

# PA HEALTH

ISSUE 12, Spring 2022

YOUR GUIDE TO FITNESS & WELL-BEING

*Long live  
living longer*



**HOW MANY YEARS IN YOUR GENES?  
STAY SOCIAL TO STAY STRONG  
KEEP THOSE BIRTHDAY CAKES COMING.**

Find us online:  
[geisinger.org/magazine](https://www.geisinger.org/magazine)



## WELCOME

Have an amazing health story to share? We'd love to hear it. And maybe we'll feature it in an upcoming edition. Send us a note:

[PAHealth@geisinger.edu](mailto:PAHealth@geisinger.edu)



Spring is back, and with warm sun on your face and life budding all around you, it's only natural to feel energized, revived — and younger than you've felt in months.

Let's keep that feeling alive for many seasons to come.

This issue of *PA Health* looks at aging and explores strategies for living a longer, healthier life. What does it take to make it to your 90th or 100th

birthday? In fact, what does it take to make it to your first? We talked with physicians whose patients fall at both ends of the lifespan.

And speaking of our caregivers, many see the spark come back to the eyes of their older patients from something as simple as being with friends. That's probably true at any age.

Are there lifestyle changes to adopt while you're young to improve your odds of living longer? What role does genetics play in longevity? And when things like eyesight and hearing start to fade, what are the best ways to cope?

You'll find answers to these questions and more in this edition of *PA Health*, along with a recipe that might help you live a longer (and definitely more delicious) life. Enjoy!

I wish you and yours a vibrant and healthy spring — and long and happy lives.

Jaewon Ryu, MD, JD  
President and CEO  
Geisinger

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### On the cover:

At 80 years and counting, Danville resident Anthony Turel offers his advice on living life long and well: "Be the best you can be. Never stop."

**Geisinger**

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The blue zone, that is. Worldwide, certain foods seem to keep people living longer and healthier.



## Her secret to a long life?

When you've made it well past the average life expectancy (for an American woman, that's 81.4 years), everyone wants to know what you think was the key. For 90-year-old Jane Selvin, "red wine every day and lots of bread" didn't hurt, and she adds:

*"I worked very hard all my life and have never been one to sit still. **Every day I do something**, whether that's sorting mail, doing laundry, washing dishes or making my bed. **I just keep pushing**, even if I don't feel like it. It empowers you to keep going. That's why I think I'm still here. Oh, and **watching my four grandchildren and my four great-grandchildren grow up**. They're my reason for living."*



Jane Selvin (right) with granddaughter and *PA Health* staffer Jeanne Laktash of Dickson City, Pa.





# Are the keys to aging hidden in your genes?

By Paula Franken

Do you have your mother's eyes, your father's hair color or your aunt Barbara's nose? You can thank (or blame it on) your DNA. And if your grandfather lived to be 101, DNA might have helped with that, too.

If high-school biology was a while ago, here's a recap: In humans, each cell typically contains 23 pairs of chromosomes made up of the DNA that makes a person unique. Under a microscope, the chromosomes look like strands. At the end of each strand are short stretches of DNA called telomeres. They're often compared to the plastic tips on the ends of shoelaces, and their job is to protect chromosomes and the genetic information in them.

Every time your cells divide — as your body makes new materials like skin, blood or bone — the telomeres get a bit shorter. When they get too short, the cell can no longer divide and becomes inactive or dies. This process is associated with aging. It's also associated with stress, overeating, smoking and exposure to pollution.

An enzyme called telomerase strengthens the ends of telomeres. Could adding telomerase to your system slow down the aging process? It's possible.

But while increasing telomerase may let skin, blood and bone cells continue dividing, it might do the same for cancer cells. That's why more study is needed.

For now, strengthen your telomeres naturally. Spoiler alert: These are generally the best ways to stay healthy anyway.

- Focus your meals on legumes, nuts, seaweed, fruit, fish and dairy products.
- Avoid the usual culprits: cigarettes, alcohol, sugar and processed foods.
- Exercise at least a little bit every day.
- Deep-breathe or meditate to calm your mind when you're anxious or overwhelmed.

"Adopting a healthy lifestyle is good for you right down to the cellular level, whether you're talking about telomere length or protecting yourself from disease — including some that run in the family," says Geisinger genetic counselor Alyson Evans, CGC. "And maybe that's the real key to healthy aging."

## Interested in genetics?

Watch how the MyCode Community Health Initiative is changing people's lives: [geisinger.org/precision-health/stories](https://www.geisinger.org/precision-health/stories)







# Medicine through the ages

By Sarah Hando

What's it like to care for a patient who's just beginning a life versus one who's lived most of it? We talked to three Geisinger doctors to get their perspectives on living a healthy life at any age.

## James Cook, MD, Division Chief of Neonatology Professional Services

### *Why did you go into this field?*

I entered neonatology because it's rewarding to care for complicated infants and their families.

