

UPMC Center for Integrative Medicine

Dedicated to increasing knowledge about safe and effective complementary and integrative medicine approaches.

Older, Wiser, and Healthier: Guidelines for Healthy Aging

By Ronald Glick MD, Carol Greco PhD, John Laird, ND, James Donnelly, MA of the Center for Integrative Medicine, Denise Zucker Hodes, LSW, of the Senior Care Institute, and Esther Teverovsky, MD, of the Benedum Geriatric Center

When I turned 40, I went in for a general check up. My doctor looked at my chest x-ray and said, “Ron, your heart and lungs look great but your spine is a mess.” It turns out my father has the same spine disease. At that time, my back looked at least 20 years older, so now it must be pushing 80. No surprise—we’re all aging; the older we get, the more likely we are to experience health problems. This can slow us down, and the decreased activity sets us up for further problems and declining function.

You can’t open a popular magazine without coming across sage advice on healthy aging, preventing dementia, or a related topic. At the risk of being repetitive, we start with the Big 4 (diet, exercise, stress management, and the avoidance of addictive substances) because they’re central to a healthy lifestyle, disease prevention, and longevity. Beyond that, we’ll touch on some basic guidelines that we’ve seen in our practices here at the Center for Integrative Medicine, the Senior Care Institute at UPMC Shadyside, and the Benedum Geriatric Center.

Eat plants: What are the nutritional keys for healthy aging? To put it simply, a plant-based diet. Perhaps you’re familiar with author Michael Pollan’s well-known quote, “Eat food, not too much, mostly plants,” which sums up the simple guidelines for a plant-based diet.¹

The Mediterranean diet has evidence to support its benefit in preventing

cardiovascular disease. It’s high in whole grains, legumes, fruits, vegetables, nuts, and olive oil, and moderate in poultry and fish. It is low in red and processed meats, dairy, and sweets. A recent trial of the Mediterranean diet in Spain among people at high risk for cardiovascular disease revealed that the diet cut the risk for heart disease and stroke by 30 percent after five years.²

Guidelines for an Alzheimer’s prevention diet were released recently by the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine. Similar to the Mediterranean diet, the group’s recommendations emphasize consuming legumes, whole grains, fruits, vegetables and nuts, and minimizing the intake of foods containing saturated fats (meat and whole fat dairy) and transfat (hydrogenated oils). The recommendations are in line with those of the American Heart Association, American Cancer Society, and the American Diabetes Association for the prevention of the common causes of death and disease in the United States.³

The DASH diet (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) is recommended by the Joint National Committee on Prevention, Detection, Evaluation, and Treatment of High Blood Pressure (JNC VII). The DASH diet recommends consuming nine or more combined servings of fruits and vegetables per day, low fat dairy foods, moderate intake of fish and poultry, and cutting back on the salt.⁴

Exercise for physical and mental health: As we get older, exercise takes on special importance. Regular exercise helps maintain bone density and muscle strength. It is useful for heart health, and studies show that those with healthy cardiovascular systems are less likely to develop dementia. In addition, exercise can have benefits for

depression and anxiety that rival those of medications and therapy.

Thirty minutes per day of moderate level aerobic activity provides a general health benefit for heart and lungs. By moderate, we mean an activity, such as walking at a brisk pace, that gets your heart pumping and allows you to work up a little bit of a sweat. For someone who is sedentary or who has heart or lung disease, it is best to start slower and work up gradually, and it’s always a good bet to consult with your physician before starting such a program.

When starting a routine, it’s important to choose something that feels good physically. As with “going on a diet,” people often start an exercise program with good intentions. We’re more likely to stay with it if the activity is fun. For many people, exercise that involves other people, such as walking in groups or attending classes, helps them to stay motivated. When choosing a class, we need to be realistic about our level of health and fitness. If an aerobic or yoga program is too intense, a person can get injured, setting him or her back for a week or two. Smaller classes or programs geared for seniors, such as Silver Sneakers, are less likely to create a problem.

Manage your stress: We can’t get rid of stress. Stress is part of life, and challenges arise for everyone. But stress levels that are high or persistent can contribute to common health problems as we age. Luckily, there are many ways to cope with stress that are healthy for us. For example, meditation can reduce anxiety, distress, and pain, and has even been found to improve memory.⁵ Set aside about 20 minutes per day, find a relatively quiet space, and allow yourself to focus gently on some aspect of your present moment experience. This can be the sensations, of breathing, or other physical sensations in your body, or sounds, or even

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Healthy Aging (cont.)

gazing at a photo or candle flame. When the mind wanders, simply turn your attention back to the sensations, without judgment or blame. By paying attention to what is here in the present moment, and letting go of judgment, we often notice that we feel more open, more calm and relaxed. Over time, we realize that our judgments and expectations are actually the source of much of our stress. Once we develop a more compassionate attitude towards ourselves and our life experiences, challenges may still be present, but we are less reactive to them, less caught up. We can focus on, and truly enjoy, the simple pleasures of life, such as being in nature, and connecting with friends and family. Engaging in these simple pleasurable activities is also a wonderful way to manage stress!

