The 8 Keys to Longevity

8 MIN READ

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How to live longer, according to the most credible science.

I've been reading health research for a living for 20 years, and a lot has shifted in that time. Coffee was bad for you; now it's good for you. One glass of red wine was good for you; now it turns out you might want to skip alcohol entirely if longevity is the goal. I could go on: carbs, fat, salt, even cardio. So when we sat down to write the guiding principles for Longevity Edition, I dug into what the most credible research actually says about living longer.

Across the largest, longest-running studies, eight keys to a longer life keep turning up, and none of them requires a trip to a fancy clinic or a supplement stack.

First, How Much of Longevity Is Genetic?

For years, scientists put the genetic share of lifespan at a quarter or less. In January 2026, a study in *Science* revised that upward. Once deaths from accidents and infections are set aside, **about half of the variation in how long people live traces to genetics**.

Half is a lot. It also leaves half to everything else: where you live, what you do each day, who you spend your time with. That half carries real weight. Among more than 110,000 people studied in the U.S., women who kept four or five healthy habits, such as not smoking, eating well, exercising regularly, and maintaining a healthy weight, **lived nearly 11 more years free of cancer, heart disease,** and diabetes after 50 than women who kept none. For men, the gap was nearly eight years. So genes matter, and so does what you do with them.

The 8 Keys to Longevity

These are the eight keys we're building Longevity Edition around. None of them requires a prescription, a device, or a lot of money. They do require effort and care. And every one is something you can start at any time, practice, and begin again when your habits slip.

1. Fitness: How Much Exercise Do You Need to Live Longer?

Fitness has some of the strongest numbers on this list. Across 199 groups of people and 20.9 million observations, **high aerobic fitness was linked to 53% lower mortality than low fitness**. There appears to be no ceiling, either. Among 122,007 adults tested on a treadmill, **the fittest fared best of all**.

Strength counts on its own. Over as long as 30 years, **90 minutes to two hours of resistance training a week was linked to 13% lower mortality**, and **earlier research found benefits starting at 30 to 60 minutes**.

Try this: A simple weekly routine covers all of it: 45 minutes of zone 2 cardio three days, 45 to 60 minutes of strength training two days, and one VOâ?? max session of four hard intervals lasting two to four minutes each.

2. Nutrition: What is The Best Diet For Longevity?

Food is medicine that has a direct link to your biological age. And the latest research shows there isn't one best diet, which is good news if you're tired of food rules. Across 30 years and 105,015 adults, **people who ate closest to any of eight healthy patterns had 45% to 86% greater odds of reaching 70 in good health**. The patterns share a core: more vegetables, fruits, whole grains, nuts, legumes, and unsaturated fats, and fewer sugary drinks and processed meats.

Fiber deserves its own mention. Across 185 studies, **the people who ate the most had 15% to 30% lower mortality**. Part of the reason may live in your gut: fiber

feeds the microbes there, and in research on more than 9,000 people, **the makeup of the gut microbiome tracked with healthy aging**.

Try this: Add one serving of whole grains, nuts, or fruit today. In a UK modeling study, **those three foods drove the biggest gains in life expectancy**.

3. Sleep: How Does Sleep Affect How Long You Live?

A steady bedtime may matter more than a long night. Among 60,977 adults wearing trackers, **the most regular sleepers had 30% lower mortality than the least regular**, and regularity predicted mortality better than hours slept. Duration still counts: in 172,321 U.S. adults, meeting five markers of good sleep was **linked to 4.7 more years of life expectancy for men and 2.4 for women**.

Try this: Go to bed and get up within the same one-hour window every day, weekends included, and get outside in daylight within an hour of waking.

4. Mindset: How Does Your Outlook Shape How You Age?

We're not talking about toxic positivity, the pressure to smile through hard things. Researchers define optimism as the general expectation that good things will happen, **or the belief that the future will be favorable because you have a hand in shaping it**. You can hold that belief while still grieving or worrying or honoring the suffering in the world. Across two large studies, the most optimistic people lived **5%** to **15%** longer than the least.

Three related habits of mind show the same pattern. Among 49,275 older women, **the most grateful had 9% lower mortality**. Across 94 studies, **people who treat themselves with compassion had better physical health and healthier habits**. And what you believe about aging has a lot to do with how well you age: **people with positive views of growing older lived 7.5 years longer than those with negative views**. Optimism, gratitude, and self-compassion can all be

built with practice.

