

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Getting familiar with fatal diseases and other lifestyle challenges
- » Learning about lifestyle changes that lengthen life
- » Setting health goals and trusting your doctor so your changes last

Chapter 1

Keeping Your Body in the Game through Extra Innings

Here's a fun fact that's not actually fun at all: in 2023, American men lived on average 5.3 fewer years than women. That's an improvement from the COVID-19 pandemic peak of 5.8 years in 2021, but it's still a pretty sobering reality check. And this holds true globally — the gap's the same for 2023.

Women living longer than men isn't some unavoidable biological destiny. Sure, women have some built-in advantages. They have some protection from estrogen and their immune systems, they're less likely to drive 95 miles per hour in a 65 mph zone, and they probably don't think "chest pain" is something you can just walk off or rub some dirt on. And genetics is certainly a contributor to diseases men develop. But the real causes of this longevity gap aren't written in our DNA; they're largely written in our daily choices.



REMEMBER

Although the main causes of death are the same for men and women, men die more often from heart disease, cancer, and unintentional injuries (also called accidents). Men are more likely to skip doctor visits, ignore symptoms, and treat their bodies like they don't need regular maintenance.

The good news is, most of these deaths are preventable. And you're already ahead of the curve because you're reading this book. So let's dive into why men are checking out early and, more importantly, what you can do to change course.

Dodging the Big Killers

Although the leading causes of death for men have fluctuated a little since 2010, when the gap between men's and women's lifespans was smallest, the top three contributors have stayed steady — heart disease, cancer, and accidents. (Well, COVID-19 pushed in from 2019–2021, but the death rates plummeted after 2021, so we're focusing on diseases that have had a consistent and sustained impact on men's lifespans.)

The good news is, none of these three diseases (along with a few buddies that are also sending men to early graves) have to be death sentences if you get ahead of things early.

Avoiding heart disease

Heart disease kills more men than anything else — nearly 300,000 American men in 2021. Even guys in their 40s are having heart attacks at rates that would make your grandfather nervous. Although genetics are a component, men develop heart disease mostly because of their lifestyle choices. They're more likely to smoke cigarettes, eat a poor diet, get too little exercise, and ignore stress.



TIP

Here's a two-step action plan to help your heart right now:

- » Know your numbers. The American Heart Association (www.heart.org) sets blood pressure targets under 130/80, so check yours and see where you stand. If you don't own a home monitor, you can get one for less than \$35, or head to your local drug store's pharmacy and use theirs for free. Check your blood pressure weekly, not obsessively. Find more about blood pressure in Chapter 15.
- » Move your body for 150 minutes per week, and walking counts. Find out what else counts in Chapter 5.

Take a look at Chapter 15 to get up to speed on heart disease and additional steps you can take to prevent it.

Reducing cancer risks

Cancer is the second leading killer, with close to 250,000 American men succumbing in 2021. Men often avoid health screenings, which prevent them from finding issues early enough for more successful treatment. Women get mammograms, pap smears, and regular checkups because they've normalized preventive care. Meanwhile, men treat colonoscopies like medieval torture. (Before you've had your first one, it certainly can appear that way.)

Some of the big cancers killing men are lung and prostate, and testicular cancer is the most common cancer in guys younger than 35. When screened and caught early, five-year survival rates for many cancers can be above 85 percent, but when caught late, the rates can be less than 35 percent.



TIP

You can also significantly reduce your cancer risk by not smoking, changing your diet, and getting enough moderate exercise. Take a look at Chapter 16 for more information about cancer and ways you can reduce your risks.

Steering clear of accidents

This category sounds easy to steer clear of, but in the United States it's actually the third leading contributor to men's deaths, claiming about 100,000 lives. *Unintentional injuries*, also known as accidents, is medical speak for drug overdoses, car accidents, falls, and workplace injuries — basically, all the ways men hurt themselves through risk-taking or poor judgment.

Drug overdoses are driving this trend; men are two to three times more likely to die from overdoses than women. Opioid addiction often starts legitimately — back surgery, injury, or dental work creates pain that needs a serious analgesic — but escalates quickly. If you're prescribed opioids, use them exactly as directed and dispose of leftovers immediately. If you're struggling with addiction, get help. This isn't a moral failing; it's a medical condition with effective treatments, and if left untreated, could literally kill you.

Vehicle accidents remain a major killer in part because men drive more aggressively and are involved in more fatal crashes than women. Some solutions are simple: slow down, buckle up, and put the phone away. Others are more difficult — if you're a truck driver, simply getting a lot more road time puts you at greater risk for fatal accidents.

Workplace safety matters too. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that men account for nearly 90 percent of workplace fatalities, many of them related to equipment operation or falls. If you work in construction, manufacturing, or any high-risk job, follow safety protocols religiously if you want to reduce your risk of dying early.



