It’s not just about extending your life—it’s also about feeling really good in the years ahead. Here, the head-to-toe tuneup that will help.

BY KEVIN LORIA

ILLUSTRATIONS BY KARI MODÉN
Well past ages 80 and 90, some people still haven’t slowed down. They’re publishing books, entering bodybuilding competitions, earning degrees, racing boats, and socializing with family and friends who are decades younger.

While that used to be almost unthinkable, it’s becoming more common. Much of what we’ve learned about thriving in one’s later years is relatively recent knowledge. That’s because today, life expectancy is 26 years longer than it was in the 1950s. And the longer you live, the longer you’re likely to keep on living: A baby born today in the U.S. has a life expectancy of about 76 years. Someone who has reached 40 is projected to live to almost 79, and a 60-year-old is expected to live to 82. If you’re 80 now, chances are you could live to nearly 89.

“We’ve gotten quite good as a medical community at extending life span,” says Emily J. Rogalski, PhD, a clinical and cognitive neuroscientist and professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago. The big challenge now is that our health span—how long we live with generally good health—“is not always keeping up.”

Age remains the No. 1 risk factor for chronic illnesses such as cancer, heart disease, and neurodegeneration. But researchers are actively working out the very best ways to stave off age-related illness and decline, and people who have an excellent quality of life in their 80s and 90s are helping to lead the way. All this means there’s a good chance your later years will be richer than you might have imagined decades ago. “There’s tremendous potential,” says Rogalski, who studies “super-agers”: people 80 and older with memory (and often health) equal to adults in their 50s and 60s. While some factors are out of your control, a big part of how you feel and what your life looks like 10 or 20 or 30 years in the future depends on what you are doing right now.

What Makes a Difference?

From the moment we’re born, we begin to age. And aging can bring certain benefits. Though some of our capabilities peak early, such as sprinting or rapid information processing, others continue to improve. Our ability to produce creative work and develop expertise can grow throughout life. Some evidence suggests that happiness has a U-shaped curve, high in young adults before dropping to a nadir around the late 40s, then rising again. Genes and social factors—the neighborhood you live in, racism or other trauma you’ve experienced, access to healthcare, and more—contribute to your health span. But lifestyle steps also play a role.

Along with getting recommended checkups and vaccines, three factors—exercise, eating well, and sleeping enough—can help support your immune system and extend the health of almost every system in your body. A fourth is just as critical to healthy aging, Rogalski says: robust social connections, which are almost always found in areas renown for having many super-agers, such as Sardinia (in Italy) and Okinawa (in Japan). The strong social fabric is a key factor in all these places, says Julia Adamian, MD, a clinical associate professor at New York University’s Grossman School of Medicine. “People take care of each other,” she says.

Wherever you live and whatever your life experience or family history, you can benefit from specific actions to shore up body systems that may start to falter as you get older. And it’s never too early or too late to start. This guide will help you understand what typically happens in six important systems, how they may change with age, what you can do to bolster them, and how to keep yourself in top shape for many years to come.

WHAT HAPPENS AS YOU AGE:
The heart becomes less efficient at pumping blood through the body, which can limit your ability to exercise and, eventually, to engage in normal daily activities, says Scott L. Hummel, MD, a cardiologist and director of the Heart Failure with Preserved Ejection Fraction program at the University of Michigan’s Frankel Cardiovascular Center in Ann Arbor. Blood vessels also tend to stiffen over time, which can lead to hypertension. The more you can keep risk factors for heart disease in check throughout life, the “younger” your heart and cardiovascular system will remain as you get older.

WHAT CAN HELP:

The American Heart Association lists eight essential factors, including diet (the best evidence is for the Mediterranean and Dash diets, which include produce, whole grains, beans and legumes, healthy fats, fish, and poultry); physical exercise; avoiding nicotine; getting 7 to 9 hours of sleep; managing your body mass index, blood sugar, and blood pressure; and controlling cholesterol. The more of these habits you engage in throughout life, the longer you live and the longer you live free from diseases—including heart disease and other chronic ills of aging, such as diabetes. Hummel says. “Steps can improve health at any age, and can even reverse the effects of arterial stiffness and lower the risk of heart attack.”
WHAT HAPPENS AS YOU AGE: Age-related changes in the cardiovascular system can potentially inhibit blood flow to the gut and the liver—the organ that helps eliminate toxins from your body. Smooth muscle cells in the gut may grow stiffer over time, which can make it harder to stay regular, says Jean-Pierre Raufman, MD, a professor of medicine and chief of gastroenterology at the University of Maryland Medical System in Baltimore. There could also be a decline in the cells that help make the mucous lining of the gut, which may result in your stomach becoming more sensitive to certain foods. In addition, the composition of “good” and “bad” bacteria in your gut microbiome changes over time, though the implications of this are still largely unknown, Raufman says.

KEY SIGNS OF TROUBLE: Two of the most common problems that can occur in the later years are constipation and gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), characterized by persistent heartburn. And while people might chalk these up to age, Raufman says both conditions can be successfully treated in the vast majority of people. Liver trouble can be hard to spot, which is why having liver function tests as part of your annual checkup is important. You’ll want to make a doctor’s appointment right away if you notice dark urine, jaundice (yellowish skin or eyes), loss of appetite, or unexplained nausea.

