

Pursuing the Fountain of Youth: Strategies for Staying Strong and Healthy as We Get Older

Target Audience: People wishing to reduced risk for chronic diseases like cardiovascular disease

Objectives: Participants will:

1. Understand various lifestyle choices that can improve and maintain health as they get older.
2. Undertake three lifestyle changes that can reduce their risk for health problems as they age.

Time Required: 30 minutes; for a 15-minute presentation, focus on physical activity, flossing, healthy weight, and smoking

Equipment: Flip chart and magic marker, adhesive for hanging

Handouts: Large note card and magic marker for each participant; “Fountain of Youth Construction Plan”

Lesson Plan

(Hand out the note card and marker as participants arrive.)

How many of you have heard of Ponce de Leon and his search for the Fountain of Youth? *(Participants will raise hands.)* If you look at television or pick up a woman’s magazine, you would think that he is still out there looking for that fountain. It seems like every ad, TV show, and article is promoting some product or service to keep us young and beautiful.

While I can’t promise you eternal youth after my presentation today, I can promise you that you will feel better and stay healthier if you try some of the things we discuss today. None of them are expensive, complicated, or unreasonable. However, some may take a good deal of effort on your part to achieve. But honestly, aren’t those things that you make the most effort to achieve, the very things you value the most and feel the most proud of?

I gave you a card and magic marker as you came in the room. Take that card out now and write down three things you think would help someone stay healthy as long as possible. *(Audience will write on cards.)*

Now let’s share some of the things you wrote down. *(As each participant shares an idea, write it down on the flip chart in large letters—use as many pieces of paper as needed until all the ideas are listed. Tape ideas up on wall. You might want to arrange ahead of time to have someone from the audience help write the ideas down and put sheets up.)*

You have done an excellent job of listing items that might be found in our Fountain of Youth. Let’s talk about some of them. *(Point to those items that are listed as you talk—*

have a blank sheet up to list as you speak any others in script that have not been mentioned by the audience.)

Physical Activity

A big factor in preserving health and independence as long as possible is regular physical activity. You notice I did not say exercise. While we know 30 minutes or more of aerobic exercise like jogging, brisk walking, or swimming is best for keeping your heart and circulation young, any activity that gets you up and moving is beneficial. It can be gardening, walking the dog, or taking the stairs. As the old saying goes, you either use it or lose it.

Really important for bone health and preservation of muscle mass and balance are strengthening exercises using weights. Even the very old have been able to become stronger and more independent from wheel chairs and walkers after they have begun a weight training program 2–4 days a week. Combine weight training with stretching on a regular basis and you'll be active and vital for a very long time.

Smoking

You would have to be unconscious not to know that smoking will likely shorten your life. Every organ of the body seems to be adversely affected by smoking. The skin gets more wrinkled; the body's ability to heal itself slows down; cancer and heart disease risks skyrocket. Stopping is usually the hardest thing anyone ever has to do. But the effort is worth it. It is common for people to quit up to three or more times before they are finally successful. The American Lung Association and your doctor can give you effective strategies for quitting if you just ask.

Good Nutrition

When it comes to aging, you definitely are what you eat. Go for the minimally processed food as often as possible. This may mean eating out less and bringing your lunch to work more often. Longevity seems to depend on plenty of fruits and vegetables and whole grains. Over and over again, research has shown that cancer, heart disease, stroke, and other chronic diseases are lowest in those who eat a plant-based diet.

That doesn't mean you can't have animal products but you should emphasize fish and skinless poultry over red meat and nonfat and reduced-fat dairy products over full-fat versions. When it comes to added fat, you want to use small amounts of liquid oils like olive, canola, and peanut oil rather than solid fats like butter or shortening whenever possible. This will cut the amount of saturated fat and trans fatty acids that threaten your heart.

Other things to consider are your sodium and alcohol intake. Sodium intake can affect blood pressure, so go for fresh food rather than processed food as much as possible.

Alcohol

Some research indicates that one to two drinks of alcohol each day may lower risk for cardiovascular disease, but more is definitely not better. For women, over one drink a day increases cancer risk. No one is advocating that someone start drinking if they currently do not drink. Certainly excess alcohol has killed more people than it has saved.

Water

A much safer drink is water. As we age our sense of thirst diminishes. We cannot depend on thirst to tell us if we need water, so now is the time to get in the habit of drinking eight or more glasses of fluid per day. Many people fill up a large sports bottle with water at the beginning of the day and when it is gone, they know they have drunk enough. Good choices besides water are juices and milk. Black or green tea that is not full of sugar may also be healthy because it contains antioxidants that help reduce cancer and heart disease risk.

Flossing

Regular dental care is related to good nutrition. While most of us are good about brushing our teeth, many of us are not so good about flossing. Flossing is one of the most effective ways to prevent gum disease. This simple activity once a day can significantly decrease the amount of plaque in your mouth that causes tooth decay and gum irritation. Plaque can cause pockets to form in the gums where bacteria can grow causing infection that leads to bone loss around the teeth. Loss of bone means loose teeth that can fall out.

Research has shown that those who maintain good dental health usually stay healthier because they can eat a wider variety of foods. *(Those who have diabetes will also have worse control of their blood glucose values when teeth and gums are infected. The opposite is also true. When blood glucose control is poor, bacteria grow more easily and gum disease is more likely to occur.)* There is even some evidence that more harmful bacteria in the mouth may increase risk for heart disease.

A Healthy Weight

By eating the most nutritious foods and becoming physically active, you will be more likely to achieve a healthy weight that you can maintain as you get older. Your healthy weight may not be your ideal weight. Rather it is weight that you *maintain* (no yo-yoing up or down) when you eat a well-balanced, nutritious diet and are physically active for at least 30 minutes 5–7 days a week. How many of you think you have achieved your healthy weight? Looks like many of you have something to work on.

Avoiding the Sun

A final habit that can help you look younger longer is controlling sun exposure. The sun's rays are damaging to the skin. Unfortunately, most of the damage is done even before we are adults. But continued sun exposure will increase risk for skin cancer and premature wrinkling.

If you must go out in the sun, use a sunscreen that has a rating of 15. Wear a hat and sunglasses. And try to stay out of the strongest sunlight between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m.

Now that you have heard about what seems to keep people young and active, let's begin to build your Fountain of Youth. *(Pass out the "Fountain of Youth Construction Plan.")* The Fountain of Youth Construction Plan is your plan for the next 6 months to begin to build your own Fountain of Youth. You should choose three different habits that you want to acquire during that time. First, write down the one you want to work on for the next 2 months, then the one you want to take on for the 2 months after that, and finally the one you want to pursue during the final 2 months. While we hope you will

accomplish these changes in that time frame, don't be disappointed if you don't achieve all three. Be flexible and realize that you will accomplish them eventually if you just keep trying.

(Give the participants 5 minutes to list their choices on the Construction Plan—if time permits, have a few participants share their goals. Plan to have follow-up meetings to see how people are doing 1 month from now, 3 months from now, and 6 months from now. Make and keep a copy of their Construction Plans for your files.)