Don't poison yourself: In the movie *Sleeper*, after Woody Allen wakes up from 200 years of suspended animation, the doctor gives him a cigarette and tells him, "It's tobacco. It's one of the healthiest things for your body. Now go ahead. You need all the strength you can get." While it turns out that a little red wine can promote health, science has yet to find a benefit for smoking. Rather, it leads the list, followed closely by obesity and sedentary lifestyle, as a cause of premature aging and raising the risk of heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. Dopamine is the brain chemical most associated with smoking and other addictions, and it's powerful. There's a tendency to look for medical solutions for addictions. While medications may help, the other guidelines in this article may be helpful for habit control, particularly taking steps to increase aerobic activity, clean up diet, and manage stress.

Keep your body stretched out: An erect posture takes the load off of our back, hips, and knees. As we become sedentary, it's automatic that muscles accommodate to a seated position. Our backs and hips shift to a flexed position, which leads us to be somewhat hunched over when we stand and walk. This puts additional stress on these areas. Along with the start of arthritic changes many of us experience with age, this

additional stress tends to aggravate problems. Tight muscles cause poor posture, further loading joints, increasing discomfort, and leading a person to become more sedentary. There are three common areas of restriction that can affect gait and balance in later years. These include loss of spinal extension, tight hip flexors, and tight hamstrings. We use spinal extension in doing a back bend, and hip flexors lift our hips up, as when bringing your knee to your chest. Tightness in these areas leads a person to flex forward at the waist. The hamstrings are what a ballet dancer stretches at the barre, and tightness of this muscle limits hip movements. To keep these areas loose, a person can ask a physical therapist, athletic trainer, or chiropractor for stretches to do at home. Participating in a class such as gentle yoga or tai chi may be more fun. Other classes, such as general exercise or aerobics, may also have stretching built in.

Embrace your spiritual side: Yogi Berra once said, "If you see a fork in the road take it". This is a reminder of the need to make deliberate choices in our lives. Getting older is a fork in our lives that requires us to make a choice. One choice leads to bitterness and resentment; focusing on all the things that we have lost, believing our best days are behind us. The other path leads to a richer life. Knowing that we have made some mistakes in our lives, we become more willing to forgive others for the mistakes they have made. We begin to see that what other people think of us is not as important as what we think of ourselves. With the awareness that time is no longer unlimited, we begin asking how we want to be remembered; and what is the meaning and purpose of our lives. These are ultimately spiritual questions. If we begin to ask these questions, the answers may surprise us. They may or may not fit neatly into the religious systems we were exposed to as a child. However they may give us a peace of mind and an inner sense of contentment that we didn't know

was possible. The choice is ours.

Stay connected: Older Americans greatly value staying connected. It contributes greatly to healthy aging and often positively reduces the risk of memory changes and physical decline. On the other end of the spectrum, feelings of isolation and loneliness place an individual at risk for depression and could negatively impact all aspects of their health. Staying connected becomes more difficult as we age, with loved ones dying, extended families relocating, limited finances, and declining physical health and mobility. Fortunately, with creativity and flexibility, the options continue to expand.

Staying connected means something different to each person. For some, it might be sitting on their porch and chatting with passing neighbors; for others, it's grocery shopping with their children followed by lunch; and for others it's going to weekly church services or the daily lunch served at the local senior center. Such activities offer people the opportunity to feel connected with family and peers and be part of a group.

Volunteer work allows many seniors to expand their networks and give back to their communities in a meaningful way. Book clubs or card groups abound at senior centers and houses of worship; classes are offered at all the universities at minimum cost; walking clubs are popular at local malls; and AARP organizes day and week-long trips.

Increasingly, older adults are taking advantage of the explosion of options in technology. It could be as simple as getting a smart phone with Skype, using the internet email or participating in on-line support groups for caregivers, or joining social networks such as Facebook and LinkedIn. One doesn't need to understand the science to take advantage of the technology and these gadgets and systems are becoming more affordable.

For references, please see the electronic version of this newsletter on our web site: integrativemedicine.upmc.com

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Research Opportunities

The UPMC Center for Integrative Medicine is dedicated to increasing knowledge about the effectiveness and safety of complementary and integrative medicine approaches. Other integrative medicine modalities may not have been subjected to the same level of scientific inquiry as western medicine treatments. The Center for Integrative Medicine, in concert with the University of Pittsburgh, is actively pursuing research to support the benefits of these therapies.

CURRENTLY RECRUITING:

- **UPMC Center for Integrative Medicine Research Registry**
- **The “Feel My Best” study for individuals with Lupus**

COMING SOON:

- **Non-surgical options for Lumbar Spinal Stenosis**

For more information call 412-623-6872.

Acupuncture for Cancer Pain

If you have cancer and you are experiencing pain, you may be eligible for acupuncture at no charge.

