EXTEND YOUR LIFE

By Dawn MacKeen

Keith Hayes was willing to try almost anything to lower his blood pressure. He sat quietly, breathing deeply, in his car. In empty conference rooms. Even in his own cubicle, with his eyes closed. But the best oasis he found for destressing during the day was a tiny 4-by-8-foot room—otherwise known as the office utility closet.

It was there in the dark, crammed between boxes of printer paper, that the 43-year-old property-tax appraiser from Salinas, Calif., would set his cell phone alarm for 20 minutes and meditate. The practice reduced the stress of his harried job. But more important, recent medical research shows that meditation can lower blood pressure, too. Hayes also cut back on the daily jolts of coffee, walked 2 miles a day and even told his employer that if he had to choose between a wage increase and more vacation time, he'd take the time off. Two years later, his blood pressure has started to fall—without Hayes turning his life upside down. "Small changes along the way work best for me," he says.

There's evidence life spans in America may actually shrink if we keep our couch-potato ways. But some surprisingly simple steps (more sleep, anyone?) may put us on the right path. Our guide to extending your golden years.
Meditation is helping Keith Hayes reduce his stress at work, and new medical research shows it may also be helping him lower his blood pressure.

His approach to health may be curious, but it’s quintessentially American. We’re always looking for new ways to live a healthier and longer life. And if anything, that search is now taking on a new urgency, because the ever-growing life spans that we take for granted may be at risk. That might sound counterintuitive. After all, life expectancy in the U.S. has been consistently rising. A 50-year-old today can expect to live past 80, compared with 75 in 1960. Conventional wisdom says that medical science will keep extending that horizon, as new pills and treatments keep Americans alive longer.

In fact, one growing concern in the financial community is the notion that we might live too long; investment advisers are increasingly warning their clients about outlasting their retirement savings.

But there’s disturbing news on the longevity front. A sedentary lifestyle has earned today’s 55- to 64-year-olds the glamorous status of being the fattest age group ever, with 39 percent of them qualifying as obese based on their “body mass index,” a formula that factors in weight and height. Wrap a cuff around their chubby arms and you’ll also find that half of this age group has hypertension, according to a recent report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That puts them at much greater risk for heart disease, stroke and kidney malfunction. What’s more, an estimated 20.8 million people, or 7 percent of the population, have diabetes.

The bottom line: While some experts disagree, a growing cadre of scientists believe that within the next few decades, these factors may halt—even reverse—the growth in life expectancy. And people who reach old age are more likely to see the quality of their lives decline as they face chronic disease. “Anyone who has predicted that boomers will be healthier than previous generations, I don’t see how they could say that,” says Amy Bernstein, chief of analytic studies at the National Center for Health Statistics.

It’s an unsettling trend, but it’s not too late for you to improve your own odds. And in fact, the latest research shows that good health and longer life may depend less on dreary diets and punishing calisthenics and more on subtle lifestyle changes like Hayes’s utility-closet retreats. Studies suggest, for example, that you can reduce your risk of obesity by sleeping adequately. Need an excuse for a holiday? There’s research showing that vacations may measurably relieve stress, as long as you’re taking the right kind of trip. And even exercise and nutrition, those longtime staples of good health, are being rethought: You can improve your odds of staying healthy without training like a triathlete (or eating like one). Indeed, doctors are finding serious benefits in moderate exercise—gardening, anyone?—and in good old-fashioned portion control.

We’ve scoured the research and interviewed leading longevity experts, cardiologists and dietitians to find unusual and accessible tips that you can apply in five areas of day-to-day life. Sure, healthy living might take a little work: It’s not easy to remove the Mocha Frappuccino with extra whipped cream from the breakfast category. But it’s an effort that could reap real rewards—in the form of years tacked on to your life.
Exercise  Each morning at 6 a.m., when the dew still lingers in her Roswell, N.M., backyard, Krista Foster walks out to her 1-acre stretch of land. Up and down, on her feet and on her knees, she plants roses, digs, hauls soil, even harvests pecans from her trees. The 51-year-old homemaker has been gardening since she was a little girl; her grandmother—who lived to be 92—taught her early on how enjoyable and rewarding it can be. “I always thought that was the one thing that kept her alive,” Foster says. “Getting out there and gardening.” By the time she returns indoors, her calves ache, her arms are sore, her heart races. And if she feels as though she’s just had a major workout, she has—at least from a medical standpoint.

