

Want to live a longer and happier life? Great advice from longevity experts backed up by older Australians

Firstly, don't obsess about diet and exercise - it may be as important to enjoy a glass of wine, a piece of chocolate, tackle a Sudoku, and take the dog for a walk say longevity expert Nicola Gates. Their views are very much in line with the results of the Good Will Week 2011 survey of more than 20,000 older Australians in NSW who were asked about what advice they would give to younger people wanting to live a long and happy life. Here are their tips:

1. Friendship

Friendship is vital - not only for having fun, sharing interests, and providing support but also giving direct health benefits. Having a network of great friends can result in a longer lifespan, reduced stress, and better coping skills.

Having friends and family nearby was the number one tip older Australians gave for living a longer and happier life.

2. Animal friends

International and Australian studies have shown that pets like dogs and cats provide health benefits for their owners. A large survey found that dog and cat owners make fewer annual doctor visits and are less likely to be on medication for heart problems and sleeping difficulties than non-pet-owners.

Over 43 per cent of people said they had a cat or dog, and more than 50 per cent of these viewed their pet as part of their family.

3. Volunteering

In 2007 a US study into the benefits of volunteering confirmed what people already felt - that volunteering was related to feelings of psychological well-being and self-reported health. The study covered several years and found that the more you volunteer over the years, the greater the benefit. Find something you're interested in or care about and go and help them. You'll do something good for others, and feel good yourself.

"Doing something you love" was the second best tip for living longer from our older Australians.

4. Diet

The evidence is pretty straightforward - a healthy diet is vital for a long and healthy life. There is so much information available about healthy diets but did you know that what you eat also affects your psychological wellbeing? In 2009 a British study revealed that people with a high intake of processed food were much more likely to be depressed. On the flip side, studies show that including dark chocolate in your diet will make you feel happier, and a glass of red wine could help your heart. Take this time to improve your diet - you might live healthier and longer and be happier as a result. Isn't that worth trying for?

Over 73 per cent of people said they had a fairly balanced diet, and almost 15 per cent said they eat whatever they like. Interestingly, more than half (54.2 per cent) said drinking alcohol in moderation made no difference to your longevity, while 32.4 per cent said it actually helps you live longer!

5. Exercise

Exercise is so good for your health, but did you know it could make you 'smarter' by building new brain connections and by improving your brain performance? Recent research suggests that exercise improves brain function in a number of exciting ways. Remember you don't necessarily have to head to the gym to enjoy the benefits of exercise - dancing can really be a great way to get your heart going, kayaking, horse riding, even walking the dog.

Over 18 per cent said they exercised or took part in a team sport.

6. Leisure activities

Too much work or doing the same thing day-in and day-out can make any of us very dull indeed. Finding fun new things to do makes life (and us) more interesting. They can also be challenging, social and educational. Identify activities that you want to do - it may be a hobby you loved as a child, or something new you've always wanted to try. Don't put it off, have a look online and find your nearest group or club and get into it. Not only will you be doing something you love in your leisure time, you'll also probably meet like-minded new friends into the bargain.

Almost 39 per cent said they took part in outdoor activities and 34.4 per cent said they participate in some form of hobby.

7. Brain activity

The 'Mind your Mind' campaign of Alzheimer's Australia recommends you keep your brain active and stimulated to reduce your risk of developing dementia. Being mentally active stimulates blood flow and brain metabolism and increases neuroplasticity when the brain makes new connections and adapts to learning - all good for keeping your brain mentally healthy. Mentally-challenging games such as playing chess, bridge or mah-jong are only some possibilities as there are many other hobbies and interests that can be mentally stimulating such as dancing, playing music, learning a language, clay modelling, craft and creative pursuits.

58.6 per cent of people told us they like activities like reading, doing crossword puzzles and Sudoku, and 10 per cent said they take classes to learn new things.

8. Sleep

Getting a good night's sleep is crucial to feeling good. Fatigue or lack of good quality sleep, can reduce a person's overall brain functioning, leading to mistakes, forgetfulness, and clumsiness. Concentration, attention and information-processing speed also deteriorate, and it should be remembered that fatigue is a major factor in motor vehicle accidents.

9. Laughter

Laughing really is the best medicine. When you laugh endorphins and other positive natural brain chemicals are released into your brain-body system. These reduce stress, increase immune functioning - and importantly we feel happier and are more likely to laugh again - a happy cycle! But it is also important to maintain perspective on what is happening to us in our lives and not take things too seriously all the time. So don't take life so seriously! LOL...(laugh out loud).

Note: When asked "At what age do you become old?" 51.3 per cent said you are "as young as you feel".

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