Other signs that might indicate potentially serious gastrointestinal problems include blood in the stool (one possible sign of colon cancer, which is increasingly occurring in younger people) and difficulty swallowing (which could indicate esophageal cancer). Such symptoms warrant an appointment with the doctor as soon as you notice them.

WHAT CAN HELP: Fortunately, many of the digestive issues that come up with age can be addressed with dietary changes. Eating more fiber—adults should get at least 14 grams for every 1,000 calories they eat—can help significantly with constipation. (For comparison, a cup of oats has 8 grams of fiber, and a third of an avocado has 3 grams.) Fiber supplements may help if dietary changes aren’t doing the trick, says Raufman—though some animal studies suggest insulin fiber supplements could damage the liver.

Your gut relies on a rich vascular system, so anything that provides cardiovascular benefits, like exercise and a heart-healthy diet, is probably helpful for your digestive system. If you’re struggling with GERD, then eliminating alcohol, quitting smoking, and not eating for 3 hours before bed may ease symptoms. It can also be useful to sleep on your left side or with your head or upper body elevated.

WHAT CAN HELP: About 40 percent of Alzheimer’s disease and age-related dementia cases could be prevented or delayed through lifestyle changes, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. These behaviors, which are also good for your heart, include not smoking, avoiding excessive alcohol use, getting plenty of exercise, following an eating plan like the Mediterranean or DASH diet, treating mental health issues, and keeping blood sugar and blood pressure in check. The earlier you start adopting such habits, the better, Galvin says—though it’s never too late.

In addition, research suggests that having positive beliefs about aging—such as feeling that you are as useful as you were in your younger years—is linked with a significantly lower likelihood of developing dementia.

Exposure to green spaces, such as forests and parks, seems to help, too, Galvin says. Socializing and learning new things (such as an art or a language) also appear to be important, according to Rogalski. Activities like dancing can be especially helpful, Adamian says; dancing involves moving with a partner while processing music and rhythm—quite the cognitive challenge.

Finally, despite plenty of persuasive marketing, there’s insufficient evidence supporting any supplements to bolster brain health, Galvin says.
YOUR HORMONES

WHAT HAPPENS AS YOU AGE: Levels of growth and sex hormones drop. Some of these changes have been associated with declines in muscle and bone strength, but after dreaming about her sister and their vow to get fitter, she began training diligently—running and lifting weights. At 71, she entered her first bodybuilding competition—and won. Today, the Baltimore resident no longer competes, but she doesn’t plan to give up her fitness routine and still trains other people. "When I’m in the gym lifting weights, not a thing in the world is bothering me."

form that’s most appropriate for you: Estrogen can be supplemented as a pill, patch, cream, or gel. Your doctor should also check you once a year to see if you should continue or stop. Using MHT for longer than necessary after menopause may increase cardiovascular risk.

for Physical Activity and Aging at NYU Grossman School of Medicine, as well as the joint pain that can signify arthritis. As he says, "What’s the reason to suffer through it?"

In addition, a bone that breaks during what seems like a small accident may be a sign that you need to have your bone health checked with a DEXA scan (See “Wh

WHAT CAN HELP: "Inactivity is the one thing that’s going to speed up declines," Rogers says. Exercise can make a huge difference: People who work out regularly can have the cardiovascular fitness and muscular strength of a person years younger.

30 SEPTEMBER 2023   CR.ORG
The most important protein source is not just meat, poultry, and eggs, but plant-based proteins like quinoa, soy, lentils, and nuts. Consider not only meat, poultry, and eggs, but if your doctor is concerned about your calcium levels, getting calcium from food is necessary. For example, leafy greens should provide 1,200 mg of daily calcium. It’s best to aim for 68 to 83 grams of protein per day, which can help with muscle strength and calcium (key for bone health). Many people in their 70s and 80s don’t get enough of either. A 150-pound person over 65 may need to aim for 68 to 83 grams of protein per day; people 50 and up need 1,000 to 1,200 mg of daily calcium. It’s best to get calcium from food, like leafy greens and dairy, but if your doctor is concerned about bone loss, calcium supplements may help. For example, consider not only meat, poultry, and eggs but also plant proteins such as quinoa, soy, lentils, and nuts.

### The Truth About 4 ‘Anti-Aging’ Pills

We’d all like to find “that magic pill where we don’t get older, don’t feel worse, and have more energy all the time,” says Anne R. Crapo, MD, professor of medicine at the University of Pennsylvania’s Perelman School of Medicine. Could these substances have potential?

**Aspirin**

This over-the-counter pain pill has long been used to lower heart attack and stroke risks. But regular use can cause side effects like bleeding. People with cardiovascular disease (CVD), especially those who’ve already had a heart attack or stroke, should continue a daily low dose. But experts say this benefit has not been proven. Some people say taking aspirin can help with making digestive health claims. As with other supplements, like Focus Factor and NeuroPro, aspirin’s makers did not have to prove its efficacy and safety before putting it on the market.