TIP

The bottom line on accident-driven causes of death? They're largely preventable. Chapter 17 has additional suggestions for how you can avoid becoming a statistic.

Rounding out the other fatal influencers

Overwhelmingly, heart disease, cancer, and accidents are the causes of men's deaths. To a much lesser degree, men die from stroke (Chapter 18), chronic respiratory diseases like COPD and asthma (Chapter 19), diabetes, and Alzheimer's disease (see Chapter 20 for both). Although genes have a stronger role in developing some conditions than others, in many cases you can meaningfully reduce your risks of developing each. Take a look at the chapters we've noted to get more information.

Addressing the Mental Health Elephant in the Room

Mental health issues are making men suffer and are contributing to shorter and less satisfying lives. A guy pretending everything's fine isn't a strategy that works. Every journey of a thousand miles starts with one step, though, and you reading this book is that step if mental health is a concern for you.

Stress

Chronic stress doesn't just make you irritable; it literally rewires your body for failure. Chronic stress increases heart attack and stroke risk.



WARNING

Men are particularly bad at managing stress because they're conditioned to "power through" instead of addressing the root causes.

Stress hormones such as cortisol wreck your cardiovascular system, suppress your immune function, and mess with your sleep. Men are more likely to cope with stress through drinking, smoking, or working longer hours — all strategies that make the problem worse and contribute to the development of other fatal diseases, too.



TIP

Even quick and easy stress reduction techniques can make a difference while you're sorting out and fixing the root causes. Next time you're feeling stressed or overwhelmed, try ten minutes of deep breathing, take a walk around the block, or call a friend. Even brief stress-reduction activities can lower cortisol levels significantly. Head to Chapter 7 for more on stress.

Anxiety and depression

Anxiety in men frequently shows up as physical symptoms, such as chest tightness, headaches, or stomach issues, making many guys think they have a medical problem rather than a mental health issue. Male depression shows up as anger, irritability, substance abuse, or emotional withdrawal — not what you expect to see for depression.

Compared to women, men are less likely to seek help for mental health symptoms, often because they don't recognize these signals for what they really are. The good news is that both depression and anxiety are highly treatable conditions, either on your own or with the help of a professional.



REMEMBER

Getting help isn't weakness; it's maintenance. Just like you'd see a mechanic for a broken transmission, you should see a mental health professional for a broken mood. We discuss several different types of therapy in Chapter 7, as well as self-help actions you can take.

Talking about Sexual Health

If you don't understand the basics of the male reproductive system, the rest of the conversation about sexual health is just guesswork.

Doing an equipment check

At its core, the male reproductive system includes the penis, testes (testicles), epididymis, vas deferens, seminal vesicles, prostate gland, and urethra. The testes produce sperm and testosterone, the prostate and seminal vesicles add fluids to create semen, and the penis delivers it to the outside world. Simple on paper — complex in reality. Chapter 11 goes into much more detail.

Making or avoiding babies

The male reproductive system is basically a production-and-delivery service for sperm. The system is designed to make babies and keep the human race going. But you may not want a little human (yet or at all), or you've been there, done that, and don't want more t-shirts. Enter contraceptives, which we talk about in detail in Chapter 12.

Avoiding sexually transmitted infections

Sexually transmitted infections, or STIs, spread through sexual activity. Some, like chlamydia and gonorrhea, can be cured with antibiotics. Others, like herpes or HIV, can be managed but not eliminated. Many can cause serious long-term health issues if untreated, including infertility.



TIP

You can generally avoid STIs with some basic precautions. Check out Chapter 13 for more.

Dealing with sexual and other system problems

A guy's reproductive health isn't just about avoiding infections or pregnancy. Issues like erectile dysfunction, premature ejaculation, prostate problems, or testicular cancer can all impact sexual function, fertility, and overall well-being. Take a look at Chapter 14 for explanations and pointers on how to approach any that you face.

Adjusting (or Overhauling) Your Lifestyle

In order to lead a healthy lifestyle, you don't need to transform into a CrossFit monk who drinks kale smoothies (although we'd like to see a face-off between that monk and Jackie Chan). You just need to make some smart adjustments that won't make you miserable.

Getting enough exercise



REMEMBER

After 40, your biceps matter less than your heart. Cardio exercise adds years to your life, while pure strength training mainly adds years to your mirror-gazing. As with many things in life, balance.



TIP

You want to hit (or exceed) 150 minutes of moderate exercise per week to get maximum health benefits. You could break this down to 30 minutes five days a week, or 37.5 minutes four days a week, or 25 minutes every day but Monday — the total minutes is what matters. And *moderate* means you can still hold a conversation while doing it. Walking counts. Gardening counts. Chapter 5 tells you what else counts.

Add strength training twice a week to maintain muscle mass and bone density as you age. You don't need to deadlift your body weight; even light resistance training helps retain muscle and support your metabolism as you age. Head to Chapter 6 for more.

