

# 10 secrets of long life

Floss more regularly. Get a pet. Add years to your life and life to your years with some surprising changes...

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**W**E ALL KNOW WHAT WE HAVE to do to improve our chances of a long and healthy life – eat sensibly, exercise regularly, ditch the cigarettes, drink alcohol in moderation and watch our weight.

But as well as the 'famous five' of which we hear so much, there are plenty of less well-known ways in which we can improve our long-term physical and mental health. Who would have thought that flossing your teeth could reduce your chances of a heart attack, for example? Or that people with a strong network of friends tend to live longer?

**1 DO SUDOKU...** or the crossword, or play bridge. According to Dr Lorna Layward, research manager at charity Help the Aged 'older people who have regular mental stimulus appear to maintain their cognitive abilities better. Old rats given new toys positively fizz with new neuronal connections and increased blood flow to the brain, and the same may be true of humans.' Exercise also seems to boost brain power, although we don't yet know how or why. What is known is that people with better cognitive function live longer.

**2 GET A PET** A US study showed that pet owners had a higher chance of surviving for more than a year after a heart attack than those without pets. And UK research has found that children who live with pets take less time off school for illness. Pet owners generally swear that animals enhance their quality of life but research has produced conflicting results. Early studies suggesting that pet owners had lower blood pressure and were less likely to visit their doctor have not been supported by later research. ▶

### 3 THINK POSITIVE

Research published by Yale University revealed that people with a positive outlook on life lived seven and a half years longer than those with a negative approach. 'Happiness and optimism can actually strengthen the immune system to help fight off disease,' says Dr Roger Henderson, author of *100 Ways to Live to 100* (Piatkus, £7.99). 'One trial of HIV-positive patients showed that such men who thought their condition could be controlled or at least stabilised had a higher "helper" T-cell count and lived an average nine months longer than their downbeat equivalents.'

**4 GET MARRIED** and/or have lots of sex. Married people not only have lower rates of mortality than those of the same age

and sex who are single, widowed, separated or divorced but also have fewer acute and chronic conditions and mental health problems, and make less use of health services. These benefits are greater for men than for women. A 20-year study by the University of Warwick showed that married men live an average of three years longer than single men. Sex also seems to keep you young. According to Dr Henderson: 'A decade-long study published in the *British Medical Journal* stated that men who had sex less than once a month had double the death rate of those who had sex at least twice a week.' Sex releases hormones and promotes a feeling of wellbeing, which may explain why it's good for you.

**5 GET FLOSSING** Increasingly, research is confirming a connection between gum disease and a raised risk of heart attack. A study in the *Journal of Periodontology* found that heart-attack victims had high levels of bacteria around their teeth, while another identified matching bacterial DNA in gums and heart arteries. It is thought that bacteria from the gums can enter the bloodstream and damage blood vessels. 'It is like setting up a garbage dump on a river,' says Dr Vincent Iacono, of the American Academy of Periodontology. 'You wouldn't be surprised if the lake downstream ended up polluted.' Regular flossing helps keep gums healthy.



### 6 TAKE ASPIRIN

A research team that reviewed 300 trials of antiplatelet drugs estimated that prescribing aspirin in patients with cardiovascular disease could prevent 7,000 deaths annually in the UK. A recent study concluded that there is a potential benefit from a daily dose of 75mg of aspirin for people who do not have evidence of heart disease but who have risk factors such as high blood pressure. 'Aspirin is so beneficial against heart disease that men over 35 and women over 40 should consider taking half a tablet a day for life,' says Dr Michael F Roizen, co-author of *You, The Owner's Manual* (Piatkus, £14.99). However, aspirin can cause an allergic reaction, so check with your GP first.

**7 GET RELIGION** An American study of 5,000 people aged 21 to 65 found that those who attended religious services at least once a week had a 23% lower risk of dying during the 28-year period of the research. Another study, among older people, found that churchgoers had lower blood pressure and stronger immune systems and suffered less from depression and anxiety than those who were not involved in religion. Researchers believe that religious communities provide a strong social network, which is known to extend life. Work at the University of Liverpool has shown that those with lower levels of social activity were more likely to die sooner than others and experience worsening physical health. Religion may also help people to cope with stressful events and illness.

**10 KEEP CALM** Cutting edge research on telomeres, the bits of DNA on the ends of chromosomes, is demonstrating what we have long suspected: that stress causes the body to age. In a study published last year, women with the highest stress levels showed the equivalent of 10 years of additional cellular ageing compared with those with the lowest stress levels. Anger is also bad for you. Results of a questionnaire from the University of North Carolina revealed that people who get most angry were almost three times more likely to die from a heart attack than the least anger-prone. Two other American studies produced similar results. If you are a person who often gets mad, take an anger-management course or try relaxation techniques or meditation. □

### 8 BUY SMALLER DINNER PLATES

'People who eat meals from smaller plates consume fewer calories – but still have the same feeling of satiety as people who eat off larger dishes,' says Dr Roizen. 'Reducing portion sizes has the effect of making you up to three years younger because it helps reduce arterial and immune ageing.'

### 9 WEAR SHADES IN THE SUN

Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is the biggest cause of vision loss among over-65s in the UK. Low intake of antioxidants, excessive alcohol, high-fat diets and smoking all increase the risk of AMD. Exposing the eyes to sunlight is also a risk factor, so it is a good idea to wear sunglasses and a wide-brimmed hat in the sun. According to the Macular Disease Society: 'A diet including at least two to four servings a week of dark green leafy vegetables [which contain high quantities of lutein and zeaxanthin] may help to lower your risk. More research is needed'