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100

How to live to 100

Centenarians share their secrets

Plus

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How to live to 100

illustration ABBEY LOSSING

With life expectancy increasing, the number of people with an age in triple figures is growing. We asked some of our centenarian readers for their secrets to longevity

by
REBECCA
NORRIS

you might feel like time is charging away from you, but the truth is that statistically we have more of it than ever before. 'Over the past 150 years, there has been a remarkable change,' says economist Andrew Scott, author of *The Longevity Imperative*. 'In high-income countries, life expectancy has increased by two or three years every decade. That's like saying to someone at the end of the day, here's another six to eight hours.' In short, we are now likely to become very old.

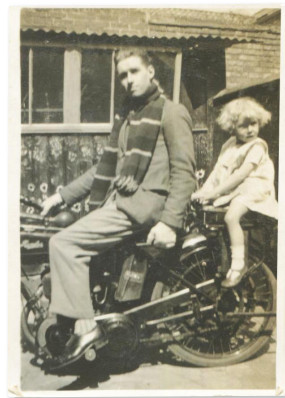
As birth rates drop, the fastest growing demographic in the world is people aged 100

and over. The latest data – from 2023 – estimated there were 14,850 centenarians living in England and Wales, a figure that has more than doubled since 2002. There were 1,000 centenarians in Scotland, and 290 in Northern Ireland.

But to make the most of these longer lives, we need to age well – staying healthy and engaged. Largely, this is under our control. Estimates suggest that only around 20% of how we age is genetic, while a staggering 80% is influenced by our behaviour and environment, though Scott notes that genetics become more important once you reach 85 to 90. We asked centenarians – all Saga readers and their loved ones – how they have lived such long, fulfilling lives.

'It's all in the genes'

Deirdre Becket 101 years old, Leeds



'Mainly, I think longevity is in the genes – I'm the third one in our family to reach 100 years old. My grandfather lived to be 104 and his daughter, my mother, reached 106.

'Getting along with others is vital too – I can't remember falling out with anyone, ever. Life is too short. I'm sure happy, positive people have a greater chance of living into old age than those who worry constantly.

'I've been lucky. I married young to the love of my life,

George, and we were together for 45 years until he died aged 69. We were adventurous – his job as a civil engineer took us to Borneo and Brunei – and we had four lovely children together. Now, I live on my own in a comfortable retirement flat. I get up when I wake up, whether that's at eight or 11. I do Wordle on my laptop, then play Spider Solitaire for a couple of hours. I must keep the brain working.' ➡



Positive outlook
Deirdre now, and as a child (left)



Precious memories
Pat (sixth from left) helps gather flax in the harvest in 1942; on holiday in Cornwall in 1946 (below); and celebrating her 100th birthday (right)



THE UK'S OLDEST LIVING PERSON

The oldest living person in the UK is Ethel Caterham, 115, from Hampshire. She is the second-oldest living person in the world, outliving her two children. Her secret to longevity is 'taking everything in my stride, the highs and the lows'. The oldest person alive today is Brazilian nun Inah Canabarro Lucas. She is 116.

Back in time
Bottom:
John (right)
with Admiral
Mountbatten
in 1977; and
aged ten with
his dog Sam



'MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR FRIENDSHIPS'

PAT HOUGH 100 YEARS OLD, CHESHIRE

I'm a great believer in doing your best for other people – looking outwards, I suppose, rather than inwards. During the war, people had to help each other; it was the only way to get by. I've dedicated most of my life to charity work.

I moved to the town of Nantwich in 1967 with my late husband, John, where we raised our four daughters. Here, I joined the amateur drama group, which had around 30 members. An old chapel was due to be demolished, so I helped find some money to buy it and we transformed the space into our own 82-seat theatre. We have around 140 members now; I was president

for 36 years – it's important to feel like you've done some good in the world. I still live at home near Nantwich with my second husband, Peter, 90.

'Make the most of your friendships and meet up while you still can. Keep a diary. Take photographs, and don't underestimate the importance of captions. That's the trouble these days – you can't scribble details on the back of digital photos. Your family will want to know who those people were, and what you were doing. I recommend getting photos printed into books.'

'The secret is luck'

John Roberts 100 years old, Kent

'The secret is luck. I was fortunate that I was good at games, playing rugby and cricket for the Navy without injury (I joined at 13; I'm one of the few remaining D-Day veterans). I played my last rugby match aged 61 and spent the next day in bed. "Serves you right," said the doctor. After that, walking my dog, Bella, kept me fit, but sadly she was put to sleep last year, so I don't walk nearly so much – just around the bungalow I share with my fourth wife, Gillian. I'm also lucky to have three children and five grandchildren.

