

Lessons From Centenarians

You, Too, Could Live to 100 -- Or at Least 80

He's 103 years old, but just try to catch Henry Maasen in his room. "I can't just stay here waiting for people to visit me," he tells WebMD. "Been out playing pool."

Maasen -- who has outlived his wife, three siblings, countless friends, and one daughter -- is one of a small minority of men who have lived to the ripe age of 100 or beyond. "Only 15% of centenarians are men," says Margery Hutter Silver, EdD, co-author of *Living to 100: Lessons in Living to Your Maximum Potential at Any Age*.

Since 1995, she and Thomas J. Perls, MD, MPH, have interviewed more than 200 men and women who, like Maasen, have made it past 100. They also have tracked down many in their 90s who are heading in that direction. The results of their two studies -- the New England Centenarian Study and the Centenarian Sibling Pair Study -- form the basis of their best-selling book. The researchers are based at Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital and Harvard Medical School.

In their book, they shed light on the secrets to longevity. Could we all live to 100, like Britain's Queen Mum, who celebrates her centennial birthday on Friday?

Visiting with Maasen, a retired Iowa wheat farmer, it certainly seems possible. His health and eyesight are still pretty good, although his hearing is a small problem. He lives in a retirement home, "*not* a nursing home," he quickly asserts. He still drives his own car -- as he has since 1920 -- but now to visit younger, sicker friends in nearby nursing homes. He reads to them. He plays pool every chance he gets. And he sometimes drives to his farm, to drink coffee and visit with the folks caring for it. He doesn't stay long, he says. "I don't want to be a burden."

The keys to longevity? "Clean living helps," Maasen tells WebMD. "And stay active. Keep your mind active." As for exercise: "I used to walk miles; now I walk blocks." His breakfast, all these years? "One slice of toast, one glass of juice, 2 percent milk, and one egg a week ... and I like a little honey on my toast." For dinner: "I never really liked the taste of meat. Oh, I eat a little ... but I just have always preferred vegetables." During his 60-year marriage, he and his wife traveled the globe. "Don't get into fighting," he says. "It's hard on the nerves."

So if you keep the peace and live right, could you reach 100, too? That depends, the researchers say.

First, there is the issue of genetics. If you don't have longevity in your family, chances are you won't get there, says Perls. "On the other hand, I think it's very

possible to be centenarian-like," he tells WebMD. Centenarians, he says, tend not to get sick until right before the end of their lives. "The vast majority of us can still do that, but probably will get to our mid to late 80s. Basically, that means 20 to 25 years beyond the age of 60. That's a lot of years.

"Most of us are born with remarkable genes," says Perls. "We don't have the amazing genes of centenarians, but I think the vast majority of us have genes that will allow us to compress the time we're sick until the very end of our lives."

As for these people who do live a full century, there are many more than you might think, says Silver -- about 50,000 in the U.S. and 100,000 worldwide. And their life stories might surprise you.

The researchers, after extensive interviewing and neuropsychological testing of the centenarians -- plus "a lot of conversations around the kitchen table, while the kids and grandkids, the whole family, ran in and out," Silver says -- found that:

- Centenarians come from all income groups, ranging from extreme poverty to vast wealth. They were from all ethnic and racial backgrounds; about half were foreign-born. Their education ranged from second grade to doctoral level. Even their physical health varied considerably.
- Many -- 15% -- were healthy and independent, leading active lives in their communities. About 35% were living with relatives. The rest lived in nursing homes. About 95% were physically healthy and mentally independent into their 90s, with low rates of mental illness and depression.
- Surprisingly, Silver tells WebMD, a large number still had excellent thinking ability. While three-quarters suffered from some form of dementia, the remaining 25% were free of any significant mental disorders. Some were still playing golf, others were active professionally, and a few were working full-time.

In fact, an estimated 7,500 centenarians across the country are living at home, "cooking their own meals, balancing their own checkbooks, reading their favorite novels, getting together with their families and friends, some even working," Perls and Silver say in their book.

