

Journey to Health: “Death and Taxes...”

By Eli Follick

Benjamin Franklin said that death and taxes were the only two certainties in life.



However, he missed one: Aging is also inevitable. A person ages with every second that ticks by. Even so, it is possible to delay or mitigate some of the more advanced signs of aging, including gradual decreases in physical and mental capacity and an increasing risk for disease.

Just look around a later-stage high school reunion and you will see that the decades appear to have been kinder to some than to others. While a good set of genes helps, not all is by chance. A study by Dr. Dean Ornish, professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, and founder of the Preventive Medicine Research Institute (PMRI), showed individuals do have some control over how dramatically they age. For instance, Ornish’s plant-based diet and lifestyle program, which includes moderate daily exercise and stress management, is known for reducing – and sometimes

reversing - the course of heart disease. The findings were the first to show “a very promising potential for individuals to change their lifestyle and have more control over how they age,” said Carra Richling, director of nutrition at PMRI.

When it comes to keeping our bodies and minds sharp, what we eat matters for both short-term and long-term health. This was the driving principle behind the creation of the MIND diet. The MIND diet is a hybrid of the

Mediterranean and DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diets, with emphasis on foods and lifestyles that will lower risk of cognitive decline, a classic component of aging. Martha Clare Thomas, an epidemiologist at Rush University Medical Center, and her colleagues developed the diet based upon research results that linked specific foods to brain function. Her studies showed that people who adhered moderately to the MIND diet lowered their Alzheimer’s disease risk by 35 percent, and those who adhered to the diet strictly lowered their risk by 53 percent.

The Ornish and MIND diets share many similarities. Both incorporate a host of plant-based foods as well as some seafood and poultry, while limiting sources of saturated fats and added sugars.

In addition to a modified diet, the following behaviors have been linked to improved cognitive health:

- Exercise – The American Heart Association recommends starting with 150 minutes a week as an initial goal, adding additional time gradually. Movement that is as simple as walking outdoors, climbing up and down stairs in your home, marching in place, or doing some exercises sitting in a chair are reasonable ways to begin.

- Socialize - Regular connection with family and community has a multitude of benefits. Consider volunteering at a hospital, nursing home or senior center. Volunteering as a teacher-assistant and working with youngsters can also help keep you “young.”

- Sleep well – Going to bed and waking at the same time each day is a healthful pattern to follow. Avoid caffeine at night, and make sure your bedroom lighting and

temperature is conducive to sleep.

- Manage stress - Stress impacts your health negatively in many ways. If you experience stress, consider consulting your doctor about ways to reduce it.

- Manage your health conditions - Various health conditions, including high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and depression should not be ignored. Take immediate and consistent action with the help of your health care provider.

Changing your lifestyle and eating patterns doesn’t have to be difficult. Start with small changes that you can manage and even enjoy. Doing so will increase the likelihood that you sustain your new habits. Remember, too, that it is important that you consult with your health care provider before making any adjustments.

The MIND Diet

Foods to Limit

- Pastries and sweets – fewer than five servings per week
- Red meat - fewer than four servings per week
- Whole-fat cheese - less than one ounce a week
- Fried or fast food - no more than one serving per week

Foods to Include

- Vegetables - two or more servings daily and at least one serving of leafy greens
- Fruit - at least ½ cup of berries five times per week
- Whole grains - Three or more servings daily, with emphasis on grains that are minimally processed
- Extra-virgin olive oil - two tablespoons daily
- Legumes and nuts - One serving of nuts and beans every other day. (A serving of beans is ½ cup, a serving of nuts is ¼ cup.)
- Seafood - at least one seafood meal per week (Focus on fatty fish like salmon, herring, and sardines.)
- Poultry - Five servings per week (Avoid frying.)



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