

# Here's to health, moderately

Woody Allen provides us with a story about two elderly women who are suffering through a bad meal. One of them exclaims, "The food here is awful!" The other responds, "Yes — and they serve such small portions, too!"

C'est la vie. Notwithstanding the endless kvetching that we do about the trials we suffer through, our biblical three-score-and-ten life is something we just can't get enough of. Those of us who compose the "Baby Boomer" generation are in for a whole lot more of it if recent trends in longevity hold true.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the life expectancy of the average American was 47.3 years. Thanks to improvements in sanitation, and the conquest of tuberculosis, life expectancy rose to the high 50s during the 1920s. However, this development put many at risk of heart disease and cancer, which remain the leading causes of death in contemporary America.

The upward trend in life-span reached a plateau of 67 in the mid-1950s, which led many to believe that society had achieved the biological maximum in longevity. But in 1968 life expectancy began to rise again; by 1986 it had reached 74.8 for both sexes.

By 2040, when most of the "Baby Boom" generation is in its 80s and 90s, the percentage of the American population over 65 will have doubled, the percentage over 85 will have quadrupled. The "upside" (as Yuppies are wont to say) to this is that we "Boomers" will live long and maybe even prosper. The "downside" is that every surge forward in life expectancy opens up new frontiers in geriatric pathology.

Aging "Boomers" will have not only cancer and heart disease to worry about. Alzheimer's disease has already been branded the "Disease of the 21st Century." Currently, America is spending \$45 billion to treat 2.5 million Alzheimer's patients.

"Boomers" may live long enough to succumb to the law of diminishing returns; that is, one may find one's self too healthy for his years, and therefore vulnerable to predatory diseases. Doctor James Fries of Stanford has concluded that there is a genetically-programmed limit to the

human life-span: the longer one lives, the more quickly disease can become terminal.

Doctor Joseph Wassersug says that he has taken note of this fact and chosen to "take a more active intervention in my destiny." Wassersug is a criminally healthy man in his mid-80s, who has discovered that his condition has placed him in danger of dying from cancer. His prescription is a high-cholesterol diet. "If a fat-enriched diet can prevent death from cancer, I say it's worth it," Wassersug declared. "Pass the butter, please."

Wassersug's therapeutic gluttony is a fascinating contrast to the oat bran-obsessed asceticism that is the rage. Wassersug is part stoic, part epicurea: he has come to terms with the inevitable and has resolved to enjoy marbled steaks, ice cream and other delights until he gives up the ghost.

We can agree that society's devotion to health is a bit overzealous when even junk foods are touting their nutritional benefits. Hostess, once the proud purveyor of useless confections like Twinkies, has suddenly unleashed an oat bran muffin upon an unsuspecting public. Keebler has announced that its products soon will be cholesterol-free. Jay Leno is hawking "Light Doritos." What is this?! Let's face it, some things are not supposed to be good for you.

Writing in *The New Republic*, Michael Ignatieff observes that America is "making (itself) ill with the frantic pursuit of health."

Ignatieff observes Americans commonly list health at the top of their concerns, ahead of love, work, or money. Health has become a species of secular religion, complete with sacred texts. One gets the impression many among the panting, sweat-suited throng would eat wicker if they thought it would lower their blood cholesterol.

Of course good health is important. But any virtue becomes a vice when it grows too large and becomes too greedy. Perhaps we should remember Marcus Aurelius' observation that none of us will live to read his own memoirs. This is why the best long-term therapy for one's heart is to avoid setting it on the things of this world.

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