

How to protect your DNA for big health benefits

July 16 2019, by Len Canter, Healthday Reporter



(HealthDay)—You might think that stress affects you only emotionally

or that a lack of sleep simply leaves you feeling cranky. But these are among the many lifestyle factors that can lead to health problems because of changes that they cause within your body's cells.

Packed inside every cell is your DNA and its strands of chromosomes. Chromosomes are protected, top and bottom, by sections called telomeres. The health of these "end caps" is crucial to your health and longevity. If they become damaged, meaning shortened, because of poor lifestyle choices such as a bad diet or lack of sleep, your health can suffer.

Shortened telomeres may, for instance, be the link between not getting enough quality sleep and developing chronic health conditions. Stress is another risk factor for telomere damage. Small studies have found that people who experience sustained stress have shorter telomeres and a greater risk of disease. This seems to be particularly true for those with an anxiety disorder.

Obesity may also play a role in telomere damage.

But there's good news. A research review published in *The Journals of Gerontology* reports that telomeres can react positively to healthy lifestyle choices, so you can influence their health. Aim for a [healthy diet](#) and a healthy weight, get lots of exercise and proper rest, and find ways to manage stress.

While research has yet to pinpoint the specific type of exercise that can boost telomere health, more has been learned about the effects of certain dietary choices. If you've been considering the Mediterranean diet for its bounty of health benefits, know that it has been positively associated with preventing age-associated telomere shortening and reduced mortality risk in older people. So, pass the [olive oil](#) and grilled salmon.

More information: The University of Utah has more on [telomeres](#) and their role in your health.

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Citation: How to protect your DNA for big health benefits (2019, July 16) retrieved 23 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-07-dna-big-health-benefits.html>

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