

EAT TO BEAT



Emulating the eating habits of the residents of “Blue Zones,” where people enjoy extraordinary longevity, can help you stay healthy at every age.

by Stacy Baker Masand



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BEING AROUND TO CELEBRATE YOUR 100TH BIRTHDAY SEEMS LIKE A MATTER OF LUCK, but it turns out that there are many similarities between the lifestyles of the world’s longest-living people. Dan Buettner, researcher and author of *The Blue Zones: 9 Lessons for Living Longer From the People Who’ve Lived the Longest* (National Geographic, 2010), explored these regions, uncovering the secrets to longevity of centenarians from around the globe. In addition to their long, healthy and happy lives, Buettner’s research found that they also have low levels of obesity, diabetes and heart disease.

Surprisingly, even though these people live in vastly different places, thousands of miles apart, there are many similarities in their diets—and their lifestyle. Some of his findings:

In Sardinia, an island off the coast of Italy, Buettner believes that the local’s herding lifestyle, combined with plenty of wine, legumes and dairy from goat and sheep, are their secrets to longevity. Even more impressive: The ratio of male-to-female 100-year-olds is one to one, which is unheard of in other parts of the world.

The people of Okinawa, Japan—which has the highest concentration of centenarians in the world—focus on tofu, brown rice, garlic and shiitake mushrooms, along with seaweed and fish.

Buettner found that the diet of Costa Ricans in the Nicoya Peninsula is centered around beans, squash and corn, supplemented by vitamin C–rich locally grown fruits.

On Icaria, Greece, the islanders eat a traditionally Mediterranean diet, including feta cheese, goat’s milk, wild greens and wild-caught fish instead of lamb, which Buettner says is responsible for their longevity.

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There’s even a Blue Zone in the U.S.: Loma Linda, CA, the home of many Seventh Day Adventists. These Californians follow an “Adventist’s Diet,” which is mainly plant-based with small amounts of salmon and no processed sugars.

Admittedly, the lifestyle and diets of the Blue Zones are not always easy to replicate if you live a modern Western lifestyle—it’s probably not realistic to give up your desk job to become a shepherd, grow and pick every salad you eat, or never get takeout. So we asked nutrition experts and health coaches to weigh in on savvy adaptations that can help you live a longer, happier life. Here’s what they said.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT.

You wouldn’t try a new sport or hobby without practicing different techniques or learning new skills, points out Ronit Kalman, PhD, a New York City–based certified health coach. “It’s just not practical.” Same thing goes for incorporating new healthy eating habits into your routine. Start with small, manageable steps: putting more vegetables, whole grains and beans on your shopping list, eating more vegetables at every meal, or just taking more time to eat. “Trying to make all the changes at once can be overwhelming and feel like a strict regimen,” she says.

KNOW WHAT YOU’RE GOING TO EAT.

Kalman also says that planning and preparing meals ahead of time can help you make good choices and stay on track with your goals. She prepares batches of food that will last for multiple meals, makes and freezes smoothies for the week, and preps snacks in advance so there’s no scrounging around for a quick fix in the office vending machine or on a delivery menu when she’s hungry.

LIMIT (READ: OMIT) THE JUNK.

Blue Zone areas generally don't have blocks-long strip malls jammed with fast-food restaurants, or convenience stores selling processed foods. Gabbi Berkow, RD, a New York City-based dietitian and Pilates instructor, believes that avoiding low-quality junk food is one of the keys that help Blue Zoners stay healthy, and she recommends that her clients follow suit.

"Limit fried foods, packaged snacks and any foods with partially hydrogenated oil as an ingredient," she advises. "They're high in trans fats, which raise your bad (LDL) cholesterol, decrease your good (HDL) cholesterol, cause inflammation and increase your risk of heart disease and diabetes." She also recommends curbing white carbs and foods with added sugar as much as possible. "They wreak havoc with your blood sugar levels, increase fat storage and have addictive qualities because they most often combine sugar, fat and salt."

Berkow recommends limiting red meat to one serving a week due to its saturated-fat content, but adds that wild-caught fish and organic, hormone-free chicken are excellent sources of protein that can be eaten daily.

FILL YOUR PLATE WITH VEGETABLES.

Blue Zoners mostly eat a plant-based diet, with a special emphasis on veggies. That's not always easy in places with a faster-paced lifestyle, but it's one of the most important things you can do to improve your health. "Veggies are low in calories and chock-full of fiber, vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants and phytochemicals that are really beneficial for your body and mind," Berkow explains. She recommends following the Plate Method, which means filling half of your plate with veggies at lunch and dinner. She also says to shoot for four different unstarchy vegetables per day, two of which are green.

Make it easy to increase your intake by having pre-cut and precooked varieties ready to go in the fridge, which you can quickly add to green or grain salads, sandwiches, eggs and other dishes. Some examples: Steam a big batch of broccoli or string beans, or roast asparagus, tomatoes, peppers, cauliflower or carrots. Pre-shredded vegetables—Brussels sprouts, carrots, cabbage, kale—as well as salad mixes also make it simple to eat more produce.

TAKE YOUR PULSE(S).

Luci Crow, MS, RD, a dietitian, Pilates instructor and co-founder of Align Wellness Studio in Nashville, encourages her clients to incorporate "pulses," aka beans, lentils and dry peas, into meals. "Pulses are loaded with protein, fiber, iron and antioxidants—they're truly an earth-friendly superfood that can be incorporated into your diet every day," she says. She sends her clients to pulsepledge.com to get recipes, learn how to easily incorporate legumes into their diet and take a 10-week Pulse Pledge.

