

*If you need to make changes in your life, do it now.  
Stop wasting time- time is our most precious commodity.  
Do you want to be chopping wood when you are 90?  
Well, then start chopping today!*

# Natural Longevity:

## ***How to Enhance Your Vitality at Any Age***

**By Howard Woodwind Morningstar, M.D.**

We humans have always pondered the riddle of immortality. Perhaps all of science, religion and art are simply arrows aimed at this elusive target. Humanity's search for the "Fountain of Youth" is both legendary and tangible, inspiring both Ponce de Leon's journeys and our modern medical research into pharmacology, genetic engineering and cloning.

Yet no matter what secrets of longevity we may discover, the same universal laws of ebb and flow, growth and decay, of birth and death continue to govern us as always. Two thousand years ago Talmudic scholars described the human life span as lasting "seventy to eighty years", same as it is today. It's clear that despite all of our accumulated biological knowledge and modern technology, the timeless principles of longevity that have been handed down to us through the ages apply as much in the twenty first century as they did in ancient times.

A sequoia seedling has the genetic potential to grow into a magnificent tree that may stand tall for thousands of years, if only it receives all it needs to flourish. But if some vital nutrient is lacking or a toxic substance is present, its growth and vitality will be stunted and its life span cut short.

A tree can't choose where to sprout, or decide how to respond to a flood or fire. Like each of us, its fate is determined by external events interacting with its unique genetic potential. But unlike trees, we can influence how we age by actively embracing what we need to thrive, while avoiding what's harmful to us.

Time, our genetic heritage and the inevitability of aging are beyond our control. But we can decide what we eat and drink, how we schedule work, rest and play, and what we do to honor or abuse our bodies.

### **Diet: You are what you eat**

It's crucial to take excellent care of one's body, since it's the irreplaceable vehicle that carries each of us through this life. Since your body must continuously create itself out of whatever you choose to eat, choose well if you want to live well!

It's best to eat a variety of fresh organic foods that are locally grown and in season. Foods that

are organically grown on vital soil contain an abundance of dozens of trace minerals essential for optimal enzyme function. Organic foods may cost more in the short run, but they are free of pesticides, herbicides, industrial fertilizers, hormones and antibiotics that can inhibit vitality by stressing the liver, hormonal and immune systems. Organic farming also enhances the earth's fertility, helping us leave a bountiful legacy for future generations.

Whole grains are rich in fiber, vitamins, minerals and complex carbohydrates. These are at the core of a wholesome diet, and should be a part of every meal. Also, eat eight or more servings a day of fruits and vegetables, including orange colored vegetables and dark leafy greens. For protein, emphasize nuts, seeds, beans, avocados and if desired, live-culture yogurt and cold-water fishes.

Limit your intake of highly processed foods such as refined ("white" or "enriched") flours and sugars, fried and fatty foods, alcohol and caffeine. It's best to avoid chemically altered foods such as hydrogenated oils, nitrite-preserved meats, artificial preservatives, flavors, colors and other chemical additives.

We maintain a healthy internal environment by regularly eliminating accumulated toxins through our feces, urine, sweat, breath and even tears. If our elimination processes falter we face increased risks of illness, in particular digestive cancers, circulatory problems, headaches, fatigue and mental disorders. It's a good idea to drink at least eight glasses of pure water or other clear liquids a day, and eat plenty of fiber-rich foods to ensure good elimination and detoxification.

### **Medicinal Foods and Supplements:**

These days we are frequently assaulted by slick advertising touting the benefits of the latest "anti-aging" nutraceutical or newest "miracle" longevity herb "just discovered" in some remote jungle. But the most effective natural medicines for enhancing vitality and longevity are often delicious and familiar foods and kitchen herbs, not exotic imports or expensive rarities.

Research shows that people who regularly eat yogurt, olive oil, cabbage and other brassica family vegetables can expect an increased life span. Garlic and many varieties of mushrooms are well known as immune-stimulating longevity tonics. Whole oats are especially useful for enhancing vitality, libido & stamina at any age, as in the familiar expression: "He's feeling his oats". And an apple a day really does keep the doctor away, by enhancing immune and cardiovascular function and improving glucose metabolism.

The isoflavones in soybeans help balance the body's hormonal systems, and can reduce a woman's risk of developing breast cancer. Tomatoes are a rich source of lycopenes, particularly beneficial for the prostate and digestive tract. The beta-carotenes that give carrots their orange color are strong antioxidants that help the body repair damaged cells, promoting overall vitality while inhibiting the formation of many cancers. For those who enjoy wine in moderation, research suggests that unique antioxidants found in red wine can increase one's life expectancy.

Flaxseeds are excellent sources of essential fatty acids needed to maintain healthy and flexible cell membranes, nerves and blood vessels, all of which tend to become stiff and brittle in the elderly. The inner rinds of citrus fruits are rich in cancer-fighting bioflavonoids, while blueberries contain antioxidants that help maintain good vision and immune competence. We are so blessed by the bounty of these and many more of Mother Nature's perfect medicinal foods!