Funded by a generous grant from the Shady-side Hospital Foundation, the Center for Integrative Medicine is offering acupuncture as a method to treat cancer-related pain.

For information call 412-623-2374 or email: mcfarlandce@upmc.edu

An Interview With Dr. Greg Thorkelson

How did you get interested in psychiatry and child psychiatry?

I was drawn to the role of the mind in human health, and I've been particularly interested in simple things a person can do to improve their physical and mental health. I've always enjoyed working with children and adolescents. There's more of an opportunity to influence a person's life, given that the brain itself continues to grow and change into the late 20s. Working with kids is more rewarding for me.

Of all of the approaches in integrative medicine, what interests you the most?

I have several interests: the role of supplements, the connection between diet and physical and mental health, and emerging science involving intestinal bacteria and overall well-being. I'm most excited about mind-body approaches, and also have a personal interest in the role of “present moment awareness.” There is a tremendous opportunity to help adolescents in the community with learning mindfulness and stress-management skills to prevent many of the problems that we see in practice. Hypnosis has been around since Freud's days, but we're just now learning how it may help in treating people with health conditions that involve inflammation, like Crohn's disease.

Is there a natural alternative to stimulants for children with attention deficit disorders?

The short answer is yes and no. Many pediatricians and child psychiatrists will tell you that there is more to attention

deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) than just giving stimulants. By expanding from traditional pharmacologic and behavioral approaches, there's a chance to provide more help and in some cases get by without or with lower doses of medication. There have been promising studies on the benefits of fish oil and zinc. Studies on diet or food additives and ADHD have been inconclusive, but some children seem less hyperactive with dietary changes; unfortunately, it is not yet clear exactly who will benefit and to what degree. The bottom line is that a holistic approach doesn't take the place of traditional therapies, but it may help. This can particularly be the case when a child hasn't responded to the usual treatment, or in the case of an individual with milder symptoms who just needs a little boost.

How is child psychiatry going to be different 10 years from now?

We're seeing a shift to a more biomedical approach and we'll certainly see more in terms of benefits of genetic testing and brain imaging. The newest entry into practice is a device that uses EEG signals to help diagnose ADHD that was just approved by the FDA. On the one hand, I welcome and look forward to some of these developments, but we can't neglect our clinical skills. As an example, even if someone had an EEG profile that showed signs of ADHD, if my evaluation showed prominent anxiety symptoms, that would be the first thing we would address in treatment. There are similar developments coming in our understanding of autistic spectrum disorders. It's going to be an exciting time, but it will be important to balance technology with a human touch. Hopefully, psychiatry will always channel that intense personal connection to help people make positive changes in their lives.

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2013 Lectures and Classes at the UPMC Center for Integrative Medicine

UPMC Employees receive 75 Take a Healthy Step points for attending. All lectures and classes at CIM.

August 2013

Mon. 8/12 – 9/23	3:30 – 5:00 p.m. 6:00 – 7:30 p.m.	Yoga Level 2 (6 classes) Yoga Level 1 (6 classes)	\$75	Alicja Walczak, MS, CRS
Wed. 8/14 – 9/25	5:30 – 7 p.m.	Yoga Level 1 (6 classes)	\$75	Alicja Walczak, MS, CRS
Thurs. 8/15	5:30 – 6:30 p.m.	Relieving Pain with Acupuncture and Acupressure	FREE	Tricia Smith, LAc
Thurs. 8/29	7 – 8 p.m.	Mindfulness Meditation Orientation Session	FREE	Carol Greco, PhD

September 2013

Thurs. 9/12 – 11/14	5:00 – 6:00 p.m.	Tai Chi and QiGong (10 sessions)	\$100	Joseph Bozzelli, MMQ
Thurs. 9/12 – 10/31	6:30 – 8:30 p.m.	Mindfulness Meditation (8 sessions)	\$300	Carol Greco, PhD
Thurs. 9/19	5:30 – 6:30 p.m.	The Alexander Technique	FREE	Lisa Levinson, AmSAT
Wed. 9/25 – 10/23	5:30 – 6:30 p.m.	The Alexander Technique (Includes 2 free sessions)	\$200	Lisa Levinson, AmSAT

October 2013

Wed. 10/2 – 11/21	12:00 – 1:30 p.m.	Mindfulness-Based Anxiety Reduction (8 sessions)		Dinnie Goldring, LCSW
Thurs. 10/17	5:30 – 6:30 p.m.	Maximizing the Benefits of Your Lymphatic System	FREE	Erin Simon, LMT, LLCC

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The Center for Integrative Medicine at UPMC Shadyside is a hospital-based center in Pittsburgh that combines natural healing practices with conventional medicine. "Integrative medicine" refers to the incorporation of evidence-based complementary therapies into conventional treatments for patients. Integrative medicine is meant to work in conjunction with traditional medicine, providing a more holistic approach to healing — mind, body, and spirit.