

Global Lifestyles

By Carl Lowe, Published in Energy Times March 2004

The statistics don't lie. The citizens of some countries live longer than others. And many live longer than folks in the US.

Those extra years inspire curiosity. What are the longevity secrets of these countries? What do they eat? What kind of exercise do they indulge in? What do their bodies look like?

When you entertain a global perspective, you can draw a few well-established conclusions about the tools that help humans live longer. These include: A diet filled with vegetables, days filled with exercise and daily routines encased in an extended network of social relationships.

Among all these factors, the most important longevity parameter may be simply to live closer. Live closer to the land by eating food that is unprocessed. Live closer to your relatives, friends and those you love. Live closer to an understanding of your body's needs, and give it the nutrients and exercise it craves.

Exercise for Longer, Better Life

Over and over again, studies of people who live the longest show that a lifestyle which incorporates exercise produces the healthiest results. For example, research on the Old Order Amish in Ontario, Canada, has shown they suffer less chronic disease and are thinner than other North Americans even though they consume plenty of fat, refined sugar and calories.

Only 4% of these Amish are obese, compared to about 30% of US citizens.

Physical activity is their secret. In research organized by David R. Bassett, PhD, of the University of Tennessee, 98 Amish agreed to wear pedometers for a week to measure how far they walked (*Med & Sci in Sports & Exer* 1/04).

The Amish men averaged more than 18,400 steps a day, while women took about 14,200 steps. In comparison, Americans rarely venture more than 10,000 steps a day.

The men worked about 10 hours a week at strenuous activities like shoveling and shoeing horses, and spent another 40 hours in moderate activity. Meanwhile, the women spent more than three hours a week in strenuous activity and another 40 hours gardening, washing clothes and feeding animals.

Eat Smaller Meals

Eating less food is also a common element among the lifestyle habits of the world's long-lived.

Eating less food is thought to increase life expectancy by cutting down on the number of free radicals—destructive molecules—unleashed by bodily processes (*Science* 1996; 273:59-63). Traditionally, Okinawans, whose life expectancy outshines longevity in the US, limit what they eat, never letting themselves feel completely full. That limit on their food is believed to cut the number of free radicals in their blood (*NEJM* 1997; 337(14):986).

According to the Okinawan Centenarian Study, fewer free radicals means Okinawans are protected against arterial blockages.

In contrast, Americans seem to be eating more than ever. A global study of teenage weight—which looked at about 30,000 teenagers from 13 European countries, Israel and the United States—found that the US had the highest percentage of overweight teenagers (Lithuania had the lowest). About one in seven American 15-year-old boys is overweight, while almost one in six teenage American girls weighs too much (Arch Ped & Adoles Med 1/04).

French Paradox Explained

Meanwhile, in France, epidemiologists trying to explain the French paradox believe that French avoidance of heart disease may also be linked to eating less food. The French paradox refers to the fact that even though the French eat a rich diet, their rates of heart trouble and obesity are lower than countries like the US, whose populations consume less dietary fat.

“The French paradox is only a paradox if one assumes that dietary fat is the major cause of obesity and cardiovascular disease,” says Paul Rozin, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania.

Dr. Rozin found that the French don’t stuff themselves the way Americans do (Psych Science 9/03).

“...[R]ecent studies suggest that the importance of fat intake as a risk factor has been greatly exaggerated,” claims Dr. Rozin. “While the French eat more fat than Americans, they probably eat slightly fewer calories, which, when compounded over years, can amount to substantial differences in weight.”

Just one of every 14 French adults is obese, while more than one in five Americans is severely overweight. French heart disease rates are also much lower.

Rozin and his colleagues compared portion sizes at about a dozen restaurants in Paris with the food served in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. These restaurants included fast-food joints, pizza palaces, ice cream parlors and a range of ethnic restaurants.

They found the mean portion size of the Philadelphia eateries was 346 grams (12.2 ounces), a full 25% larger than the servings in Paris. The largest differences were found in Chinese restaurants. Philadelphia's Chinese restaurants serve meals with portions that are a whopping 72% bigger than those you get in Parisian Chinese restaurants.

