



EAT TO LIVE LONGER

**NUTRITION SECRETS OF THE PLANET'S
OLDEST PEOPLE.** BY LIA HUBER

THE ISLANDS OF OKINAWA, A LUSH archipelago southwest of the main island of Japan, are home to the largest and healthiest population of centenarians on earth. They suffer significantly fewer heart attacks and 80 percent fewer incidences of breast cancer and prostate cancer and have lower rates of diabetes and less than half of the ovarian and colon cancer cases that we do. Their secret? A nutrient-dense diet and stress-proof lifestyle.

Before you pack your bags and say *sayonara* to your on-the-go American fast-lane life, consider this: "It's the little tweaks to your everyday routines that can make the biggest difference in your lifelong wellness," says Peter Martin, Ph.D., director of the gerontology program at Iowa State University in Ames. Think of today as the first day of the rest of your long, healthy life. Get started with these 12 simple steps.

MAINTAIN YOUR WEIGHT

Okinawan centenarians tend to stay lean throughout their lives by eating fewer calories than they burn off during the day. But retaining a healthy body mass index (BMI) is just one piece of the longevity puzzle; maintaining a stable weight is every bit as important.

Research has linked yo-yo dieting to elevated risks of hypertension, endometrial cancer and a preponderance of body fat in the upper body, a risk factor for heart disease. If you're a yo-yo dieter, take a long, hard look at your approach to weight loss. If your BMI is over 25, by all means take steps to reduce it by exercising more and eating less, but choose activities and foods you can live with for the long haul. "The most effective way to restrict your calorie intake is to gradually reduce the portion sizes of foods you already eat," says Lisa Young, R.D., Ph.D., author of *The Portion Teller* (Doubleday, 2005).

MAKE MEALS MORE SOCIAL

Unlike Okinawans, Americans tend to focus more on getting through a meal than on enjoying it, according to Bradley Willcox, M.D., one of the authors of *The Okinawa Diet Plan* (Clarkson Potter, 2004) and copincipal investigator of the Okinawan Centenarian Study. "Americans look for convenience in the foods they eat, while Okinawans look for meaning," explains Dr. Willcox.

Sitting down to enjoy a meal with friends and family can help you take the focus off food as a source of emotional gratification. "If you can train yourself to enjoy mealtimes as a social activity that involves interaction with people you care about, you will eat more slowly and will likely make more thoughtful food selections," agrees Young. But it's not just the sitting down to eat that's important, it's also the preparation of the food. "Taking the time to prepare a meal can give it meaning," explains Young.

EAT SEASONALLY

Thanks to the globalization of food resources, it's quite possible to buy tomatoes in December and winter squash in July. In water-locked Okinawa, however, people traditionally eat more locally grown foods, and that means constantly changing their dietary intake. As a result, their food choices are fresher,

riper and more flavorful. "That constant change-up of nutrients may explain their resistance to chronic illness," says Dr. Willcox.

In America, the best way to eat more seasonally is to shop at your local farmer's market or join a community-supported agriculture (CSA) program. CSAs are local groups that allow you to buy a "share" in a local farm. In return, you'll get a weekly shipment of the farm's freshest offerings.

FILL UP ON 80 PERCENT

How many times have you put your fork down and thought, "Whew, I'm stuffed!" Well, you'd never hear that in Okinawa. But you would hear the saying *hara hachi bu*, which translates literally into: "80 percent full." "*Hara hachi bu* is sort of an insurance plan against feeling deprived," says Dr. Willcox. "It takes about 20 minutes for the body to signal the brain that there's no need for more food. *Hara hachi bu* gives the brain a chance to catch up."

To help her clients home in on when it's time to stop eating, Young advises using a hunger-rating system. At various times during a meal, rate your hunger on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 is famished and 5 is stuffed). "Just stopping eating to think about how you feel decreases the odds that you'll charge past the comfort zone of 3," she says.

THINK CALORIE DENSITY

Okinawans may eat fewer calories, but they also eat more food. Confused? The foods that are paramount in the Okinawan diet are less calorically dense, explains Young. "They have more nutrients, greater bulk and fewer calories per gram." Vegetables are the least calorically dense foods you can eat. Fruits are runners-up, then whole grains. After that come lean proteins like skinless white-meat chicken, pork tenderloin, extra-lean beef and seafood, then fatty proteins like dark-meat chicken with the skin on and fattier cuts of beef and

pork. The most calorically dense foods include fats, oils and sugars. If this sounds like a new food pyramid, it is. To lower the caloric density of your diet to more closely match the Okinawan diet, you need to eat fewer fats, oils, sugars and fatty protein sources while you increase your intake of vegetables, fruits, whole grain and lean proteins, says Dr. Willcox. Vegetables and fish make up the bulk of the Okinawan diet.

Besides helping you feel fuller on fewer calories, eating a diet rich in vegetables and fruits and low in saturated fat from animal proteins has been shown to significantly cut your risk of chronic disease. Consuming 25 grams of whole grains daily may help reduce your risk of coronary heart disease by 15 percent. These foods are loaded with antioxidants, which help reduce the cellular damage caused by free radicals.

GO MEATLESS

A large part of the Okinawan diet is made up of antioxidant-rich proteins like soy. Another major protein is seafood, which provides omega-3 fatty acids. These fats are superstars when it comes to protecting against heart disease, depression and Alzheimer's, because they reduce arterial inflammation. "Each type of protein consumed by the Okinawans offers an additional benefit. Soy offers phytochemicals; legumes, which include soybeans and lentils, provide fiber and antioxidants; seafood supplies healthy fats. These beneficial by-products help them live longer and with fewer diseases. They simply get more bang for their protein buck than we do," says Young.

Instead of your usual beef burger, slip a salmon patty or veggie burger on a whole-wheat bun once in a while. Order the shrimp chow mein instead of the pork. Find a whole soy food you enjoy and include it in your diet at least once or twice a week. (Our pick: steamed edamame pods sprinkled with toasted sesame seeds.)

The fountain of youth: DAILY EXERCISE

Okinawan elders are surprisingly fit. Many of the physical activities they engage in—gardening, practicing traditional dance and tai chi or simply walking to a friend's house—give them more energy and contribute to their sense of community. The regime sticks because it's woven into their lives. Okinawans also tend to get their daily exercise in the evenings, which can help relieve the day's tension and prime the body for rest.