**Rapamycin**

Discovered in Easter Island soil, this molecule is now a prescription drug given to kidney transplant patients. Rapamycin appears to activate the same pathways as calorie restriction, which extends life in animal studies. Early evidence suggests it may help prevent some cancers and improve cardiovascular function—at least in mice. But its immune-suppressing effects may weaken your defenses against infection.

**Metformin**

This prescription drug for type 2 diabetes is linked to a reduced incidence of cancer, improved heart health, and some cognitive protection. In animal studies, it appears to extend life span and health span. Researchers are exploring whether it might do the same for people, but they don’t know if long-term use is healthy for everyone, or how to reduce side effects such as diarrhea.

**Prevagen**

This supplement is widely marketed as a memory booster. But some doctors say it’s overhyped and unproven. Its makers have settled several lawsuits regarding their marketing assertions. And in an ongoing government case, they’ve been charged with making deceptive

### Your Skin

**What Happens as You Age:** Signs of aging often first appear under the eyes, as people lose collagen and the skin thins, says Kathy Grossman, MD, a dermatologist in Santa Monica, Calif., and New York City. Fine lines and wrinkles start to appear. As decades go on, those lines deepen, and people lose the fat beneath the skin, which can lead to sagging. Skin spots—including moles and freckles, as well as brown age spots—may also appear. “Much of what people tend to think about as old-looking skin are people who have excess sun exposure,” Grossman says. In older adults, itchiness and bruises also become more common and wounds heal more slowly.

### Key Signs of Trouble: Melanoma, the most potentially fatal form of skin cancer, represents 5 percent of all new cancer cases each year. So see your doctor if you notice new or changing moles, or those with irregular, uneven, or asymmetrical borders. Do the same if a mole seems to be changing shape or size."

What should you do if you notice any future declines, Rogers says. With any exercise, push yourself a bit beyond the bare minimum so you’ll still be able to get a workout in after any future declines, Rogers says. For those who need it, physical therapy can help with a range of pain, posture, strength, and balance issues, and prescription drugs can slow the progression of osteoporosis.

Finally, consider whether you might need more protein (important for muscle strength) and calcium (key for bone health). Many people in their 70s and 80s don’t get enough of either. A 150-pound person over 65 may need to aim for 68 to 83 grams of protein per day; people 50 and up need 1,000 to 1,200 mg of daily calcium. It’s best to get calcium from food, like leafy greens and dairy, but if your doctor is concerned about bone loss, calcium supplements may help. For example, consider not only meat, poultry, and eggs but also plant proteins such as quinoa, soy, lentils, and nuts.

### Avoid These...

Five factors that can cause harm and lead to premature aging

#### Smoking

This habit dramatically increases the likelihood of lung cancer, a major cause of heart disease, and is associated with a 30 to 40 percent higher risk of dementia. (See cdc.gov/quit for tips on quitting the habit.)

#### Alcohol

Light drinking was once considered healthy, but data now suggest that “any alcohol increases risk for cancer and other diseases,” says Jean-Pierre Raufman, MD, chief of gastroenterology at the University of Maryland Medical System. Drinking also has a significant negative impact on memory, and some preliminary research suggests that alcohol may even speed up the aging process. (See CR.org/alcohol for advice on cutting back.)

#### Inactivity

Being sedentary hastens the loss of muscle, bone, cardiovascular fitness, increasing the risk of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, dementia, and cancer. Each week, try for at least two strength training sessions and 150 minutes of moderate cardio exercise (such as brisk walking).

#### Insufficient Sleep

This raises the risks of type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, obesity, and depression. With age, getting the optimal 7 to 9 hours a night can be challenging. Sleep meds are no panacea, so consider seeing a sleep specialist if you need help.

### Processed Food

Regular consumption of highly processed foods—such as sodas or bagged snacks—may accelerate biological aging. It’s also associated with greater risks of heart problems, diabetes, and cognitive decline. To cut back, fill your plate with whole foods: fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and whole grains.

**Aerobic exercise is important, but you should prioritize strength and balance workouts as you get older. So find a strength training workout, whether that’s a session with a trainer, a circuit at your gym, or a functional fitness class, that you can do at least a couple of times a week. (You can also go to nia.nih.gov and search for “balance training” and “strength training.”) After all, going for a walk becomes much harder if you can’t get up out of a chair or maintain your balance on the go. With any exercise, push yourself a bit beyond the bare minimum so you’ll still be able to get a workout in after any future declines, Rogers says. For those who need it, physical therapy can help with a range of pain, posture, strength, and balance issues, and prescription drugs can slow the progression of osteoporosis.**

**Finally, consider whether you might need more protein (important for muscle strength) and calcium (key for bone health). Many people in their 70s and 80s don’t get enough of either. A 150-pound person over 65 may need to aim for 68 to 83 grams of protein per day; people 50 and up need 1,000 to 1,200 mg of daily calcium. It’s best to get calcium from food, like leafy greens and dairy, but if your doctor is concerned about bone loss, calcium supplements may help.**

**For example, consider not only meat, poultry, and eggs but also plant proteins such as quinoa, soy, lentils, and nuts.**