### *What challenges do you face dealing with this age group?*

Setting appropriate expectations, not just for care in the hospital, but for any long-term problems that may arise in the years ahead.

### *What do you like most about treating this age group?*

The diagnostic dilemmas where the patient can't communicate any symptoms — my diagnosis is based on history, exam and focused testing.

## Michelle Neff-Bulger, DO, Pediatrician

### *Why did you go into this field?*

I enjoy pediatrics because I can help educate and mold young minds and bodies with proper nutrition, exercise and healthy behaviors.

### *What challenges do you face dealing with this age group?*

It's humbling to know that you likely only see a snapshot of the lives people live. Some have very difficult circumstances. It's challenging to peel back the layers in families to try and help.

### *What do you like most about treating this age group?*

Smiles, giggles, births — all gifts to remind me how amazing life is.

## Kiran Rayalam, MD, Primary Care Physician with a Geriatrics Specialty

### *Why did you go into this field?*

I realized there weren't enough geriatricians to care for the number of elderly patients in any given community. Working with my patients is rewarding because each has a unique story.

### *What challenges do you face dealing with this age group?*

A lot of my older patients have family who don't live near them, so they rely on their community to help with their needs. This puts them at higher risk for not receiving timely care.

### *What do you like most about treating this age group?*

My older patients' complex conditions challenge me to stay up to date on changes in the practice of medicine.

Check out the physicians' full responses online: [Geisinger.org/ThroughTheAges](https://www.geisinger.org/ThroughTheAges)







# People power

*How your tribe helps you thrive.*

By Beth Kaszuba

Staying social by clicking “like” or “dislike” isn’t always healthy.

But our deep, true human connections — the ones we foster with real conversation and emotional sharing — contribute to longer, happier lives.

That’s not just common sense. It’s backed by science. Studies show that loneliness increases cortisol, a hormone related to stress that can lead to inflammation. And research indicates that volunteering gives older people benefits comparable to eating a healthy diet.

“Loneliness can have a detrimental effect on mental health,” says Teena Kubasti, director of LIFE Geisinger, a program that provides qualifying senior citizens with a broad spectrum of healthcare services — including opportunities to socialize. “Being social gives people a sense of purpose, belonging and connection.”

Ms. Kubasti and her staff have seen formerly isolated patients transform and thrive once they join group activities at LIFE Geisinger day centers.

“They may be withdrawn at first, and the stimulus can be overwhelming,” she says. “But we’ve seen people make friends, do activities and blossom. They become part of a family, and they’re smiling when they get off the bus.”



Geisinger’s 65 Forward health centers are also designed to foster personal connections among their age 65+ clientele. Through longer appointments with their doctor, members can forge a relationship. And the centers are hubs for group activities such as crafts, game nights and exercise classes.

Even a simple phone call can make a difference. That’s why Geisinger also sponsors the Friendly Neighbors program, which connects volunteers with socially isolated people over age 50 for chats about hobbies and shared interests. The program, in collaboration with area YMCAs, gives older people the chance to raise practical concerns about things like transportation, food or safety concerns, too.

Whatever your age, the next time your social media scrolling brings you down, switch to real-life socialization. Look up from the screen, make eye contact and smile at someone. You’ll boost your health — and maybe theirs, too.

Expand that circle of friends:

**LifeGeisinger.org**

**Geisinger.org/65Forward**



**Strong connections with neighbors and family members are credited with making Nicoya, Costa Rica, a “blue zone,” where people tend to live longer, healthier lives. Learn more about these spots, and the impact of local diets, on page 14.**



# MAKING SENSE OF OUR SENSES

BY KIMBERLY ADLER-MORELLI

Always reaching for your reading glasses? Cranking up the volume on the TV? Changes in sight and hearing are a natural part of aging. So be prepared for what will happen (or maybe already is) and what can help.

## See what you're missing

As eyes get older, the pupils shrink so they don't let in as much light and lenses stiffen. This makes it harder to see in dim light and focus close up. Adding lamps to your house and using reading glasses can help. Consider these options, too:

- **Monovision and multifocal contacts.** Monovision corrects one eye for distance and the other for close-up vision. Multifocals have several zones, using both near and far vision at the same time. The only brief downside? Being patient as your brain adapts to a new way of seeing.

- **Refractive surgery.** A doctor reshapes the cornea for clear far vision in one eye and close-up vision in the other, like monovision contacts.

- **Corneal inlays.** Tiny devices are inserted under the cornea to restore close-up vision. This minimally invasive procedure takes about 15 minutes.

Want to ditch the readers? Talk to your eye doctor about which of these options — or another one — is right for you.

## Hear the latest

Remember those rock concerts you went to in your teens and 20s? Your ears remember them, too.

Hearing loss is common in people exposed to repeated loud noises — like hunters, flight crew members and construction workers. But it can also be due to frequent ear infections (or just a lot of birthdays!). Sure, you can decrease background noise and ask people to talk louder, but what else can raise the volume?