Vegetables and Longevity

Eating plenty of vegetables, especially leafy greens and soy foods, may also help to confer longevity on Okinawans and other long-lived global citizens. Scientists have found that Okinawans consume a great deal of the B vitamins folic acid and vitamins B6 and B12 (found in vegetables). Those nutrients, in turn, are believed to lower blood levels of homocysteine, a protein linked to arterial blockages and heart disease.

The folic acid in vegetables helps the brain stay sharp, too. A study at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (J Nutr 1/04) shows that lack of folic acid “...causes

impaired development of areas of the brain important for memory and for thinking,” according to Steven Zeisel, MD, professor of nutrition.

In animal studies, Dr. Zeisel's research team found, “In the babies of folic acid-deficient mothers, the stem cells divided less than half as much as in the babies of mothers on normal diets, so there were less than half the number of stem cells available to help populate the brain...In addition, the number of cells that were dying off [in the brain] was much greater—twice as high as it should have been.”

Studies like that lead experts to believe that the large amount of folic acid in the Okinawan diet may keep their brains healthy into old age. According to researchers, Okinawans, as they approach 100, suffer much less Alzheimer's than senior citizens in the US (Int J Epidemiol 1995; 24:373).

Along with vegetables, the long-lived Okinawans eat meals filled with whole grains and fish. Soy foods like tofu are a staple of their diet. They frequently eat a tofu dish called mooji, which is tofu mixed with seaweed. And when they eat fish, they eat species like salmon, tuna and mackerel, which are rich in omega-3 fatty acids, good fats that have been shown to protect the cardiovascular system.

Soy May Boost Life Expectancy

In a study of the dietary habits of 30,000 Japanese, scientists from that country's Gifu University found that those who ate the most soy were least likely to die during the seven years of the research (Am J Epidemiol 2002; 156:824-31). These researchers attribute the longevity benefits of soy to its phytoestrogens, natural chemicals that have been found to reduce the risk of heart disease and cancer.

In another study (Int J Epidemiol 2000; 29(5):832) that looked at the diets of 6,000 Japanese, researchers found clear evidence that people who eat soy improve their chances of living longer because they develop less cancer and heart disease. Those who ate large quantities of tofu, miso and other soy foods had a lower risk of stomach cancer and colon cancer. Soy consumers also enjoyed a significantly reduced chance of dying from heart disease.

Mediterranean Longevity

Increased longevity and lower rates of heart disease have also been attributed to the so-called Mediterranean diet, a lifestyle common to Greece and other southern European countries that has garnered a plethora of research attesting to its effectiveness at increasing life expectancy.

In a study of people who have already suffered a heart attack, researchers found that eating this diet—rich in fruit, vegetables, fish and olive oil—can prolong life (American Heart Association's Scientific Sessions 2000).

According to Roberto Marchioli, MD, with the Consorzio Mario Negri Sud, Santa Maria Imbaro, Italy, “A significantly lower risk of death was associated with eating more Mediterranean-style foods and fewer foods containing saturated fats, such as butter. People in the study who had the most butter and vegetable oils in their diet had a risk of death almost triple that of people who ate more fresh fruits and vegetables and used olive oil.”

Though it contains substantial fat, the Mediterranean diet's fats are considered healthy: Monounsaturated fatty acids from olive oil and polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFA) from fish. It also contains large amounts of natural vitamin E, thought to be a reason people living in Spain, Greece and Italy suffer fewer heart attacks than their northern neighbors.

“Omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids include a particular kind of fat that is typically found in cold-water fish such as salmon, tuna and herring. The amount of [omega-3s] in other foods is minimal,” says Marchioli. “[Our] study demonstrated that taking one gram of omega-3 PUFA daily, in addition to following their doctors’ lifestyle and dietary recommendations, could lower the risk of death after heart attack by 20%.”

The researchers also found that lowering stress (with activities such as meditation or prayer), getting more exercise and stopping smoking helped lower the risk of heart attacks.

“Particular attention should be paid to having good dietary habits and maintaining them as time goes by,” says Dr. Marchioli. “Eat foods such as fruit, vegetables, fish and olive oil, which are rich in protective nutrients....This approach could increase the feasibility of adopting healthy dietary habits that will be maintained in the long term.”

Global research shows you can have great-tasting food and still enjoy extra longevity. Just don't forget to keep your stress down, fill up on healthy foods, and eat those meals with family and friends.