

Ageing myth 1: You can't control how you age



About the author

With more than 40 years of expertise in helping people age well, Hilary O'Connell is LiveUp's Principal Advisor for Healthy Ageing.

Originally from the UK, Hilary's career has encompassed work as a clinician, manager, and project leader across the disability and aged care sectors.



The reality is that you start to age from the moment you're born, and you're older today than you were yesterday. Getting older is inevitable. But when you hear the phrase, 'You can't control how you age,' it's really saying you can't control how well you age.

This is a myth!

Ageing is associated with physical and hormonal changes in your body which increase your risk of developing chronic diseases and needing care. Older people are more likely to experience changes which increase your need for support and services as you age ([WHO 2017](#)). However, these difficulties are not all an inevitable part of getting older.

It's true that some people age better than others. Some people stay physically active and able to live independently, even though they are the same age and live in the same community as others who need high levels of support. We also know that some people around the world are more likely to live healthily into old age ([NIH 2016](#)).

While your health is influenced by your genes, the environment you live in, and the medical care you receive, research shows that only 25% of how long you live is dictated by your genes ([AJLM 2016](#)). The rest is dictated by your lifestyle. Over 50% of your personal health status can be attributed to unhealthy behaviours such as physical inactivity, smoking, and poor diet ([AJLM 2020](#)).

Science has also shown that there is an increasing incidence of chronic diseases worldwide. This includes diseases such as diabetes, obesity, heart disease, and cancer, many of which have been linked to the modern lifestyle.

So, what can you do to improve your own health and reduce the risk of chronic illness and any reliance on care and services as you age?



Get moving

Scientific research shows that the single most important choice you can make to improve your health is to increase your level of activity and to be active every day. Here are some helpful suggestions to incorporate movement into your lifestyle. Build a little bit of exercise into everyday activities.

- Do [sit-to-stand exercises](#) from your lounge chair during ad breaks.
- Do [heel lifts](#) when you're standing in front of the kitchen sink.
- Practise side stepping beside your kitchen benchtop (so you have something to hold onto).
- Use bottles of water or cans of food as weights.

Walk

[Take a daily walk.](#) Walk around the block or up and down your street. Challenge yourself to walk up and down slopes. Use walking poles to help with your balance and stability. Challenge yourself to walk for a bit longer or a bit further each week and gradually build up your level of activity.

- Choose the stairs instead of the lift or escalator.
- When you can, walk instead of driving.
- Park a short distance away from the shops to fit in a walk.
- Plan to go for a walk with a friend somewhere you enjoy such as a nature reserve, botanic gardens, or the park.
- [Do some gardening.](#) Sweep or rake leaves, push a lawnmower, do a bit of digging. All require some effort and energy on your part.
- [Do some housework.](#) Pushing a vacuum cleaner, scrubbing floors, mopping, sweeping, reaching, and dusting are all good activities to test your balance, strength, and endurance.
- [Online resources](#) can help you exercise in your home. Alternatively, join a class or group or even a local [ParkRun](#) for added motivation and social connection. Check on the [LiveUp website](#) or with your local council to find out what groups run in your community.



Eat well

- Choose a [diet that is balanced and healthy](#).
- Focus on eating plenty of vegetables, whole foods, and lean protein like tofu or oily fish, and reduce dairy, sugar, and red meat.
- Remember that tinned and frozen vegetables are a good substitute for fresh vegetables and can be cheaper. Tinned chickpeas, beans, and lentils are a handy way to reduce meal preparation and cooking times.
- Plan your meals in advance and stick to your shopping list. Meal plan based on what you already have, then write your shopping list to add any extra ingredients you need.
- Cook in bulk and freeze meal size quantities. Label your food containers with the date of preparation and the name of what is in the container. Plan to use what you have in the freezer before it is lost to freezer-burn.
- Have a few pre-prepared meals in your freezer. They are a great way to get a meal on the table when you can't cook. Just be mindful of your choices so that you're not eating high-salt, high-fat foods too often.

Stay social

- Stay in touch with family. Write emails or letters, make a phone call, or catch up by video-call. Schedule regular times to catch up face to face with those who are living nearby.
- Read stories by video call to grandchildren. Set up a family WhatsApp group to share what you're doing each week.
- Make time regularly to see friends. Hold a lunch where everyone brings a plate of food to share. Ask people to bring a favourite item, a recipe, or poem to share with the group. Meet at a coffee shop or café for an outing. Plan a picnic, take a walk, ride a bike, or even join up to [learn a new skill](#) together.
- Reach out to a friend or neighbour, especially if you have not heard from them for a while.

By choosing to work on just a few of these simple suggestions you can control how well you age. You can improve your health even if you are already living with chronic disease or disability. What is more, it's never too late to get started!

For ideas and inspiration, [explore these articles](#) about older Australians actively living life on their own terms.

More helpful information

If you would like to find local exercise classes, social activities, and helpful tips, take the [LiveUp quiz](#) or get in touch with one of our helpful team on **1800 951 971**.

References

1. World Health Organization, Integrated care for older people: guidelines on community-level interventions to manage declines in intrinsic capacity (2017). <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241550109>
2. Frates, B., Buettner, D., Skemp, S., Blue Zones - Lessons From the World's Longest Lived, National Library of Medicine | National Center for Biotechnology Information (v.10(5); Sep-Oct 2016) PMC6125071. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6125071/>
3. Buettner, D. and Skemp, S. Blue Zones: Lessons from the World's Longest Lived. American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine 10(5):318-321. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1559827616637066>
4. Thompson, W. R., Sallis, R., Trilk, J. L. et al., Exercise is Medicine, American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine (22 April 2020) Volume 14, Issue 5. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1559827620912192>

CONTACT US

Website: liveup.org.au

Email: support@liveup.org.au

Phone: 1800 951 971

Facebook: [facebook.com/LiveUpAus](https://www.facebook.com/LiveUpAus)

LiveUp is a healthy ageing initiative funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care.