In their book, Perls and Silver say that older people will soon become the norm, not the exception. "More than half of today's 74 million baby boomers will live past age 85, but unless they take the proper steps, many of them will bear a heavy burden of chronic disease along the way," they write.

So what are centenarians' secrets to a *healthy* old age?

One of them, Silver says, is adaptability. Centenarians are the Michael Jordans of stress management -- "the natural athletes of stress," she tells WebMD.

"It's not that they avoided stress," she says. "This was an immigrant generation. They didn't have easy lives. They left family in the old country and struggled when they came here. Some were Holocaust survivors, and widows who raised children alone and worked by scrubbing floors. But they were people who seemed able to cope with their problems and tragedies and moved on with a

fairly positive attitude. They didn't get overwhelmed by things. They seemed to be born with that temperament."

In fact, that quality tops the list of centenarians' lessons for aging that Perls and Silver have created:

- **Attitude.** Centenarians tend to be an optimistic group. They rarely consider their age a limitation. They have dealt well with the stresses in their lives. And they take advantage of new opportunities.
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- **Genetics.** Most people can live to age 85 if they take good care of themselves. But if most members of your family are living into their 60s and 70s, an alarm bell should go off. Disease prevention and screening, along with good health practices, can help you make up for at least some of the genetic differences between you and centenarians.
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- **Exercise.** After age 30, we lose about 1/3 pound of muscle every year -- muscle that's replaced by fat. Through exercise, especially resistance training such as weight-lifting, you can regain muscle mass while reducing your risk of heart disease, improving your mental ability, and markedly enhancing your sense of well-being.
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- **Investigate new challenges.** Keep your mind active with new activities to exercise different parts of your brain. Learn a new language, learn to play an instrument, write your autobiography, volunteer. Such activities develop new connections between different parts of the brain, strengthening it and preventing any deficits from showing up in everyday functioning.
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- **Nutrition.** Keeping calorie intake under control is critical to slowing the aging process. For most people, simply cutting back on unnecessary calories a little every day -- especially sweets and other carbohydrates -- can make a big difference in weight loss. Perls also recommends taking daily supplements of vitamin E (400-800 units) and selenium (100-200 milligrams), both of which have been shown to be potent antioxidant substances that combat cell damage from so-called free radicals, thus helping to prevent cancer, stroke, and heart disease.
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- **Get rid of stress -- and don't smoke.** Both cut years from your life and are responsible for a lot of illness.

We all can learn to manage stress better, adds Silver. Meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, creative visualization, and exercise are all great stress reducers.

For her, the answer is listening to audiobooks during the drive home. "It's always fiction, something that takes me to another world. Then I'm immediately out of the daily problems, the stresses, and off somewhere else. It clears my head of all my worries for a time," she tells WebMD. "What's really important is taking time every day to do something you really, really enjoy, something that empties your mind of all the stuff that's producing stress in your life."

Also, building a support network is important. Many centenarians lead "intergenerational lives," she says. Many never married. "When they don't have family around, they surround themselves with lots of other friends of all ages. They have personalities that draw people in. They're gregarious."

Silver is heartened by the fact that so many centenarians had excellent thinking ability. "It very much counters all the myths and common thinking, that by the time you get to be 100, you'll be demented."

"It's true that exercising your brain is just as or more important than exercising your body," she says. "Whether you retain your thinking abilities predicts whether you're going to be able to remain independent -- much more than your physical condition. People can often compensate for physical disabilities with various devices and assistance, but if you don't have mental acuity, it's much more difficult."

Also, there's such a thing as "centenarian humor," says Silver, which boosts immunity plus keeps things in perspective. "As one 105-year-old said, 'The best thing about living to 105 is, there's no peer pressure. You don't have any peers left.'"

By Jeanie Lerche Davis

Courtesy: WebMD Health News