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Turning Back Time

By Debbie DeAngelo
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Would you believe me if I told you that your age may not actually be the same as the number of candles on your birthday cake? That's right – chronological age and biological age can be vastly different.

While chronological age is the number we celebrate, or avoid, each year, biological age is how old your cells and organs are. In other words, the functional age of your body. Compounding the potential discrepancy between these two definitions is the fact that not all parts of your body age at the same

rate. For example, your kidneys could function at a more aged state than your liver or your heart could function at a more youthful level than your brain. Research suggests that your biological age, also known as real age, is a more accurate way of predicting aging and disease.

Heredity vs. Habits

We all know people who look and function much younger than their years, as well as those who are rapid agers. Although some of how you age has a genetic component, much of it is influenced by external factors. The way we age is not set in stone.

When it comes to the role that heredity plays in aging, the two main determinants to changes in genetic material are telomere length and methylation. The terms will be explained. Genetic predisposition can be affected either positively or negatively by our health habits through the process of methylation. The entire field of epigenetics is based on this interaction between the environment, our behaviors and genetics. This can mean the difference between whether the hereditary risk of disease is expressed or suppressed.

Hand-in-hand with methylation is telomeres. DNA is the cell's genetic material. At the end of each DNA strand is a structure called a telomere. Often described as being like the cap at the tip of a shoelace, telomeres become shorter with age and disease. The scientific community believes that people with shorter telomeres are more likely to experience chronic illness. Also, it appears that adopting a healthy lifestyle can slow down this process by lengthening telomeres.

It's clear from studies of identical twins that genes aren't the primary determinant of aging. These studies imply that genes account for approximately 20% to 30% of biological age. The best chance of lowering your real age is through your health habits. These lifestyle recommendations aren't new to any of us. They do work – if you follow them. Perhaps achieving a more youthful level of functioning will motivate you to adopt a few.

Nutrition. One of the most pivotal choices we can make is to eat a high-quality diet. Consuming whole, unprocessed foods is a vital first step. Next, be sure your meals contain a spectrum of vegetables, fruits and whole grains. Select healthy fats, fish, and lean meats. Bottom line: Eat whole foods; mostly plant based; and not too much.

Activity. Contrary to popular belief, activity isn't just about achieving at least 30 minutes of exertion five days a week. Regular movement throughout the day aids in living longer and stronger. It's important to avoid being couch bound for most of the day.

Sleep. Over one-third of adults aren't getting seven to eight hours of shuteye. Sleep is not a luxury, it's a necessity. Since there are a variety of reasons people cite for lack of sleep or not achieving quality sleep, start by identifying and problem solving the obstacles that impact your sleep routine. Not only will you feel better and be more productive on a daily basis, but you also may add a few more trips around the sun.

Stress. Stress is the body's reaction to real or perceived challenges. Short-term stress isn't considered harmful but ongoing stress is a different story. It's a major contributor to chronic inflammation and disease. Since we can't totally eliminate overwhelming circumstances or occurrences, we must shift our focus to controlling our response to it. Developing a plan for dealing with persistent stressors should address minimizing our exposure when we can and finding a productive outlet for coping.

Relationships. People are social beings and therefore have an inherent need to connect with others (including pets). Regular interactions with family, friends, and community strengthen this sense of connectedness. Studies reveal that when it comes to mortality, lack of social network conveys a risk comparable to smoking, lack of activity, and obesity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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