



Seven Steps to Grow Younger and Live Longer

Deepak Chopra, MD

Only a few decades ago, conventional medicine viewed the body as a machine whose parts would inevitably break down until it could no longer be repaired. As a medical student, I learned that random chemical reactions determined everything that happened in the body, the mind and body were separate and independent from each other, and genes largely determined our health and lifespan.

Today scientific research is arriving at a radically different understanding: While the body appears to be material, it is really a field of energy and intelligence that is inextricably connected to

the mind. We now know that what used to be considered the “normal” experience of aging—a progressive descent into physical and mental incapacity—is in large part a conditioned response. The mind influences every cell in the body and therefore human aging is fluid and changeable. It can speed up, slow down, and even reverse itself.

There are many studies demonstrating the profound influence of the mind and beliefs on aging.

For example, a landmark study by Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer, Ph.D., showed that the so-called irreversible signs of aging, including deterioration in hearing, vision, manual dexterity, muscle strength, and memory, could be reversed through psychological shifts in awareness and increases in physical and mental activity.

Even though we all have genetic predispositions, our health and aging aren't predetermined. By making conscious choices in our behavior and where we focus our attention, we can transform our experience of our body to decrease our biological age.

These seven steps are practical ways to tap into your inner reservoir of unlimited energy, creativity, vitality, and love.

Step 1: Change Your Perceptions of Your Body and Aging

Affirmation: Every day in every way, I am increasing my mental and physical capacity. I am reversing my biological age by changing my perception of my body, its aging, and time.

Perception is a selective act of attention and interpretation. What you experience as “reality,” including your physical body and aging, is shaped by your habits of perception. While most people are conditioned to see the body as a static, biological machine, you can begin to view it as a field of energy, transformation, and intelligence that is constantly renewing itself.

Begin to notice both your internal dialogue and how you speak about your body and aging. If you find yourself saying things like, “I'm hitting the age where I'll need reading glasses,” “I'm too old to try yoga (or some other

activity),” “I inherited my dad’s bad back,” or other such statements, make a conscious choice to shift your perspective and what you tell yourself about your body and age.

Keep in mind that your cells are eavesdropping on what you say, so unless you want to have your father’s bad back or anything else that “runs in the family,” don’t nurture that seed of intention in your awareness.

Step 2: Manage Stress with Meditation

Affirmation: I prioritize self-care by meditating regularly, allowing myself to rest in the sacred space of silent connection so I may be calm and centered.

Meditation is a simple yet powerful tool that takes us to a state of profound relaxation that dissolves fatigue and the accumulated stress that accelerates the aging process. During meditation, our breathing slows, our blood pressure and heart rate decrease, and stress hormone levels fall. By its very nature, meditation calms the mind, and when the mind is in a state of restful awareness, the body relaxes too.

Research shows that people who meditate regularly develop less hypertension, heart disease, anxiety, and other stress-related illnesses that speed up aging. Furthermore, new studies are finding that meditation literally restores the brain. A recent groundbreaking study conducted by Massachusetts General Hospital made headlines by showing that as little as eight weeks of meditation not only helped people feel calmer but also produced changes in various areas of the brain, including growth in the areas associated with memory, empathy, sense of self, and stress regulation.

This study adds to the expanding body of research about the brain’s amazing plasticity and capacity to grow and change at any stage of life. We can nurture our brain’s power and maintain a youthful mind by developing a regular meditation practice.

Getting Started with Meditation

I usually recommend that people learn a traditional meditation practice from a qualified instructor. That way, you know exactly what to do at any point in meditation and with any experience that comes along. Often when people try to learn on their own or from a book, they learn incorrectly and soon give up in frustration because they aren’t experiencing the expected benefits. For those who are interested, the Chopra Center offers instruction in *Primordial Sound Meditation*, a natural, easy practice that dates back thousands of years to India’s Vedic tradition.

