

# **How Healthy Are You?**

Take our quiz to see if your habits are helping or hurting you.

Your health can be measured in several ways, such as through blood and imaging tests. But what should matter most is how you feel. And when thousands of baby boomers rated their own condition, just 13 percent reported "excellent" health, according to a 2013 analysis published in the journal JAMA Internal Medicine. To put that into perspective, 32 percent of people born in the generation before the boomers reported excellent health at the same age. And although boomers had higher rates of disease and disability, they were expected to live longer.

The findings shed light on an unfortunate fact: Advances in medication and medical care can extend our lives, but those added years are not as healthy as they could be.

Take the results of a 14-year review of more than 44,000 adults by researchers at the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Fewer than 2 percent of people achieved all of the following healthy habits: not smoking; staying physically fit; keeping blood pressure, blood glucose, and cholesterol numbers in check; maintaining a healthy weight; and eating a healthy diet.

The prize for the few people living a healthy life? A 76 percent lower risk of dying from cardiovascular disease and a decrease in death from all cancers when compared with those meeting only one of those health parameters.

Fortunately, there's still time to experience the lifesaving effects of being healthy. Adopting a good-for-you habit—even past your seventh decade—can add several quality years to your life. That's why we've created the self-test that begins on page 4 to help you analyze your habits and to see where change is needed, whether it means a better diet, more exercise, or additional fun. Answer honestly and use the results as a road map to a longer life.

## **1. Are you more of a carnivore or an herbivore?**

- a) Carnivore.
- b) Herbivore, but I like a steak sometimes.
- c) I don't eat meat.

A steak may be satisfying, but eating red meat can have deadly consequences. Though it has long been associated with certain cancers and cardiovascular disease, a large Harvard University study recently found that consuming red meat increases the risk of death from those chronic conditions, as well as a person's overall mortality risk. Processed red meat such as bacon, bologna, and salami were found to be most dangerous. The researchers advise replacing red meat with more fish, poultry, legumes, and whole grains. All were associated with a significantly lower risk of death.

## **2. Do you have type 2 diabetes?**

- a) Yes.
- b) I have prediabetes.
- c) No.

If you chose "C," confirm your answer with a doctor; 7 million people in the U.S. have undiagnosed diabetes right now. But an official diagnosis isn't the only reason to cut back on sugar. The sweet stuff, as well as carbohydrates in general, can raise triglyceride levels while lowering concentrations of healthy HDL cholesterol.

### **3. How many daily servings of fruits and vegetables do you eat?**

- a) One or two.
- b) Around five servings.
- c) Seven or more.

A person should consume at least two to four servings of fruit and three to five servings of vegetables each day. Doing so reduces the risk of many causes of premature death, such as cancer and diabetes. The more colorful your selections, the better. Red, orange, yellow, green, purple, and white fruits and vegetables each contain different and important groups of phytonutrients, including antioxidants and other disease-fighting substances.

### **4. Which color bread do you normally choose?**

- a) White.
- b) Light brown.
- c) Dark brown.

Trick question. Many people wrongly believe color is an indication of whole grains and therefore think darker bread is healthier. Instead, pay attention to bread's ingredients and not its hue. Whole grain should be a part of the first ingredient. (Look for "whole wheat flour" or "whole grain rye flour," for example.) At least half of your daily six to 10 servings of bread, pasta, and cereals should be whole grains rather than refined. The refining process removes the bran and germ, which are rich in fiber and a host of nutrients.

### **5. Are you a soda drinker?**

- a) I have an occasional soda.
- b) Yes, at least one soda a day.
- c) I swore off soda years ago.

Soda is the largest source of added sugars in the U.S. diet, and regular consumption has been associated with weight gain, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, gout, and coronary artery disease. What's more, researchers from the Cleveland Clinic and Harvard University found that both sugar-sweetened and low-calorie sodas are associated with a higher risk of stroke, perhaps more so in women.