Doctors are increasingly realizing that it’s not just hard-core physical activity that benefits your health. A recent study in the Archives of Internal Medicine, which analyzed the exercise habits of some 5,209 Americans over a period of 36 years, found that those who did a moderate amount lived 1.3 to 1.5 years longer than those doing very little. What’s surprising is that such moderate exercise can come from a hodgepodge of activity, whether it’s vigorous gardening, biking to work or taking a leisurely walk, just as long as it adds up to about an hour a day.
Adding On the Years

Here’s another reason to think positive: You may live longer. Though genetics remains a huge factor in longevity, science is moving closer toward determining how our lifestyles can affect how long we live.

Manage Your Weight
One out of three Americans are obese, and two out of three are overweight, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This increases our risk for all sorts of things, including high blood pressure, heart attacks and type-2 diabetes. Not coincidentally, unhealthy weight also can drastically curtail our lives. One study that analyzed people for more than three decades found that those who were obese at age 40 lived six to seven years less than those with normal weight. Even just being overweight erased three years, according to research published in the Annals of Internal Medicine.

Lower Your Blood Pressure
A cantankerous boss or a pressing deadline can increase your blood pressure and make your heart work harder. The fallout? A recent study in the journal Hypertension found that 50-year-olds with high blood pressure lived an estimated five years less. “High levels of blood pressure imply bad levels of diet, physicality and smoking,” says Dr. Oscar H. Franco of the University Medical Center Rotterdam in the Netherlands, lead author of the study. Because of the deleterious effects, doctors have lowered the guidelines for what is considered normal from below 140/90 to 120/80. Luckily, blood pressure is very responsive to diet, exercise and other lifestyle modifications.

Potential Longevity Gain: 6 to 7 years
Potential Longevity Gain: 5 years

In fact, the latest research says that walking briskly—like you’re really in a hurry to get somewhere—just three times a week can help your heart pump much more oxygen to the blood vessels. Good thing walking is one of America’s favorite fitness activities, with 36 million enthusiasts, according to American Sports Data, a market-research company specializing in sports and exercise. But remember, not every kind of leisure counts as moderate exercise. You must get your heart rate up to get real benefits: That means fishing doesn’t count.

Are you getting greedy for more years? Then quicken the pace. Those who engaged in at least 30 minutes a day of more-vigorous exercise, like running or fast swimming, lived 3.7 years longer. This type of activity can raise the “good” cholesterol level by 10 percent. Regular exercise can also lower insulin sensitivity—a problem with metabolizing blood sugar that’s frequently a precursor to diabetes—by up to 80 percent. “I can guarantee if I didn’t work out, I’d be vastly overweight and have diabetes,” says Douglas Brusig, a 51-year-old consultant who frequently bikes 25 miles to work in Redmond, Wash.

As we age, we lose mass in our muscles and bones. A half hour of strength training three times a week can help slow that loss and reduce our risk for osteoporosis. Patti Nemoto, a 43-year-old graphic designer, combines her 10-pound weight-
Exercise
You don’t have to become a full-blown gym rat to live longer through exercise. What’s important is to get that body moving. Using data from the oft-quoted Framingham Heart Study, in which residents of a small town were followed for more than five decades, researchers found that moderate activities can extend your life by 1.3 years. And the exercise can be anything from bike riding or walking to carrying boxes, just as long as it adds up to an hour a day. Of course, the biggest leap forward is still vigorous exercise, which is associated with an extra 3.7 years of life.

Quit Smoking
Not only does smoking dull your taste buds and fill your lungs with mucus, but it increases your risk for cancer and heart disease exponentially. That should be common knowledge, of course, but the 45 million Americans who still puff away might find it surprising how low their life expectancy could dip. A 50-year study of 34,439 British doctors found that smokers died 10 years earlier than nonsmokers, according to research in the *British Medical Journal.* “The vast majority of people will either become ill or pass away from smoking,” says Thomas Glynn, director of cancer science and trends at the American Cancer Society.

Think Positive
Perhaps it’s all in your mind. A new study suggests optimism may reduce the risk for cardiovascular death by 50 percent. The upbeat outlook may also translate into extra years, according to separate findings published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.* Researchers analyzed the writings of a small sample of nuns, penned when they were roughly 22 years old, and graded their disposition on a scale. They later found that those with positive attitudes lived a decade longer. Attitude, says the study’s lead author, is a “better predictor than exercise or smoking.”

Lifting routine with something called core fusion, a combination of yoga and Pilates. She follows that with jumping rope about three times a week. “I don’t wake up and say, ‘Maybe I’ll work out today,’” says the Metuchen, N.J., resident. “It’s a matter of when.”

Vacation
If you’re looking for an excuse to take a vacation, here’s the best one: It’s great for your health.

