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**Age is an issue of mind over matter.
If you don't mind, it doesn't matter.**
Mark Twain



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What's Your Real Age?

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Scientists say we all have one, and it might not be the number you see on your driver's licence

by Shannon Melnyk



It wasn't long ago we thought an apple a day would keep the doctor away. Matters of health seemed pretty simple; diet and exercise, finishing the broccoli on our plates and eating according to a pyramid designed by our nation's nutritionists.

Flash forward to several decades and along with them, our obsession with anti-aging. How do we live healthier and longer lives? How do we enjoy our golden years without the threat of chronic pain, mental dysfunction and devastating disease? Those in the business of studying aging are travelling the planet and observing the latest hot spots for longevity: regions in the world where people are living well and living long. The locations are curious; happy centenarians seem to be abundant in various climates and cultures including the Italian island of Sardinia, Okinawa, Japan, Loma Linda, California and the Nicoyan Peninsula on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica. It's becoming less of a secret that some of us age better than others and more of a modern day thriller figuring out what it takes to be in that category.

A tool aiding in this discovery is the concept of real age: it's your biological years, as opposed to chronological age – or more simply put, the age that most normal people would be when they have a body and mind similar to yours. Your biological age can be calculated with a formula combining detailed personal information about everything from your family's history of heart disease to whether or not you floss. Real age takes a holistic view of what keeps the body healthy – and lifestyle, nutrition, genetics, attitude, self-development and social habits are all considered determining factors in how we age, according to the increasingly mainstream concepts found in complementary medicine.

Considering biological age is a trend that's likely to stick around and evolve. According to the Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine, doctors are now using these formulas to help determine whether or not to go forward with surgeries for patients in their senior years.

But you don't have to wait for pending surgery to see how your body is holding up. Clinics throughout North America now use biological age assessments as tools in preventative and alternative health practices. The concept's popularity has also hit the internet. Free biological age tests are offered on-line on the websites of [RealAge](#), the brainchild of Doctors Michael Roizen and Mehmet Oz, otherwise known as "the You Docs" made popular by The Oprah Show. The New England Centenarian study's Dr. Thomas Perls offers the Living to 100 Life Expectancy Calculator and you can also take part in the American Association of Retired Person's Vitality Compass assessment. Be prepared to answer questions inquiring about your body fat, sexual habits, toxic lifestyle choices, and your ability to cope with stress, amongst others.

These tests could divulge either exciting or daunting news, depending upon the participant; so is taking one a good idea, exactly? Retired SFU Educational Gerontologist Dr. Sandra Cusack asserts that knowledge and awareness are power. Having dedicated an entire lifetime to the study of aging and now in a position to put everything she's learned to practice, Cusack feels these tests, although not scientifically precise, give us valuable information based on exceptional research and allows for insight into how we can go about experiencing quality and longevity.

"These tests give each individual a personal prescription for how to reduce their biological age. All one needs is the motivation to put it into practice", says Cusack.

An especially important component to the age factor, according to Cusack, is stress management.

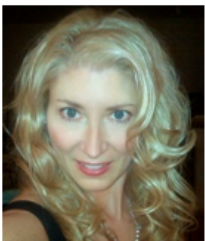
"Stress needs to be managed at every stage of life. When we get older it becomes even more important to manage stress. Anxiety, for example, contributes to memory loss".

Although the results of these tests will reveal areas requiring improvement for most of us, the good news is that there's a myriad of ways you can reduce your biological age no matter what stage you're at in your life. The link between behavioural change and vitality is stunning, offers Cusack. Her work with "The Mental Fitness for Life Program", based on a decade of rigorous research and development, has demonstrated exceptional results.

"We watched our students, aged 50 to 90 – grow visibly younger right in front of our eyes", she says.

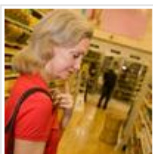
Cusack happily reports our interest in biological age is a positive advancement in the way we view our lives and reinforces the idea that we can be proactive in our aging process.

"In the early days, the academic community treated aging as an illness to be overcome; research was focused on eliminating illnesses relating to aging. Now we talk about the concept of healthy aging. We certainly have evolved as we've now finally begun to see aging as an opportunity."



About the Author: Shannon Melnyk is a freelance journalist and copywriter based in Vancouver. Dividing her time between newspapers, magazines, television and the world wide web, her latest adventures in word slinging can be seen at www.shannonmelnyk.com

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