9 Simple Steps to Improve Your Health
by Sven Eberlein

Ask a centenarian the secret ingredients to a long and healthy life and you aren't likely to hear "doctors, drugs, and fad diets." We all know that there's more to our overall well-being than treating symptoms or the occasional replacement of a part. The good news is that scientists in various fields are discovering ever more ways we can keep ourselves healthy without expensive medication and complicated workout regimens. Here are nine simple, scientifically proven—and sometimes surprising—ways to empower yourself to make the right choices for your body and health.

1. Laugh to your heart's delight

"Laughter might be one of the only things in life that can be done outside of moderation and still reap the benefits," muses Dr. Michael Miller, director of the Center for Preventive Cardiology at the University of Maryland Medical Center. If you ever LOL you don't need proof of the healing powers of a good belly laugh. Dr. Miller's studies show that laughter expands blood vessels, and endorphins released in response to laughter activate the chemical nitric oxide in the inner lining of our blood vessels to promote vascular health. Seriously.|

STUDY: "Inverse association between sense of humor and coronary heart disease"

2. Age artfully

Digging the old paint brush or the dusty guitar out of the closet is always a good idea. However, for aging baby boomers, getting back into the creative swing of the rockin' '60s is a matter of health insurance. Research shows that seniors engaged in activities like singing, creative writing, or painting are healthier and happier than those who aren't. Whether this boost in the immune system is from a heightened sense of personal growth or from feeling more socially engaged, it's clear that the body likes it when the imagination roams freely.

STUDY: "The Creativity and Aging Study"

3. Work with friends

When you're shopping around for a job with great health benefits, pay attention to the office vibe. Israeli researchers found that people who get along with their co-workers in a friendly and supportive work environment live longer. Note: Similar support from the boss had no effect on mortality, so get acquainted with your peers before accepting the job.

STUDY: "Work-Based Predictors of Mortality"

4. Get a massage

You can never go wrong with a massage, but research shows significant benefits for overall health. Tiffany Field of the Touch Research Institute says massage therapy slows the heart rate and lowers blood pressure and stress hormones. The decrease in stress hormones increases your body's natural killer cells, which ward off viruses, bacteria, and cancer cells. "We're finding biological changes associated with a single massage session," says Mark Rapaport, Chief of Psychiatry at Emory University School of Medicine. Added bonus for massages from loved ones: good for body, mind, relationship, and wallet.

STUDY: "A Preliminary Study of the Effects of a Single Session of Swedish Massage…"

5. Eat your carotenoids

It's no secret that people feel good when they look good. New evidence suggests that fruits and vegetables, in addition to their many other benefits, give our skin a healthful glow. Scottish researchers found that eating lots of carotenoid-rich fruits and veggies like kale, cabbage, broccoli, tomatoes, peppers, or peaches gives our skin a slightly yellower tone, making us look—and feel—healthier and more attractive. If it works for pallid Scots, you know it'll work for the rest of us.

STUDY: "You Are What You Eat"

6. Chat with the neighbors

People are healthier when they have a strong, localized community. A 50-year study centered around Roseto, Penn., a close-knit community of Italian-Americans, showed the lowest rates of heart disease in the nation—until the town became more "suburbanized" in the 1960s. Many people living in housing cooperatives report improved emotional and physical health. As social animals, having playmates is part of our survival strategy.

STUDY: "The Roseto effect"

6 Ways Communities Put Health First
From play space for kids to AIDS activism: the fight against disease goes grassroots.

7. Sleep more

Become a dream catcher and stop being a weight watcher. According to researcher William Killgore, when people get less sleep they tend to feel more hungry and to crave carbohydrates, particularly sweets. "If a person feels excessively sleepy," says Killgore, "it's likely that they haven't been getting adequate sleep and may be prone toward eating more than they want to." If you're plagued by frequent snack attacks, cure them with a good night's sleep.

STUDY: Preliminary findings, Killgore, et al., Harvard Medical School

8. Scrub without toxics

There are alternatives to toxic household products like bleach. A University of Florida study found that a mixture of vinegar, lemon juice, and baking soda significantly reduces

bacteria. Good Housekeeping microbiologist Gina Marino put it to the test and was impressed with how well vinegar worked in fighting germs and mold. Adding a little elbow grease on the tough spots helps keep your gym dues low.

STUDY: "Bacterial Reduction Test on Food Surfaces"

9. Hope like your life depends on it

We know enough about anxiety and depression to drag us down for several lifetimes, but a truly uplifting new study by Harvard's School of Public Health gives reasons to rejoice. "Happy and optimistic people with a purpose in life tend to have a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease," says researcher Julia K. Boehm. So keep hope alive, but remember that in the words of the late, great Vaclav Havel, "Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out."

STUDY: "The Heart's Content"