Eating like an adult

Your college diet of pizza and energy drinks stops working when your metabolism hits the brakes around age 30. You don't need to eat like a rabbit, but you do need to eat like someone who wants to see 70.



TIP

The Mediterranean diet promotes longevity and tastes good, so it's easy to adopt. It offers lots of vegetables, lean proteins, healthy fats, and moderate wine consumption. Translation: more fish and olive oil, less processed garbage. If the Med's not your thing, you can take some other practical steps to improve your diet: Cook at home more often (you control the ingredients), eat vegetables with every meal (yes, every meal), and limit processed foods to weekends. See Chapter 4 for more nutrition tips.

Taking a reality check on smoking and drinking

There's no gentle way to say this — if you smoke, you need to quit. Smoking cuts years off your life expectancy and dramatically increases your risk of heart disease, stroke, lung cancer, and many other cancers. E-cigarettes and vaping aren't necessarily safer alternatives; they may just be different ways to damage your lungs and cardiovascular system.



REMEMBER

Quitting certainly isn't easy, but the benefits are immediate. Your body starts healing as soon as you quit. Within minutes, your heart rate drops. Within one to two days, carbon monoxide levels normalize. Within a year, your heart attack risk is cut dramatically. Chapter 9 gives you some resources if you're ready to toss your smokes.

Alcohol is more complicated. The Mediterranean diet includes moderate wine consumption, and some studies suggest light drinking might have cardiovascular benefits. But alcohol also increases risks for several cancers and accidents — two of the top killers of men.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov) defines moderate drinking as two drinks per day for men. If you're consistently above that, you're moving into dangerous territory. Research from the prestigious

medical journal *The Lancet* suggests that any potential benefits of light drinking are offset by increased cancer risk, particularly for men over 40.

In the face of evolving research, we say if you don't drink, don't start for health reasons. If you do drink, keep it moderate and honest about what "moderate actually means. That nightly "glass" of wine that's actually three glasses isn't helping your longevity.

Recovering via sleep

Sleep isn't laziness; it's when your body repairs itself. Men who sleep less than six hours nightly have lower testosterone levels and die earlier than men who get the recommended hours of snoozing.



REMEMBER

Most adults need 7–9 hours' sleep per night. If you're consistently getting less, you're not "getting by" — you're slowly degrading your health. Poor sleep increases heart disease risk, weakens your immune system, and makes you more likely to gain weight.



TIP

Keeping your bedroom cool (around 65–68°F or 18–20°C), avoiding screens for an hour before bed, and going to bed and waking up at the same times (even on weekends) are ways you can improve the quality of your sleep. Chapter 8 sheds light on sleep.

Making Changes That Stick

Big lifestyle changes such as modifying your diet or tripling your weekly workout sessions (or starting to get any at all) don't happen because you "feel motivated" one day. They happen because you commit, even when the changes feel inconvenient or difficult. The first step is mindset: stop waiting for the perfect moment and start acting like the healthy person you want to become. Small, consistent actions compound into big results over time.



TIP

Setting clear, specific goals can also help you adopt new habits. "Get healthier" is too vague. "Walk 30 minutes after work, five days a week" is actionable. Goals work best when you can measure them, track them, and celebrate small wins along the way. Progress fuels momentum, and who doesn't like a little celebration?

And if you build yourself an accountability network, you're more apt to sustain your new habits. This could be a workout partner, a coach, or a group chat that checks in daily. When someone else knows what you're aiming for, it's harder to quietly give up. Accountability also gives you a boost when you hit the inevitable slumps. Head to Chapter 3 for pointers on adopting changes in your life.

Keeping Tabs on Your Health

Here's an uncomfortable truth: men are not great patients. They often avoid doctors until something's actively bleeding or broken, and they're surprised when preventable problems become serious ones. If this sounds like you, hopefully we can help, both here and in Chapter 10.



TIP

Make sure you actually trust your primary-care doctor (PCP). Good doctors explain things in plain English, listen to your concerns without rushing, and involve you in decision-making. If your current doctor makes you feel uncomfortable if you ask questions or dismisses your concerns, find a new one. You're paying for this service; you deserve quality care.

Men are less likely than women to visit a doctor in any given year. Annual physicals aren't about finding problems — they're about preventing them. Your doctor can catch high blood pressure, diabetes, and early signs of heart disease years before you'd notice symptoms. And the appointments don't take a lot of time — usually just 30–45 minutes, not including paperwork, digital or otherwise (so much paperwork).



REMEMBER

Come prepared with questions, and write them down beforehand because you'll forget half of them once you're in the exam room. Ask about anything that's been bothering you, even if it seems minor. Most importantly, be honest. If you drink more than you should, say so. If you're stressed, anxious, or depressed, mention it. If you're having sexual health issues, bring them up. Your doctor has heard it all before and can't provide good care without accurate information.

