

Lifestyle and luck both factors in a long, healthy life

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More people may be [living to 100 and beyond](#) than ever before, but the real challenge is how to become one of them yourself, and how to care for an aging population.

Dr. Noel H. Ballentine, director of geriatric health in the Division of General Internal Medicine at Penn State Health Milton S. Hershey

Medical Center, said although good genes help determine how long you live, other factors are less dependent on luck.

Good nutrition and plenty of exercise are the top two ways to live a long and [healthy life](#), and neither should come as a surprise.

"Eating high-quality foods with lots of fruits and vegetables and controlling your weight are the things I spend most of my time talking about," he said. "And there is lots of data showing that strength training helps even very old people do better."

Ballentine suggests getting both nutrition and exercise habits under control while young, since it's more difficult to implement weight-loss plans or exercise routines once you're already in your 70s and beyond.

The third factor is avoiding [accidental injuries](#). "If you're in your 60s or 70s and don't have a lot of health issues, you have a better chance of losing your independence from an accidental injury than due to an illness," Ballentine said.

That means not standing on a chair to change a light fixture, climbing a 10-foot ladder to clean gutters or going out of the house when the ground is icy.

"If you're 40 years old and you fall, you probably won't break your hip, but if you're 70, there's a good chance of very severe injury," he said.

Staying socially engaged is also increasingly noted as an important way to stay both mentally and physically healthy.

"Don't become isolated," Ballentine said. "If you live alone and don't have much social contact, you're more likely to degrade mentally and be less active and engaged." Those who are more socially active are also

more likely to be more physically active and eat healthier, he said.

If depression does happen, recognizing the symptoms and getting treatment can ward off further problems.

An [aging population](#) living longer could lay a heavy economic weight on society if not handled well, Ballentine said.

Although tremendous progress has been made in the treatment of medical conditions such as [coronary artery disease](#), stroke, [high blood pressure](#) and infectious diseases that used to take lives earlier, other conditions have stolen the limelight of concern.

"Obesity, dementia and addictions are the biggest issues now," Ballentine said.

Media focus on obesity is putting pressure on the food industry to make changes and help consumers become more aware of what they are eating, while the federal government has dedicated funds to dementia research. Addiction to narcotics and opiates has recently begun to be classified as a disease rather than a bad habit or lifestyle.

Then there is the issue of health literacy – making sure patients understand what is going on medically with their minds and bodies. "Do you know what your pills are for and how to take them? Do you know how to figure out if a suggested treatment is right for you?" Ballentine said.

He adds the medical community needs more training on managing an aging population: "There aren't enough geriatricians to take care of them, so doctors of all specialties are going to have to care for them and recognize their special needs."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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