Research has long shown that taking a holiday lowers your risk of premature death. Time off can reduce depression and anxiety and create time for healthier activities. But scientists in the nascent field of “respite research” are discovering that what really matters is the *way* you spend that time. Health psychologist Gerhard Strauss-Blasche and his colleagues at the Medical University of Vienna analyzed the vacations of 191 white-collar employees and found that a warm climate, plenty of exercise, good sleep and time for themselves all helped workers feel more relaxed when returning to their desks. “A very important factor in vacation is the ability to shut off and cut out the things that are usually stressing yourself,” says Strauss-Blasche.

That means you shouldn’t be working during your time off, as 42 percent of Americans do, according to estimates from the Families and Work
“I can guarantee if I didn’t work out, I’d be vastly overweight and have diabetes,” says Douglas Brusig, who commutes by bike.

Institute. Unfortunately, much of the travel industry is racing to accommodate this bad habit, with hotels becoming better wired for cell phone reception and high-speed Internet access. If you find it hard to resist the call of the office, you might be better off staying at traditional bed-and-breakfast inns, where rooms often lack phones, to say nothing of Wi-Fi routers.

When Harry Hudson wants to get away from overseeing his Duluth, Ga., insurance agency, he really gets away, traveling to remote regions. A typical day in the 62-year-old’s recent Costa Rican holiday might begin with his waking up to the warm jungle air, picking up cheese and bread at a grocery store, and then hiking for five hours in the rain forest, scouting for monkeys and verdant foliage. Then a quick swim, dinner and an early bedtime—and all of it far beyond the range of his cell phone. “When I go out of the country, they don’t call me,” Hudson says. “It’s so invigorating and relaxing, you can clear your mind.”

While there’s probably no such thing as too-long vacation, the Vienna study found there was no additional health benefit to taking a vacation much longer than five days. It’s probably best if all five days are spent on the ground instead of in the air: The study found that vacations that crossed several time zones proved less relaxing, and anyone who has burned a “vacation” day waiting through flight delays in a cramped airport lounge can understand why. Whatever your plans, don’t skimp on your trip. Another study found that we need at least three days to fully unwind and relax.

Work Stress If ever there were a job that had a lot of pressure, it was that of Keith Hayes, the tax appraiser in California who routinely fields calls from angry residents. “I’ve been threatened with violence before,” he says. He can easily unwind in the morning and at night, but when he most needs to do so is the middle of the afternoon. That’s why, with his blood pressure on the rise, Hayes decided to do something about it.

A recent study analyzing about 3,000 middle-aged men and women found that people with normal blood pressure lived five years longer than those with elevated pressure. But researchers are just beginning to understand stress’s larger implications. According to a new study published in the British Medical Journal, London civil servants under chronic stress were twice as likely as those not stressed to develop metabolic syndrome, a set of conditions that include high cholesterol and
abdominal obesity. "It's well established that stress at work is pretty bad for your mental well-being," says Tarani Chandola, senior lecturer at the University College London and the study's lead author. "What was not so clear before was how stress at work can affect more-physical outcomes like cardiovascular disease."

The current business climate can easily increase the anxiety load. Stress is the top fallout of companies cutting back on hiring, according to the National Business Group on Health; there's also a close connection between workplace stress and the amount of overtime employers are asking of their staff. So it's no wonder that at least some companies are beginning to address the issue. Google, for example, not only has a sand volleyball court at its headquarters but offers subsidized massages there.

But if your workplace isn't addressing the issue, you can still do a lot on your own. For starters, there's always standing up and taking a short walk out of the office. Don't think about your problems, just let your thoughts float in order to clear your mind. If you are deskbound, sit up straight and inhale deeply for six counts, pause and then exhale for four counts. Repeat this three times. If work is creating a lot of anxiety, try working more efficiently so you can leave earlier, or building in an extra half hour so when you go home, you're not haunted by everything in your inbox. "To tell you the truth, what you really need to do is work with your mind," says Dr. Woodson Merrell, director of integrative medicine at New York City's Beth Israel Medical Center. "Stress is all in your mind."

**Sleep** It was a factor in the Exxon Valdez oil spill, as well as the Chernobyl accident, and it contributes to an estimated 100,000 roadway crashes—and 1,400 deaths—in the U.S. each year. But now researchers are discovering another potential consequence of sleep deficit: It may increase your risk of obesity. A recent study of thirty- and fortysomethings in the medical journal *Sleep* found that those snoozing only two to four hours a night were 23.5 percent more likely to be obese than those getting seven hours of sleep. In fact, one study found, just a 16-minute loss per night may also increase the risk.