### **6. Do you drink alcohol?**

- a) I have a drink or two on most days.
- b) I often have more than three drinks in a day.
- c) I rarely consume alcohol.

You don't have to overdo it to be in danger. Alcohol results in 10 times as many deaths as it prevents in the U.S. even after considering possible beneficial effects for cardiovascular disease, according to a February 2013 study in the American Journal of Public Health. Alcohol—a known carcinogen—accounts for up to 21,000 cancer deaths annually (more than melanoma or ovarian cancer), resulting in approximately 18 years of life lost in each case. Approximately 30 percent of those deaths occurred with a consumption of less than 1.5 drinks per day. "For most alcohol users, reducing alcohol consumption would likely improve their health in many ways in addition to reducing cancer risk," the study's authors conclude.

### **7. How many glasses of water do you drink each day?**

- a) Several.
- b) One or two.
- c) No more than a glass.

Water is the only nutrient whose absence becomes lethal within days. Experts generally recommend drinking six to eight 8-ounce glasses of fluid every day, which helps lubricate and cushion joints and protect tissue. It doesn't have to be solely water. You can satisfy some fluid needs by drinking milk, tea, coffee, or no-sugar added juices, which are mostly water.

**8. Have you had fun lately?**

- a) Yes, of course.
- b) Honestly, no.
- c) Not enough.

If you find yourself thinking, "I used to have so much fun," take a hard look at the demands on your time. Not being able to schedule fun activities, or enjoying them less than you once did, can be a subtle indicator of stress, anxiety, or depression.

**9. Do you have a big social network?**

- a) Yes, I'm always seeing friends.
- b) I have a small circle and see them only now and then.
- c) I don't socialize much.

Being more social might lower your dementia risk, according to a Swedish study published in the American Journal of Epidemiology. The researchers tracked the health and activities of older adults and found that being social stimulates and helps preserve cognition. If you're more of a loner, make sure to keep your mind active by reading, writing, studying, completing puzzles, and making art, which may also help keep dementia at bay.

**10. Do friends, a partner, or your spouse say you're hostile?**

- a) Absolutely not.
- b) I wouldn't be surprised.
- c) "Me? Hostile?"

Maintaining good emotional health might be almost as important for preventing heart attack and stroke as a healthy diet and exercise. People who are happier, more optimistic, and less hostile have stronger immune systems and are less likely to die early of chronic disease. Try focusing on good memories rather than bad, and seek engaging experiences.

**11. Do you need to lose weight?**

- a) Yes.
- b) No.
- c) I need to gain weight.

If your waist is larger than 35 inches (for women) or 40 inches (for men), you need to lose at least a little weight around your waistline. The total inches around your waist should be less than half of your height. For instance, if you're 67 inches tall, your waist size should be about 33 inches or less. Waist size tends to be a better predictor of health than measures of weight or body mass index (BMI) because belly fat, rather than fat on the hips and bottom, is more closely tied to disease risk.

**12. How many hours do you sleep each day or night?**

- a) 4 or less.
- b) 5 to 6.
- c) 7 or more.

Insufficient sleep—6 hours or less—contributes to many health problems. Studies have shown that failing to get enough sleep is associated with an increase in obesity, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease,

impaired cognition, and premature death. Recent research published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences provides a possible mechanism: Just one week of inadequate sleep can alter the expression of more than 700 genes involved in inflammation, immunity, and cells' response to stress. So try keeping a consistent sleep schedule. Bedtime shouldn't vary by more than an hour each day, including weekends.

**13. How much TV do you watch?**

- a) Many hours each day
- b) 2 hours or less daily.
- c) I don't watch TV at all.

If your daily total of TV-watching time is less than 2 hours, you're likely to be healthier than those who view more. Not only can television keep you pinned to your chair, but it also bombards you with food advertising that can make you hungry. Adults who watch more than 2 hours of television a day consume more calories at snack time and dinner and are more likely to be overweight than those who watch less.