Hearing aids can help, and they've come a long way! These aren't your grandpa's hearing aids. For one thing, they come in different styles and sizes, many quite small. They're also customized to the listener, can connect to your smart devices and may be rechargeable. An audiologist will help you find the type that's perfect for you. Just remember to wear ear plugs if you plan on reliving your youth at a local rock concert.



Just as the tastes of wine and cheese evolve with age, our sense of taste changes as we get older. Find out more: [Geisinger.org/ShiftingSenses](https://www.geisinger.org/ShiftingSenses)

Volume isn't the only harm to hearing — duration is key, too. Control your kid's "noise dose" by limiting how long and how often they have headphones glued to their ears.



# Want to live to 100?

## Build a lifetime of healthy habits.

By Jeanne K. Laktash

Looking for ways to live a longer, healthier life? Maybe you've already nailed all the usual ones, like exercising and eating right. If so, try layering on some of these out-of-the-box ideas. They might just help you reach that milestone birthday.

**Get outside.** A little time outdoors each day is good for you, even if it's rainy or snowy. Spending a few minutes outside:

- Boosts mood
- Improves sleep
- Delivers a dose of vitamin D

**Check your gut health.** Want to add more candles to your birthday cake? Get some help from bacteria — good bacteria, that is. For a healthier gut, chow down on probiotic-rich foods like:

- Yogurt
- Kombucha
- Sauerkraut
- Pickled vegetables



**Be kind.** Doing nice things for others feels good. A bonus: It boosts your health. It could be as simple as holding a door open for a stranger, letting another car in ahead of you or donating blood. These small acts of kindness help foster personal connection and improve your well-being, which can add years to your life — and life to your years.

No matter your age, it's never too late (or early) to adopt healthier habits. If you're wondering where to begin, start small. Pick one change and stick with it. Over time, add in more changes to feel your best.

And who knows? You may need to start stocking up on birthday candles.

Keep your trips around the sun coming with even more tips for a longer life:

[Geisinger.org/HealthyHabits](https://www.geisinger.org/HealthyHabits)

### Another habit to start now? Preventive care.

- Mammography (starting at age 40)
- Colonoscopy (starting at age 45)
- Lung cancer screening (starting at age 50 if you're a smoker or past smoker)
- Vaccination against flu, COVID-19 and other infectious diseases



At 26 years old, she was healthy — but unvaccinated. A case of COVID led to a lengthy hospital stay, scarring on her throat and a change of mind. Read Keish Pares' story: [Geisinger.org/KeishStory](https://www.geisinger.org/KeishStory) And if you haven't already, schedule your COVID-19 vaccine today.



# Get in the zone.

By Beth Kaszuba

## Have you heard of “blue zones”?

The color might be cool. But these are actually hot spots — for longevity.

And the folks who inhabit these locales, including places as diverse as Loma Linda, California, and Okinawa, Japan, don't just live longer on average. They often avoid the health problems we might consider inevitable as we age: Diabetes. Heart disease. Obesity.

Of course, many factors contribute to making a zone blue. But regional cuisine almost certainly plays a role.

In Ikaria, Greece, vegetables and fresh fish are diet staples. In Okinawa, plates are full of sweet potatoes, soybeans and melons. And in the Ogliastra region of Sardinia, which has the world's highest concentration of male centenarians, the traditional diet is low on meat protein and high on vegetables, olives and nuts.

Want to blow out 100 birthday candles — with a deep, strong breath? Consider following the blue zones' lead. You can start by adding more healthy fats from fish and nuts to your diet and boosting your intake of veggies and plant-based proteins like soybeans.

Best of all, working with clean, simple ingredients makes for clean, simple cooking. After all, who wants to waste precious minutes stirring pots and doing dishes?



## Walnut-and-pistachio-crusting ginger salmon

### Ingredients

- 2 tablespoons brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons reduced-sodium soy sauce
- 2 teaspoons freshly grated ginger or 1½ teaspoons ground ginger
- 1½ tablespoons Dijon mustard
- 4 salmon filets (6 ounces each)
- ½ cup each chopped walnuts and pistachios

### Directions:

Preheat oven to 400° F and place salmon on a parchment-lined baking sheet. Mix first four ingredients together and brush onto salmon. Sprinkle with walnuts and pistachios. Bake for about 15 minutes, until the fish flakes easily with a fork.

*Pair this with the fire & ice cucumber salad from our summer 2021 edition for a complete, healthy meal. Get the recipe:*

***Geisinger.org/FireIceSalad***



LIFE GEISINGER

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- Wellness activities
- Social opportunities
- Transportation

If you're caring for an older family member, call **866-451-2890** or visit [Geisinger.org/LongLife](https://www.geisinger.org/LongLife).

A mask is still required when you come to Geisinger. Thanks for protecting our patients. Learn more: [geisinger.org/safe](https://www.geisinger.org/safe)

Safety  
✓