

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Tips To Increase Longevity”

According to the CDC, Americans have a shorter life expectancy than almost all other high-income countries. In 2016, the United States ranked 43rd among all nations’ life expectancies, with an average lifespan of 78.7 years. In 2019, the agency calculated that the average American has a life expectancy of 78.8 years. That falls short of comparable countries like Australia or France, whose residents can expect to live 82.6 years, and for the United Kingdom and Germany, about 81 years. But the future of the world’s health is not preordained. Experts say that the top three health drivers behind the future trajectory for early death will be metabolic factors—high blood pressure, high body mass index, and high blood sugar. Other top drivers of premature mortality will be tobacco and alcohol use, and air pollution. Admittedly, COVID-19 and its death toll dominated 2020 and may extend well into the future. Here are some tips to adopt for a longer life, based on the latest studies and expert opinions. Recommendations are to avoid meat and consume a diet composed of 90%-100% plants. However, I would personally have a difficult time following this course strenuously. Journalist Dan Buettner, who wrote the book, *The Blue Zones Solution*, found vegetarians in Loma Linda (a Blue Zone in California) often outlive their meat-eating peers by up to 8 years. Consider making olive oil a staple. Buettner found that taking in about 6 tablespoons of olive oil daily appears to cut the risk of premature mortality by 50%, which I personally have difficulty believing. To extend life, he recommends eating small amounts of fish and opting instead for a daily dose of beans as the key protein source. Buettner says beans are a cornerstone of every longevity diet in the world. Most centenarians eat roughly four times more beans than the average American, Buettner notes, which makes sense, as beans pack more nutrients per gram than any other food on the planet. He suggests limiting sugar as much as possible. A couple of handfuls of nuts daily can fill the void. Buettner’s research suggests that nut-eaters outlive those who abstain by 2 to 3 years. Researchers anticipate a coming shift in premature death from communicable to non-communicable diseases (NCDs), including diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), chronic kidney disease, and lung cancer and problems related to obesity. However, people can still learn to make changes to avoid these outcomes. While research suggests obesity and physical inactivity increase the risks of disease and shorten lifespan, not all researchers agree on what kind of exercise—or how much of it—is appropriate.

In the America that I love, we cannot change the past, but we can improve future longevity.

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