'I still drive – my licence was recently renewed for another two years. I don't smoke. When I was at naval college, a man was beaten for smoking in the toilets, limping into the dining hall afterwards. Still, I smoked a bit at parties, until Christmas 1960, when I was captain of a ship in Fiji. A hangover from drinking and smoking meant I couldn't join a Boxing Day picnic – I haven't had a cigarette since then.'



'Never accept you're old'

Ron Monk 100 years old, Cheshire

'I swear by Shredded Wheat, All-Bran and bananas for breakfast, and a small glass of Merlot every night. Moderation is key – I was only intoxicated once, which was enough to put me off.

'I began my career as a surveyor in Burma during the war – I retired at 65 and never thought about working again. Instead, I focused on what I really enjoyed; I went on walking holidays around Europe with my wife, Millicent. This, plus lots of birdwatching, meant I stayed extremely fit. I was married to Millicent for 62 years and we had two sons.

'I'm a keen football fan and have supported Blackburn Rovers since I was an eight-year-old boy leaning over the wall to watch them play. I went to matches until I was in my seventies – now I stick to watching them on television.

'How to be fulfilled? Take life as it comes. To age well, never accept that you're old – resolve to stay the same.'

Then and now
Ron with his wife Millicent (below and above); and turning 100 (above left)



GLOBAL SECRETS

Five 'blue zones' have been identified by longevity researcher Dan Buettner (far right) with an unusually high proportion of centenarians – Sardinia in Italy; Okinawa in Japan; the Nicoya Peninsula in Costa Rica; Ikaria in Greece; and Loma Linda in California. These populations are highly active, eat plant-based diets and have a strong sense of community. They were the

subject of documentary *Live to 100: Secrets of the Blue Zones* based on Buettner's 2008 book. However, sceptics say this phenomenon might be due to poor record keeping.



'YOU MUST KEEP LEARNING'

NANCY TITMAN 106 YEARS OLD, LINCOLNSHIRE

'The secret to my longevity? I'm more mystified than anybody. Writing and playing Scrabble keep me busy, and I'm getting to grips with an iPad (though I accidentally gate-crashed my son-in-law's conference call). You must keep learning.

'My philosophy is to make do and mend – people care too much about amassing possessions. Knitting and sewing are valuable skills. For my wedding in 1947, I bought a red dress for 15 guineas as I wanted something I could reuse. My daughter wore it recently for a 1940s event.

'I moved into a care home at 105. I'm the oldest resident here, yet I made the speech at the Christmas party. I was a teacher until 1979 and some infants I taught are carers here. They're in their fifties now but I'm still Mrs Titman to them.

'There's plenty to keep life interesting – I have endless visitors, and I always look forward to *Strictly*. I score performances in a scrapbook and cross out eliminated dancers. My granddaughter got the judges to wish me a happy 106th birthday on social media.

'In 2007, the press took interest in my hot cross bun, a family heirloom that's now over 200 years old. Baked in 1821, it's not mouldy, just rock hard with some holes. I took it on Channel 4's *Richard & Judy*.

'VE Day is one of my most treasured memories. We went to London, danced in Hyde Park, and got off with soldiers and sailors. I can't remember how I got home!'

Living life to the full
Nancy as a child (above). Birthday wishes from the Queen (below)



Good times
Kenneth and Joan setting off on their honeymoon in 1953 (right); and marking Kenneth becoming 101 (below)



'STAY BUSY, MENTALLY AND PHYSICALLY'
KENNETH BANFIELD 101 YEARS OLD, YORKSHIRE

'You must stay busy, physically and mentally. I worked in various different jobs – sales, procurement, secretarial – but after I retired at 68, I drove a minibus for the elderly. For over a decade, I chauffeured them to appointments and clubs – in the end, some were younger than me.

'I played the keyboard until about a year ago. I read the newspaper from cover to cover and do the crossword with my wife Joan, 99, every day. We've been married for 71 years, with two children.

'Keeping social is important – we go to coffee mornings organised by our church and make sure to stay in touch with friends from further afield. I've never drunk alcohol. My advice would be to take an interest in your local community and always maintain a sense of humour.'



'Don't think of yourself too much'

Jim Collorick 103 years old, Cheshire

'It's strange that I've lived so long. I was born a weakling – mother said they nearly lost me three times before I was five. War broke out when I was 17-and-a-half. Once I was 18, I volunteered for the Navy. I hadn't any experience of the sea, but I wanted a tough regime. Even now, though I retired

in 1982 from my job as a college administrator, I live a life of routine. The body expects it.

