

Aging Well: Science Looks for the Secrets

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As scientists try to identify the secrets of aging well, and crack the genetic code of those who live the longest, they turn to the laboratory, and to the real world, to identify the role of DNA and lifestyle in aging well. Though average human life expectancy hovers around 78, the number of older adults, and those thriving at 85 and beyond, is multiplying. Today, the over-85 group is the fastest-growing population and there are more than 55,000 American centenarians.

Among the elite of the aged - those who live a century or more free of disease and cognitive decline - researchers are seeking the genetic secrets of a longer, healthier life. In their quest, teams around the world are scrutinizing the oldest of the old, Ashkenazi Jews in New York, rural centenarians in the state of Georgia, century-old siblings in Holland and vigorous retirees in Okinawa, as living test tubes in which nature has concentrated a vital essence of longevity.

Instead of focusing on what goes wrong as we age, researchers want to understand why some people live so long without getting very sick. If they succeed, scientists one day may be able to do for humankind what they can already do for mice - dramatically increase the normal life span. "Our hypothesis is that in order to live to 100 or more, you need sets of genes that protect you, by delaying aging and preventing age-related diseases," says Dr. Barzilai, head of the Longevity Genes Project at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York.

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According to a study at Harvard University, an active lifestyle is the main predictor of longevity. Researchers followed a group for about 30 years, beginning when they were in their early 70s. They found that those who lived the longest had some things in common: They avoided smoking, didn't become obese or diabetic, controlled their blood pressure, and remained physically active, exercising two to four times per week. Those who followed this lifestyle had greater than a 54 percent chance of living into their 90s. Dr. Laurel Yates, the lead researcher of the study says, "the surprise, I think, is the importance of regular exercise, and how strongly that is associated with long life and good health."

The study showed folks aren't just hanging on. Many have a good quality of life. "There's so much ageism in this society that constantly reminds older people, 'You can't do this; you can't do that,'" says geriatrician William Hall at the University of Rochester. But, Hall says, there are a lot of ways for older Americans to stay active. He says that many older adults, particularly women, do well with group classes. Men tend to be motivated by a little friendly competition. Either way, it takes effort. "I'm not by any means a Pollyanna about this," Hall says. "Aging isn't for sissies." It comes with losses, including, friends, spouses, sometimes children. But for those trying to beat the odds, Hall says, they have to keep active and try to create new friendships. This may or may not be the secret, but it sounds like good practical advice for those looking to stay healthy longer.