**14. How often do you see your dentist?**

- a) Once or twice a year.
- b) About once every five years.
- c) I don't know the last time I saw a dentist.

Tagged "the silent epidemic," tooth decay is chronic in the U.S. According to the National Academies' Institute of Medicine, people "do not fully appreciate how oral health affects overall health and well-being." Evidence shows that decay and other oral complications are linked to respiratory disease, cardiovascular disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and bacterial pneumonia. Schedule regular dental check-ups and cleanings because they are the only way to effectively remove tartar, which traps plaque bacteria along the gum line.

**15. Are you a cigarette smoker?**

- a) Yes.
- b) No, but I used to smoke.
- c) I never smoked.

Smoking can shave more than 10 years off the average life span, but quitting at any age buys time. Quit by age 40 and you'll avoid almost all of the excess risk of death from smoking. Push it back to about age 55, and you'll gain four to six years.

**16. How long have you been a regular exerciser?**

- a) I have always tried to stay fit.
- b) I still don't exercise.
- c) As I've grown older, fitness has become more of a focus.

People who are physically fit at midlife appear to be much less likely to develop Alzheimer's disease and other types of dementia than those who were less fit, according to a study conducted at the Cooper Institute in Dallas. You still have time to get serious: Recent research in the British Medical Journal found that even people 75 or older could boost their life expectancy by five to six years if they started to exercise more.

**17. How much time do you spend exercising each week?**

- a) Less than an hour.
- b) Closer to 2 to 3 hours.
- c) More than 3 hours.

The goal is to get at least 30 minutes a day, five days a week, of moderately paced exercise (such as purposeful walking, swimming, or bicycling). If you keep a vigorous pace and jog or run, for example, you can cut it down to 15 minutes. A January 2013 review in the journal *Maturitas* states that it's now clearly apparent that a decline in one's muscular strength and exercise capacity can initiate a downward spiral of reduced health. Exercise helps lower high blood pressure, and 69 percent of people who have a first heart attack, 77 percent who have a first stroke, and 74 percent with chronic heart failure have elevated blood pressure.

**18. Do you lift weights as part of your exercise regimen?**

- a) Yes, regularly.
- b) I don't lift weights.
- c) Sometimes.

Mind your muscles and lift weights a few times each week. Individuals who have more muscle mass have a higher metabolic rate (up to a 15 percent increase), which is helpful for weight loss and long-term weight control. And weight lifting can be a very powerful tool for reducing the signs and symptoms of numerous diseases and chronic conditions, including arthritis, back pain, depression, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis, and obesity. Scientists at Tufts University recently found that the effectiveness of strength training to ease the pain of osteoarthritis was just as potent as, if not more potent than, prescription medication. The higher your point total, the healthier you might be. Find the questions where you scored lowest and work to build up your points.

**Scoring**

				<b>POINTS</b>
1.	a = 1	b = 2	c = 3	_____
2.	a = 1	b = 2	c = 3	_____
3.	a = 1	b = 2	c = 3	_____
4.	a = 2	b = 2	c = 2	_____
5.	a = 2	b = 1	c = 3	_____
6.	a = 2	b = 1	c = 3	_____
7.	a = 3	b = 2	c = 1	_____
8.	a = 3	b = 1	c = 2	_____
9.	a = 3	b = 2	c = 1	_____
10.	a = 3	b = 2	c = 1	_____
11.	a = 1	b = 3	c = 2	_____
12.	a = 1	b = 2	c = 3	_____
13.	a = 1	b = 2	c = 3	_____
14.	a = 3	b = 2	c = 1	_____
15.	a = 1	b = 2	c = 3	_____
16.	a = 3	b = 1	c = 2	_____
17.	a = 1	b = 2	c = 3	_____
18.	a = 3	b = 1	c = 2	_____
<b>TOTAL</b>				_____

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