It turns out that sleep loss may affect the hormones that regulate our appetite. In a controlled experiment, researchers have deprived healthy males of sleep and found that their levels of leptin went down, while ghrelin went up—both changes that can increase appetite. And just what did they

Studies show even moderate exercise—like Krista Foster's daily gardening in New Mexico—can make a difference.
Sleeping Aids

These are booming times for the sleep-medication industry, with 43 million prescriptions filled for sleeping pills in the past year alone. The reigning king, Ambien, accounts for more than half the market. But this newfound popularity has prompted concerns from doctors about its usage. Here’s a capsule summary of the issues:

THE OLDER SLEEP MEDICATIONS, known as benzodiazepines, were essentially tranquilizers. Indeed, they doubled as muscle relaxants, were often addictive and often abused. But 13 years ago Ambien hit the market, part of a new wave of medications with the ingenious name of nonbenzodiazepines. They not only improved the quality of sleep but shortened the time it takes to get there.

THE SIDE EFFECTS: Recently, news reports surfaced of people bingeing or getting behind the wheel of a car in the middle of the night after taking Ambien. The sleep-eating phenomenon was documented four years ago in the journal Sleep Medicine, but only in five patients. There have been more cases, but specialists say this occurrence is exceedingly rare. Although the new medications are believed to be less addictive, doctors don’t know their long-term effects.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO? Doctors say it’s important to treat insomnia. And changing your lifestyle can help: That means not working on your computer or snacking late at night. It also means waking up at the same time every day, exercising more and, most important, trying to resolve the problems that are keeping you up at night, from too much work stress to family strife. If that fails, then medication may be the solution. —D.M.

What should you do? Rather than counting your hours, practice what doctors call “good sleep hygiene.” Start by going to sleep and waking up at the same time every night. Darken your room. Cut back on caffeine and alcohol close to bedtime.

Diet

For some people, it’s all liquids, all the time. Or protein. At one time, it was grapefruit. Americans have always gone to extremes to slim down. But dietitians say there are much simpler, and proven, ways to eat healthier—including one approach that takes aim at coronary disease and hypertension. A recent study in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that three variations of the DASH diet—Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension—not only lowered blood pressure but also reduced heart-disease risk by 16 to 21 percent. In general, DASH calls for reducing saturated fats, cholesterol and total fat. A typical day’s menu includes seven to eight servings of whole grains, four to five of both vegetables and fruits and two to three of low-fat dairy like yogurt or skim milk. Fish and poultry make up two servings or less, and red meet and sweets are discouraged. And, above all, salt is drastically reduced—a key factor in controlling blood pressure, says Dr. Lawrence Appel, professor of medicine at Johns Hopkins.

Of course, one key to following DASH is learning what a correct portion size is. For example, one serving of meat is about 3 ounces, no larger than a deck of cards. And one serving of a vegetable is the size of a computer mouse. Portion management is one of the worst problems for American overeaters. Food scientist Brian Wansink of Cornell University has conducted studies suggesting that we tend to eat whatever’s put in front of us, regardless of its size. In one experiment, he gave two different-size popcorn bags to theatergoers, and those who received the large size ate 45 percent more. In another study, he served tomato bisque to a group of college students, but underneath half of the bowls was a long tube that refilled the dishes as they ate. When questioned afterward, the two groups said they felt equally full, but those with the refilling bowls had consumed 71 percent more.
His suggested antidote? Serve yourself 20 percent less. And if you’re at a restaurant, leave that same amount on your plate.

Portion size used to be something that the Williams sisters of San Diego simply didn’t think about. Every Sunday at their family dinner, they would fill their plates with too many indulgences and too few vegetables. For birthdays, they would almost finish an entire sheet cake. “I just ate until I couldn’t anymore,” says Pamela Williams, a 47-year-old administrative assistant. “With diabetes in the family, I know I was on my way.” Then the baby of the family, 40-year-old DeJeanette, joined Weight Watchers, a weight-loss program that emphasizes portion control; the other four sisters soon followed. Two years later, they’ve collectively dropped more than 500 pounds. DeJeanette personally has lost 147 pounds. “I just feel incredible,” she says.

The portion doctrine dovetails nicely with America’s latest food obsession, “intuitive eating.” The concept is exceptionally simple: Eat when you’re hungry, and stop when you’re full. There are now multiple books on the topic and research studies examining the possibilities. “It’s starting to become a movement,” says Andrea Giancoli, spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. “I have been telling people that for years.”

By controlling portions, the Williams sisters have collectively lost 500 pounds. Pamela (far right) has lost 55 pounds.