Try this: Before bed, write down one thing that went well today and one thing you're looking forward to. If you can, find 12 minutes a day for mindfulness meditation. That's the dose neuroscientist Amishi Jha, PhD, found keeps attention steady under stress, and a steadier mind gives gratitude, compassion, and optimism more room to grow.

5. Connection: How Do Relationships Affect Lifespan?

Your friendships are doing more for your health than you may give them credit for. Across 148 studies and 308,849 people, **stronger social relationships meant a 50% greater likelihood of survival**, an effect on par with well-known medical risk factors. On the other side, **social isolation is linked to 32% higher mortality and loneliness to 14% higher**.

Try this: Join one thing that meets every week: a walking group, a class, a choir, or a volunteer shift. If that feels like too big a step, start with one standing date with a friend.

6. Nervous System: How Does Chronic Stress Affect Longevity?

Stress is part of a full life. What wears the body down is staying in it. Among 378,785 adults, those carrying the heaviest physical stress load had **roughly double the mortality risk of those carrying the lightest**.

Here's the encouraging part: that stress load responds to practice. Across 45 randomized trials, **meditation lowered cortisol, blood pressure, heart rate, and inflammation**, the same markers scientists use to measure how stress affects the body. And in one trial of heart patients, adding stress management training to standard cardiac rehab **cut the rate of serious health events nearly in half**. Early studies hint that **meditators have longer telomeres**, a marker of cellular aging.

In one randomized trial, six weeks of loving-kindness meditation was linked to **less telomere shortening than no training**, though a longer trial of meditation found no such effect.

Try this: Choose one practice that settles you, and do it daily: meditation, slow breathing, a walk outside, dancing, or unhurried time with someone you love.

7. Purpose: Why Is A Sense of Purpose Linked to A Longer Life?

Purpose doesn't have to be grand. It can be your passion for gardening or birding, or your dedication to your kids or a cause. Across 488,765 people in the United States, Europe, and Asia, followed for as long as 32 years, **a stronger sense of purpose was linked to about a quarter lower risk of dying during the study**.

Why would purpose matter to your health? Part of the answer is behavior. **Being more active, feeling less stressed, and staying socially engaged** explains about half of purpose's link to survival. And purpose can be built. Across 33 randomized trials, **programs based on storytelling and mindfulness raised people's sense of meaning**. Volunteering helps too: **adults over 50 who gave about two hours a week later reported a stronger sense of purpose**.

Try this: Spend a few minutes writing about a time you felt most useful or most alive, and what it tells you about what matters to you. Then put it to work.

8. Environment: How Does Our Exposome Affect Longevity?

Scientists have a word for everything that surrounds you: the exposome. It covers the air you breathe, the light you get, the chemicals you meet, and the place you live. A r **eport from the Buck Institute for Research on Aging** calls it the missing layer of precision health. Unlike your genes, it can change.

These exposures look unrelated, **but they may harm the body in overlapping ways**. A 2021 review in *Cell* proposed eight shared routes of damage, including inflammation, mitochondrial dysfunction, and disruption of hormones and the gut microbiome. That overlap helps explain why a mix of modest exposures can add up. It's also a reason not to chase every toxin: a few well-chosen changes cut several exposures at once.

Light may be the piece you have the most say over. Among 88,905 adults wearing light sensors, **the brightest days were linked to 17% to 34% lower mortality, and the brightest nights to 21% to 34% higher**. **Cleaner air** and **more green space near home** are each linked to longer life. The science on microplastics is young, but **one early study tied plastic particles in arterial plaque to higher risk of heart attack, stroke, or death**.

Try this: Start with the **air in your home**. A HEPA purifier in the room where you sleep is the one swap tested in trials with a health marker. Then keep kitchen plastic away from heat: reheat food in glass or ceramic. When you're ready for more, filter your drinking water and test your home for radon.

You don't need all eight at once. Pick the habits that feel most within reach and start there. If your routines start to stress you out, look for where you can invite some ease in. No one lives a perfect version of this list. I certainly don't. What I do practice are two habits from it: compassion for myself when I fall short, and the optimism to believe I can still shape what comes next.

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