Step 3: Get Abundant Restful Sleep

Affirmation: I honor my body’s need for rest by prioritizing deep, revitalizing, undisturbed sleep.

Getting regular restful sleep is an essential key to staying healthy and vital, yet it is so often neglected or underemphasized. There is even a tendency for people to boast about how little sleep they can get by on. In reality, a lack of restful sleep disrupts the body’s innate balance, weakens our immune system, and speeds up the aging process.

Human beings generally need between six and eight hours of restful sleep each night. Restful sleep means that you’re not using pharmaceuticals or alcohol to get to sleep but that you’re drifting off easily once you turn off the light and are sleeping soundly through the night. If you feel energetic and vibrant when you wake up, you had a night of restful sleep. If you feel tired and unenthusiastic, you haven’t had restful sleep.

You can get the highest quality sleep by keeping your sleep cycles in tune with the rhythms of the universe, known as circadian rhythms. This means going to bed by about 10 p.m. and waking at 6 a.m.

Ideally, eat only a light meal in the evening, before 7:30 if possible, so that your sleep isn't hampered by the digestive processes. You can go for a leisurely walk after dinner and then be in bed by 10 p.m.

It's also very helpful to download your thoughts from the day in a journal before going to bed so that your mind doesn't keep you awake.

Step 4: Nurture Your Body with Healthy Food

Affirmation: I lovingly nurture my body by listening to its needs and nourishing it with healthy, vibrant foods.

There are "dead" foods that accelerate aging and entropy and others that renew and revitalize the body. Foods to eliminate or minimize include items that are canned, frozen, microwaved, or highly processed. Focus on eating a variety of fresh and freshly prepared food.

A simple way to make sure that you are getting a balanced diet is to include the six tastes (sweet, salty, sour, pungent, bitter, and astringent) in each meal. The typical American diet tends to be dominated by the sweet, sour, and salty tastes (the main flavors of a hamburger). We do need these tastes, but they can lower metabolism especially if eaten in excess.

The pungent, bitter, and astringent tastes, on the other hand, are anti-inflammatory and increase metabolism. These tastes are found in food such as radishes, ginger, mustard, peppers, spinach, mushrooms, tea, lentils lettuce, and so on.

Along with the six tastes, filling your plate with the colors of the rainbow promotes a long and healthy life. We can literally ingest the information of the universe into our biology. Foods that are deep blue, purple, red, green, or orange are leaders in antioxidants and contain many nutrients that boost immunity and enhance health.

Examples of foods of the rainbow:

- Red: Red tomatoes (particularly cooked), red peppers, red/pink grapefruit, watermelon, red grapes, beets, red cabbage, red apples, strawberries, cherries, raspberries, cranberries
- Orange/yellow: Squash, carrots, sweet potatoes, yams, pumpkin, cantaloupe, mangoes, oranges, papaya, nectarines
- Green: Broccoli, kale, spinach, cabbage, peas, avocado, collard greens
- Deep blue/purple: Plums, blueberries, black raspberries, blackberries, purple grapes, eggplant (with skin)

Step 5: Move Your Body Every Day

Affirmation: I rejoice in the miracle of my body by moving, stretching, and strengthening it every day.

One of the most important ways to grow younger and live longer is regular exercise. Dr. William Evans and Dr. Irwin Rosenberg from Tufts University have documented the powerful effect of exercise on many of the biomarkers of aging, including muscle mass, strength, aerobic capacity, bone density, and cholesterol. Not only does exercise keep the body young, but it also keeps the mind vital and promotes emotional well-being. In his

book *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*, Harvard University professor John Ratey, M.D. describes research showing how “physical activity sparks biological changes that encourage brain cells to bind to one another.” This spark, as he calls it, increases the brain’s ability to learn, adapt, and perform other cognitive tasks.

A complete fitness program includes exercises to develop flexibility, cardiovascular conditioning, and strength training. Find an aerobic activity that you can do regularly—three to four sessions each week for twenty to thirty minutes is usually enough to give you substantial benefits. After your body is warmed up, spend five to ten minutes stretching. You will also want to include strength training in your program to systematically exercise the major muscle groups of your body.

