

The secrets of longevity

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Credit: Peter Griffin/public domain

After numerous studies, it appears that scientists are beginning to unravel some of the secrets of aging. Genes certainly play a role in longevity, but it's been determined that only 35 percent of those living well into their 90's and 100's possess the longevity gene. What of the other 65 percent? Is it luck, healthy lifestyle choices, attitude?

Len Kravitz, associate professor of Exercise Science and researcher at the University of New Mexico, recently delivered a talk on aging during

a Lobo Living Room event at Hodgkin Hall and said that it is likely a combination of the three.

Healthspan vs. lifespan

"It's great that people are living longer," Kravitz said, "but the goal should be to cultivate a mindset of healthspan rather than lifespan. Adults that take care of themselves physically and mentally have a better quality of life in later years than those who do not."

There are currently more Americans age 65 and older than at any other time in U.S. history. According to the latest Census Bureau report, there were 40.3 million people age 65 and older on April 1, 2010, up 5.3 percent from 35 million in 2000. In 1900, there were just 3.1 million. And the numbers are expected to increase over the next decade as baby boomers began turning 65 in 2011.

According to Kravitz, the biggest fears of aging are a loss of independence from mobility issues caused by health-related problems, loss of memory, going to a nursing home and having to give up a driver's license. Consequently, most people think of "old" not so much as a specific age but rather reaching the point where they lose the ability to do the things they love.

In order maintain or create a [healthy lifestyle](#) into the golden years, Kravitz suggests shedding pounds, if necessary. Being overweight is a major contributor to declining health and well-being as we age. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) close to 80 million adults in the U.S. are obese. Obesity-related conditions include heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and certain types of cancer.

Kick stress to the curb

"Chronic stress is also a big contributor to aging," Kravitz said, "and the best way to fight it is with exercise. Incorporate some resistance training, [aerobic exercise](#) and mind/body practices to deal with stress at work or wherever the problem exists. When you take this multi-faceted approach you can mediate the stress and have less cognitive decline as well."

Let's get physical

Exercise is enormously important to successful aging. "The one intervention proposed to have the highest preventative and therapeutic impact on age-related changes is physical activity," Kravitz said. "A lack of exercise during adult life is associated with weakness, fatigue, decrease in one's physical and mental health and well-being, the onset of disease, loss of self-esteem and self-efficacy and an increase in depression and anxiety."

For overall health benefits, and reduction of numerous health risks, Kravitz recommends some form of aerobic activity, at least 30 minutes daily. "The use of the large muscles in the body from activities such as walking, swimming, aqua exercise and cycling are all good choices. Swimming, aqua exercise and stationary cycling are excellent due to lower stress placed on the joints. Walking, at a higher pace than normal is one of the most viable options for ambulatory elders. It can be done easily in most environments and requires no additional equipment", he said.

Keep the ole noodle sharp

Your brain also needs a work out to stay young. Reading, playing games, memorizing stuff and challenging yourself with new hobbies can all play

a part in keeping your brain buff. And since we lose about 1 percent every year to utilize oxygen, remember to take deep breaths throughout the day, especially when not exercising. Unlike muscles, your brain does not store energy and therefore needs a steady stream of oxygen to stay sharp and focused.

Mix and mingle

Get out there and socialize with friends and family. Many studies support the positive effects of social interaction such as maintaining cognitive function and protection against diseases like dementia and Alzheimer's. Typically, people who have a wider circle of friends tend to age better all around.

Laugh more

"You don't stop having fun because you get old; you get old because you stop having fun," so the saying goes.

Provided by University of New Mexico

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