### **Tonic Herbal Teas:**

In every culture worldwide, humans have been using beneficial herbs since before the dawn of recorded history. As an herbalist, I often recommend herbal tonic teas for enhancing, restoring and preserving vitality. While time honored formulas abound, your ideal tonic formula will depend on your unique and changing needs, so experiment with safe and simple tonic herbs to find out what's best for you. Or talk to a knowledgeable health care provider if you're uncertain how to choose and make herbal teas. Learn to grow and harvest your favorite herbs, as preparing your own medicine can add extraordinary and unexpected dimensions to your personal healing.

Stinging nettle (*Urtica dioeca*) is an unmatched tonic that will benefit almost anyone alive. Its roots reach far into the subsoil to concentrate an amazing variety of trace minerals that enhance enzyme function in every organ system. Red clover (*Trifolium praetense*) is rich in estrogen-like compounds that help balance glandular function, as well as immune enhancing substances that protect against cancer. These tonic herbs combine well with oatstraw (*Avena sativa*), especially nourishing to the nervous system and raspberry leaf (*Rubus ideaus*), excellent for restoring hormonal balance and vigor.

Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*), sometimes regarded as a troublesome lawn weed, is a valuable circulatory, kidney, digestive & liver tonic. It's remarkable how, like it or not, nature so abundantly provides us with this humble yet potent remedy.

Hawthorne berries (*Crataegus* spp.) are rich in antioxidants and bio-flavonoids that especially benefit circulation and cardiovascular function. Ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba*) promotes circulation and oxygenation throughout the whole body, from the brain to the sex organs. It's also rich in antioxidants that protect against heart disease and strokes. Ginger (*Zingiber officinale*), horseradish (*Amoracia rusticana*) and cayenne (*Capsicum* spp.) are familiar digestive tonics that also improve circulation and overall vitality.

Adaptogenic herbs such as astragalus (*Astragalus membranaceus*) and eleutherococcus (*Eleutherococcus senticosus*, also called Siberian ginseng) enhance well being by increasing the body's resilience to the harmful effects of chronic stress. Finally, ginseng (*Panax* spp.) described in ancient Chinese medical texts as the "king of all tonics" is unrivaled in its ability to restore and maintain one's vitality, libido & vigor.

I'm often asked which nutritional supplements are best for promoting vitality and longevity. I believe that since we have co-evolved with so many medicines that nature provides for us in

their perfect forms, it's generally best for healthy people to focus on whole nutritious foods and herbs, rather than seeking out extracts of "active ingredients" in pill or capsule form.

I do suspect however that a modest amount of extra antioxidants, such as vitamin C and E and selenium will benefit most adults, while calcium supplementation is helpful for those at risk for osteoporosis, including most women. If your diet is erratic, or lacks adequate fresh fruits and vegetables, it's certainly sensible to take a daily multiple vitamin and mineral supplement.

### **Exercise: Use it or lose it**

Soon after arriving in southern Oregon twenty one years ago I met an elderly neighbor who was always building things, chopping firewood and moving around with a spring in his step and a twinkle in his eye. I was just beginning to study herbal healing, and in my youthful amazement at his white-haired vigor I asked him if he would share with me the secret of his vitality. He offered to show me the place where went to get his "herbs of longevity", and with a quick command to "follow me!" he took off up a steep trail behind his cabin.

I struggled to keep up as we swiftly climbed up through the woods for perhaps half an hour. We finally emerged at a hilltop clearing a thousand feet above the valley, me huffing and puffing, he sitting on a rock and looking amused.

After I caught my breath I demanded: "So where are they?"

He replied: "Where are what?"

"The herbs that you were going to show me!"

Well, he just laughed, and that was the end of the conversation. But then I realized that his "secret" for keeping fit was staying physically active, not some mysterious herb he had discovered.

The benefits of regular aerobic exercise go far beyond conditioning the cardiovascular system to prevent heart attacks and strokes. Exercise also generates endorphins, mood enhancing substances that create an invigorating 'natural high' and feeling of well being. It also increases oxygen flow to the whole body, enhancing mental and sexual function. Regular exercise helps prevent osteoporosis by building strong bones, reduces one's risk of cancer by enhancing immune balance, and can prevent and even reverse major causes of premature disability and death including obesity, heart disease and diabetes.

Try to work out for thirty minutes every day. If you're too busy and just don't have the time, I suggest sixty minutes instead, since you need the health benefits of exercise even more! Another tool for keeping your body and mind fit at any age is to practice daily stretching and breathing disciplines such as Yoga or Tai chi. Remember to breathe deeply throughout the day, expanding and emptying your lungs fully to promote calmness and mental clarity.

**Immortal divine energy:**

While it's essential to nurture one's physical body with wholesome food and exercise, it's no less vital to nourish one's spirit and soul. We are, after all, the physical manifestation of the immortal divine energy of stars, inhabiting these frail bodies while we live our brief lives.

