle-aged men in Finland visited saunas—from once a week to daily—the lower their death rates over a 20-year period. Sauna use appears to lower blood pressure and protect blood vessels. (It may not be recommended if you’re recovering from a heart attack or have angina.)

### Manage stress

“If you have protracted stress for a long time, you tend to have elevated levels of cortisol,” says MacDonald. “It’s been shown that your hippocampus atrophies when you bathe it in cortisol over a long time.” Prolonged exposure to emotional stress can reduce survival rates for people with health conditions, raising their death rate over a four-year period by 39 to 43 per cent. Try seeing a problem as a challenge you can tackle and learn from.

### Listen to nature

Can’t get outside? At Brighton and Sussex Medical School in the United Kingdom, MRI scans of volunteers demonstrated that listening to recorded sounds of the great outdoors can produce a brain response associated with reduced stress.

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### Don’t take work home

A 2018 study in *The Lancet* showed that job stress may be leading men with cardiometabolic diseases (like insulin resistance or high blood pressure) to an earlier death—with a 68 per cent higher risk. The same effect wasn’t seen in women. Guys, stop checking work messages when you’re off the clock.

### Hunt for silver linings

Boston-based researchers have just shown that optimism increases the odds you’ll live to 85 by 50 per cent if you’re female and 70 per cent for males. Try focusing on all the things you’re grateful for.

### Take piano lessons or join a choir

“As you get older, it becomes more difficult to socially interact in noisy environments,” says Memorial University’s Zendel. Research in his lab and elsewhere is showing that musical training can improve your ability to decipher speech in loud restaurants and bars.

### Improve your listening skills

Focus your attention on the speaker and watch their lip movements. Being a good listener is another strategy that can help you stay socially engaged, reducing your loneliness and isolation.



Zendel has met people with hearing issues who don't let others get a word in edgewise. "They know they won't understand you, so their solution is to keep talking."

Canada report, people in remote areas often have poorer access to health services because of distance and wait times, and are more likely to die a preventable death.

## **RULE #5: FIND YOUR HAPPY PLACE**

### **Bond with nature**

When you're planning a walking or biking route in your neighbourhood, make sure it cuts through a park or two. According to a 2017 report in *The Lancet*, exposure to community green spaces—which increases our sense of well-being—lowers death rates by eight to 12 per cent over 10 years.

### **Get a roommate**

A 2019 study that followed men over more than 30 years found that the risk of dying was 23 per cent higher for those living alone. Another recent study found a similar link in men and women living by themselves, but only for those who actually felt lonely. The new Symbiosis program at McMaster University matches students in need of short-term housing with seniors who have a room to spare. Participants report a greater sense of community connection.

### **Live closer to amenities**

Too much isolation can reduce your lifespan. According to a 2019 Statistics

### **Share the load**

Research led by the Johns Hopkins University Center on Aging and Health in 2013 showed that the emotional rewards of caring for a family member can extend your life by 18 per cent. The key, though, is to keep the workload manageable. This frees you to enjoy the health benefits of higher self-esteem and the sense that you're making a difference.

### **Avoid third-hand smoke**

We all know about the risks of inhaling second-hand smoke, but the chemical residue that clings to clothes and builds up on furniture can create a type of indoor pollution that may pose harm, too. Studies on this are still ongoing, but Berkeley Lab scientists were able to show, for instance, that these chemicals react with compounds in a room's air to form carcinogens.

### **Manage your temp**

Heat waves and cold snaps can be life-threatening, especially as you age. If you live in a community that is prone to either extreme (or both—this is Canada, after all), heed weather warnings and stay indoors if you need to. **R**