The important thing is to start off slowly, find physical activities you enjoy, and do them regularly. If the most you can do right now is walk around the block, do that, and you will be surprised how quickly you increase your endurance and enthusiasm for moving and breathing.

Step 6: Cultivate Love and Friendship

Affirmation: I openly give and receive love to those around me.

Isolation and loneliness create the conditions for rapid aging. Heart attack and death rates are known to increase among the recently widowed and among men who have been suddenly terminated from their jobs without warning and against their will. The emotional value of social bonding is immense, yet in some countries, including the U.S., we have moved in the opposite direction for decades. With high divorce rates, single-parent families, and a population constantly on the move, social bonding keeps declining. The trend will be exacerbated as the fastest-growing population, those eighty and over, move into retirement homes. It’s becoming increasingly rare for older people to be cared for at home, and there is still a stigma about seniors being a burden to the young and a drag on society.

The key here is to stay connected and open to new relationships throughout your life. Resist the impulse to go quietly into semi-isolation because you assume that society expects that of you. Losing friends and spouses is an inevitable part of aging, and many people can’t find replacements or lack the motivation to. By “replacement,” I don’t mean a new spouse and family (though that is certainly a possibility), but emotional bonds that mean something to you and offer continued meaning to your existence. No amount of reading and television substitutes for human contact that nourishes on the level of love and caring. One of the most effective steps is for older people to become involved with mentoring programs, education, and youth programs.

Step 7: Maintain a Youthful Mind

Affirmation: I make time to play and explore each day, approaching new experiences with the curiosity and openness of a child.

An ancient Vedic aphorism says, “Infinite flexibility is the secret to immortality.” When we cultivate flexibility in or consciousness, we renew ourselves in every moment and reverse the aging process. Children offer the finest expressions of openness and flexibility. They play and laugh freely, and find wonder in the smallest things. They are infinitely creative because they haven’t yet built up the layers of conditioning that create limitations and restrictions.

To maintain a youthful mind, write down two or three things you can do that are totally childlike. Think of something that evokes childhood for you—eating an ice cream cone, going to a playground to swing, coloring a

picture, jumping rope, building a sand castle. Find something that brings back the sense of fun you had as a child, even if you think you've outgrown it, and choose one of these activities to do today.

As you carry out your childlike activity, let yourself embody the archetypal carefree and innocent child. The feeling you're aiming for isn't a return to childhood, but something more profound, as expressed by the brilliant therapist A.H. Almaas: "When we look at a child, we see that the sense of fullness, of intrinsic aliveness, of joy in being, is not the result of something else. There is value in just being oneself; it is not because of something one does or doesn't do. It is there in the beginning, when we were children but slowly it gets lost." By re-experiencing our childlike nature, we not only cultivate a youthful mind, but we also connect to the part of us that is never born and never dies—our eternal spiritual essence.

About the Author

Deepak Chopra, M.D., F.A.C.P., is the co-founder of the Chopra Center for Wellbeing, the founder of the Chopra Foundation, and a world-renowned pioneer in integrative medicine and personal transformation. He is board certified in internal medicine, endocrinology, and metabolism. He is a Fellow of the American College of Physicians, a member of the American Association of Clinical Endocrinologists, and a clinical professor in the Family Medicine and Public Health Department at the University of California, San Diego.

He is the author of more than 85 books translated into over 43 languages, including numerous New York Times bestsellers. His recent books include *You Are the Universe*, co-authored with Menas Kafatos, Ph.D.; *Quantum Healing (Revised and Updated): Exploring the Frontiers of Mind/ Body Medicine*; and *The Healing Self: A Revolutionary New Plan to Supercharge Your Immunity and Stay Well for Life*, co-authored with Rudolph Tanzi, Ph.D.