

New study shows how to live a long and active life

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Credit: Uppsala University

Are you a man and do you expect to manage on your own for a while longer? Research at Uppsala University now shows that efforts to achieve a healthy diet, normal waist size and non-smoking habit can yield benefits long after the age of 90.

When people reach a very advanced age, they tend to value an

independent existence and retention of bodily functions more than absence of disease. Now, researchers at Uppsala University are showing that men aged 70 and over should give up smoking and choose healthy eating habits if they want to improve their chances of managing on their own as they approach the age of 90.

"We also see that mild obesity after 70 is in fact healthy, as long as it doesn't consist simply of abdominal fat – an observation that tends to please many men in upper middle age. Overall, our findings may not be revolutionary, but they are important pieces of the jigsaw puzzle for active ageing, which should be of interest to individuals, politicians and health professionals alike," says Kristin Franzon, specialist doctor and Ph.D. student at the Department of Public Health and Caring Sciences.

The results are based on interviews with participants in the Uppsala Longitudinal Study of Adult Men (ULSAM), an Uppsala County study that began in 1970. It then included 2,322 men born in the early 1920s. In the latest follow-up, 276 of the 369 men originally taking part were still leading an independent existence despite their average age of 87 years.

"Our definition of independence includes living in one's own home and being able to go for walks unaided. And it's interesting to see that more than a tenth of the people in the first study are functionally unimpaired and manage on their own at such an advanced age. It's a higher proportion than you might think," says Kristin Franzon.

Not smoking is, unsurprisingly, among the most important factors for continued independence. When the ULSAM study began, 51 per cent of the participants smoked – a figure that has shrunk to 6 per cent over the years. In total, the men who have never smoked enjoy twice the chance of remaining independent late in life. Yet the group who continue to use tobacco seem reluctant to give up their harmful habits.

"Even at the age of 70, many make the mistake of believing that a changed lifestyle is no longer important. Several cling to smoking as 'the only fun left' in their lives. But on this issue our study is only one of many that clearly show how vital it is to give up smoking, and above all that it's never too late to drop the habit."

Another distinguishing feature of the men who testify to their continued high quality of life is a fondness for the Mediterranean diet, which is recognised as healthy. In a food diary kept by the participants at the age of 70, many report a high intake of fish, fruit, vegetables, nuts and cereals but a correspondingly lower one of meat and dairy products.

"True, our interpretation of the term 'Mediterranean diet', including items like potatoes, was relatively generous. So our Nordic diet is probably a perfectly good alternative. Yet our study shows that prospects of an independent old age are almost three times better for men with [healthy eating habits](#)."

What about exercise? Well, the results confirm that physically active leisure can help to prolong life. But if the aim is to retain bodily functions, higher priorities seem to be a normal waist size up to retirement age and brisk walks at the age of 87. However, a previously published study shows that physically arduous work can adversely affect independence, as well as survival, in later life.

"We still have lots to learn from the ULSAM men. We've recently followed them up at the age of 92, focusing on retention of muscle mass and the effects of certain specific diseases on ageing with unimpaired functions. Of the 148 who chose to take part, 95 lived independently, and regardless of how representative of Swedish men this group is, it bodes well that so many are alive and independent so late in life," says Kristin Franzon.

Provided by Uppsala University

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