CHOOSE GRAINS WISELY.

"True whole grains have 100 percent whole-wheat or whole-grain flour listed as the first ingredient," says Kalman. "If the word 'whole' isn't in the ingredients list, the product is not really a whole grain—even though it may be advertised as such!"

In addition to wheat, look for other organic whole grains, like quinoa, wild rice, brown rice, amaranth and buckwheat.

EAT EVERY THREE TO FOUR HOURS.

Skipping meals can cause blood sugar levels to drop and increase your odds of overeating and reaching for unhealthy foods because you feel so hungry. That's why Berkow is big on snacks. "Never leave home without a snack," she says. "Pack options that contain at least 20 grams of protein, healthy carbs and healthy fat, like plain Greek yogurt with fruit and a handful of nuts."

EXAMINE YOUR SWEET TOOTH.

It's normal to have a sweet tooth, says Berkow, because you need sugar for energy. The trick to curbing cravings, however, is to look at the reasons you want something sweet. "Did you go more than four hours without eating, or not have protein at your last meal or snack? If so, you're just hungry and need a solid, protein-rich meal," she explains. But if you feel sad, lonely or bored when you crave sweets, find ways to cope with the emotions sans sugar. Here's some good news for sweet tooths: The less often you turn to sugar, the less you'll crave it.

Berkow advises curbing cravings with "healthy sweets": berries with one or two squares of dark chocolate and nuts; a baked apple with cinnamon in plain Greek yogurt; or a "protein pudding" made by blending chocolate casein protein powder with almond milk.

TRADE FRUIT SNACKS FOR VEGGIES.

Most people grab a banana or an apple for a quick snack on the go, but if you're looking to incorporate more veggies, Kalman recommends portable vegetables. Radishes, baby carrots, and pre-cut celery and peppers don't require peeling or prep.

EAT HIGH-QUALITY MEAT.

While Blue Zone meals are primarily plant-based, you don't need to cut out meat entirely to be healthy. "Rather than encourage exclusion of animal foods, I recommend people choose the best quality animal foods they can afford," says Lily Nichols, RDN, a Los Angeles-based dietitian and Pilates instructor.

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SAY CHEERS.

Buettner's guidelines also recommend wine in moderation, which makes sense because of its high antioxidant levels, but limit your daily serving to one glass.

MAKE MEALS A STROLL, NOT A SPRINT.

How you eat is just as important as what you eat. People in the Blue Zones don't gobble breakfast while driving to work, or speed-eat their lunch while reading a report or catching up on Facebook. "In Blue Zones, people focus on their meals when they eat," says Kalman. "They're not eating on the go, stopping at drive-throughs or mindlessly eating."

Mindful eating means using all of your senses—seeing, smelling, tasting—engaging different parts



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PHOTOS BY BIGSTOCK

of your brain, which ultimately means you may eat much less. "You start 'eating' when your brain gets the message that food is coming, which begins as you plate your food, so by the time you sit, you're two to three minutes into eating," Kalman adds. "Our brain only sends us the message to

IT'S MORE THAN WHAT YOU EAT

NUTRITION IS ONLY A SMALL PART OF WHAT HELPS US LIVE LONGER. "The symbiotic relationship between how people live and work in these communities is just as important as the food they eat," says Luci Crow, RD. "Their 'exercise' is primarily activities of daily living, like working in the garden, walking everywhere they go, fishing, etc. Each community has a faith or spiritual connection that emphasizes the importance of community and well-being, so their existence is far less stressful and complicated than most of us can imagine." These mind, body and spirit tricks can help you live a healthier, more vibrant life.

DO WHAT YOU LOVE. When you engage in activities you enjoy—gardening, painting, redecorating or even socializing—you'll feel happier, says Crow. She advises clients to turn to YouTube for videos that teach them something new, podcasts that keep them inspired or new workouts to stay engaged.

WALK IT OFF. If you're feeling tired, don't reach for a sugary treat or caffeine, but instead up your energy with a "mental-health walk," suggests Crow. She says people often turn to food to re-energize when they feel tired, when all they need to do is move.

GET TO KNOW YOUR GO-TO STRESS BUSTERS. Create your own toolbox of healthy stress-reduction strategies, advises Gabbi Berkow, RD. Know what immediately lowers anxiety for you so you're armed and ready to combat worry

before it starts. Think: meditation, journaling, yoga, listening to your favorite music or calling that friend who just gets you.

EXERCISE YOUR MIND. Brain and muscle power go hand in hand, according to Berkow, which is why workouts are as important for your mind as for your body. "Exercise literally increases the size of your brain and improves your ability to stay in control, manage stress and make good decisions," she says. "It's really important to incorporate mind/body exercises, like Pilates and yoga, to help you get in touch with your body and reduce tension."

PRIORITIZE SLEEP. Don't skimp on zzzs. "If you want to live healthier, you have to sleep," says health coach Ronit Kalman. "It's our body's time to recharge." She won't schedule early flights or meetings if they cut into her sleep.

keep eating for about 10 minutes." When you slow down, you can experience the food with your senses, so you'll feel satisfied when you're actually full. She recommends prepping meals ahead of time, plating your food, slowing your eating and thoroughly chewing your food. **PS**