Creative work and service that benefits the community and restores our planet is extraordinarily healing to the self as well as to others. So many of us rush around day after day without ever stopping to see if what we are doing has any lasting value. It's good to remember that one's sense of self-worth, a fundamental influence on mood, immune function and vitality is greatly enhanced when one's life make a positive difference.

No matter how useful one's work may be, it's essential to balance productive activity with deep relaxation and soulful rest. Good quality sleep, the "chief nourisher at life's feast", according to Shakespeare, is absolutely essential for the body to repair and heal itself effectively.

Be sure to stop fully and rest regularly, especially when you feel stressed or overwhelmed. Take routine sabbaticals to rejuvenate yourself- an hour every day, a day every week, a week every season. Find hidden opportunities to meditate as you go through your day. Chant a soothing mantra or even pray for a minute while you are waiting in line at the store or at a red light. Even a few deep, relaxed breaths or a moment spent listening to the song of wind blowing through trees can go a long way towards reducing harmful stress levels.

Chronic unresolved stress steals one's vitality and sense of well being. It increases your risk of developing high blood pressure, heart attacks, strokes and cancer. So, identify your life's inevitable stressors, and then regularly do whatever it takes for you to resolve them: pray, meditate, dance, paint, garden, drum, make love, change your profession, or read to your child.

Nourish yourself with your favorite music, a candle-lit lavender bath or perhaps a therapeutic massage. When you are heavily stressed it's particularly important to slow down and gain perspective on what is really important in life.

Laugh and cry when you feel the need; tears eliminate harmful toxins from the body and cleanse the spirit. While laughter is "the best medicine", it's also important to express your anger constructively, as repressed anger festers and is a common treatable cause of hypertension, heart disease, depression, insomnia, digestive problems and immune disorders.

Since love is the universe's most potent healing force, find your inner love and express it whenever possible. Open your heart and get involved in loving relationships of all kinds. Do work that you love, live in a place you love, surround yourself with people you love and your loving energy will flow to others and to the world around you. Loving touch and sexuality keeps vital juices flowing, engaging the senses to keep us feeling fully alive. Of course, practice safe sex no

matter what your age, since disease prevention is important to anyone's prospects for longevity.

Cultivate a zest for living and an optimistic outlook. Learn new skills and start new projects throughout your life. Whatever your age, you'll find that starting over with a "beginner's mind" keeps you feeling and thinking young. When you continue to develop new ideas and skills you build and exercise new mental connections throughout life, reducing your risk of Alzheimer's dementia.

Connect with the eternal spirit, the divine nature of all creation. Realize that each day of life is a precious gift to be treasured, not squandered. Since gratitude is great medicine, remember to give thanks and be grateful for whatever you have. According to the ancient wisdom of 'Pirkei Avot': "Who is wealthy? One who is pleased with his share."

Live in harmony with natural rhythms of the day and the seasons. When we find balance with Mother Nature and attune ourselves to her nurturing ways, we discover her boundless beauty and healing power. When we nourish the earth we leave a healthy and life affirming legacy for our children- the deepest expression of our immortality.

Ultimately it's the quality, not the quantity of life that determines when life is worth living. It's best to honor our elders and respect them for their experience and wisdom, rather than emphasize the glamour of youth. Death is imbedded in life, an inexorable natural law. Even immortality is temporary: the gods of one civilization later turn up as the quaint myths of another.

### **How to chop wood at 90:**

The timeless principles of natural longevity are plain and simple, not mysterious or complicated. It's best to focus on living a wholesome life that promotes well being, rather than fighting to hinder the natural aging process. The greatest healing gifts are the most obvious ones: love, kindness, nature's beauty, nourishing food, fresh air and pure water.

Take the time examine yourself and discover what habits you need to change in order to thrive and maximize your personal wellness potential. Become aware of your individual genetic and environmental risks and strengths. For example, if you are fair-skinned and live in the sunny Rogue Valley, skin cancer prevention needs to be part of your longevity strategy. If there's an illness that runs in your family, or if you suffer from unexplained symptoms that won't go away, check with your health care provider and find out what you can do to minimize your risks of disease. But, no matter what the 'experts' say, trust your own body's inner wisdom as you make your health choices.

If you need to make changes in your life, do it now. Stop wasting time- time is our most precious commodity. Many folks delay making beneficial changes until they're older and already suffering from degenerative diseases. So, why not do it now? The sooner you act, the more you'll benefit.

Do you want to be chopping wood when you are 90? Well, start chopping today!

This overview is presented for general educational purposes only. For advice regarding any specific health condition please consult a qualified health care professional.

This article originally appeared in ***Sentient Times***.

Howard W. Morningstar MD, board-certified family physician, is a graduate of Yale University School of Medicine and the California School of Herbal Studies. He and his wife Sue Morningstar CNM, women's health nurse practitioner, share a family medicine practice in Ashland, Oregon. They can be reached at (541) 482-2032.