'In the 43 years I've been retired, I've never sat down and thought, "What shall I do next?" I wake up at the same time every morning, I get my own meals, I take care of my retirement flat. I never sleep in

the afternoon – six hours a night is plenty.

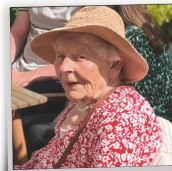
'I was married to my late wife, Joyce, for 78 years; we had one son. To younger people, I say, "Stay active, and don't think of yourself too much".'



GETTY

'Don't try for perfection'

Betty McLaughlin 101 years old, Glasgow



'I don't know how I've lived so long. I was lucky to grow up in the country, eating homegrown veg, and once the war started you couldn't overindulge as you couldn't get hold of anything.

'A long, happy relationship doesn't hurt – I celebrated 60 years of marriage to my husband, Jimmy, a grocer, just before he died in 2006. On Sundays we'd go cycling together on a tandem bike. We had five children.

'Love and family is everything – what more do you need? Don't try for perfection, just do the best you can. Worrying is futile, and I'd like to see more kindness in the world.

'These days, I love reading and I follow mass on my laptop.'

Special moments
Betty in her garden on her 101st birthday (above); and around 1955 with her husband Jimmy and three of her children (left to right) John, Charles and Anne



'A happy family is crucial'

HAZEL TROMANS 100 YEARS OLD, WORCESTERSHIRE



'I'm lucky to have lived so long, considering I was a sickly baby with double pneumonia and whooping cough, back when the doctor would call in a horse and trap. I don't drink or smoke, which must sound boring, but I've never fancied it.

'Having a happy family is crucial. I feel blessed to have been married to my wonderful husband, John, for 70 years – we had two sons. During the war, he was in the RAF and we wrote each other a letter every day for six years. Hundreds of them filled a drawer. When we moved house in 1961, we decided it was daft to keep them all. We saved half a dozen, put the rest in a dustbin and had a fire.

'While John was at war, I worked on a noisy accounting machine, organising wages. When there was an air raid, most people fled to a shelter, but the wages still had to be paid on time, so I'd put my tin hat on and get on with it.

'My advice? If you're worried about something, always talk to other people – they can help.'

A ROYAL CARD

The King sends a congratulatory card by Royal Mail for 100th and 105th birthdays, and every year thereafter. You don't need to apply – cards are sent using the details on a person's state pension.



How to BOOST YOUR LONGEVITY



Professor Andrew Steptoe is director of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, which collects data from people aged 50 and over to understand the ageing process. Here are his tips for living longer.

Have a purpose

Feeling like you're filling your time with something worthwhile is critical. 'It could be looking after grandchildren, focusing on a hobby, or working for longer than you have to,' explains Steptoe.

Stay connected

A strong social network is associated with longer life, he says. 'As you get older, people fall away, so work hard to establish new relationships with younger generations as well as contemporaries.'

Get regular sleep

A consistent sleep pattern is important. Go to bed at a similar time and try to manage things that might keep you awake, such as anxiety.

Be culturally active

There's evidence that people who engage with the arts live longer. This includes visiting museums, the theatre, and listening to music, as well as learning a craft or joining a choir.

Ignore stereotypes

It's easy to internalise negative stereotypes of older people – that once you're retired, you're unproductive and slowing down, living on the outskirts of society. Don't accept this, says Steptoe, and don't give up on life.



Neuroscientist Dr Julia Jones has been researching wellness for 30 years. In pursuit of longevity, she spent two years revamping her lifestyle, based on the latest science. The author of *F-Bomb: Longevity Made Easy*, she recommends these daily habits.

Learn an instrument

'We lose brain connections as we age if we don't try to offset that decline,' says Jones, who took up electric guitar two years ago in her fifties. 'Learning how to play a musical instrument is one of the most effective ways of boosting neuroplasticity, because it's so difficult.'

Eat lots of plants

Aim for (at least) 30 different plants a week. 'This improves gut health and results in lower incidence of illness,' says Jones, who also advises limiting sugar, eating as much fibre as possible, and healthy omegas such as fish.

Keep active

Walk as much as you can, but don't neglect muscle strength. 'Weight-bearing exercises, such as planks, will help maintain muscle mass,' she says.

Go outside early

Heading outdoors first thing helps set your circadian rhythm, improving sleep quality.

Do intermittent fasting

'When the digestive system is empty, a lot of repair work happens at a cellular level,' says Jones, who tends to eat within an eight-hour window (typically 10am–6pm, though she is flexible with timings). ☼