



Renew Yourself

By Ngam Su May

Dr. Victor Chen says we can be young in terms of 'biological' age, regardless of our birthday. The body itself has built-in mechanisms for self renewal to keep our body tissues and organs functioning optimally. But to age gracefully and not prematurely, we must take action to maximise our body's own powers.

Dr. Victor WS Chen believes that the human body is programmed to live 120 'great years'. However, many of us can only make it to the 70-75 year mark and suffer deterioration in health from the fourth decade onwards. He believes a greater understanding of the ageing process is an important step in helping us live longer and live better. Dr. Chen is of the view that the current level of understanding is very low in the country as consumers get bits and pieces of health information and are swayed by product testimonies and unsubstantiated claims from poorly designed clinical trials.

As a trained medical doctor and someone who has close to 10 years experience in the sale and marketing of pharmaceutical and consumer health products (see profile), Dr. Chen says he

can put forward a balanced perspective on health and ageing. He deals with the subject of ageing in one of his books called *Age Without Getting Old* published in September 2004.



Dr. Victor Chen

Boost Your Biological Age

Are we aging prematurely? Can we slow the ageing process? Dr. Chen replies that an understanding and evaluation of bio-markers of ageing will determine whether one has aged prematurely or gracefully. "We cannot deny our chronological age marked by our birth day but we can be 'younger' in terms of biological age," he notes. The biological age is measured by parameters such as lean body mass, insulin resistance, cholesterol level and exercise capacity. Scientists Evan and Rosenberg identified bio-markers which are clear-cut and scientific measurements that can be used to determine how old a person is. Dr. Chen outlines the 10 biomarkers and how many of them can be influenced by diet and exercise.

Muscle Mass and Strength. Between young adulthood and middle age, we lose about 3 kg of lean body mass/muscle each ten years of our life. This loss is accelerated after the age of 45. Dr. Chen notes that the loss is not a normal part of ageing but the result of disuse. Similarly, muscle strength is dependent on regular use of muscles, strength of the tendons, bones and ligaments.

Basic Metabolic Rate. A person's basic metabolic rate, that is how many calories the body needs to sustain itself, declines 2 % per decade, due to a decrease in muscle mass. Dr. Chen explains this is one of the reasons why people after 40 who continue to eat as they did in our youth, will put on weight and find it hard to shed the kilos.

Body Fat Percentage. Between ages of 20 and 65, the average person doubles his or her ratio of fat to muscle. Sedentary lifestyle and over-eating can raise the ratio even higher.

Aerobic Capacity. Aerobic capacity is the body's ability to process oxygen in a given time, and a reflection of how healthy our lungs and cardiovascular system are. By age 65, the average person's body ability to use oxygen efficiently declines by 30 to 40%.

Blood Sugar Tolerance. The body's ability to use glucose in the bloodstream declines with age. Dr. Chen explains that this is because the cells become less responsive to the hormone insulin that does the work of moving the sugar into the cells, resulting in a condition called glucose intolerance (see iSmile's article on *Insulin and Ageing* in this issue). As this tolerance worsens, the body is exposed to higher risk for type 2 diabetes.

Cholesterol/HDL Ratio. Total cholesterol tends to rise in both men and women until the age of 50 and the 'good' HDL cholesterol that protects the body against heart disease loses ground

to the 'bad' LDL cholesterol. However, Dr. Chen recommends regular cardiovascular exercise, strength training and reducing dietary fats to keep a lower cholesterol/HDL level.

Blood pressure. Most people show an increase in blood pressure with age. Dr. Chen says that exercise, maintaining an optimum weight and salt restrictions are ways to lower blood pressure.

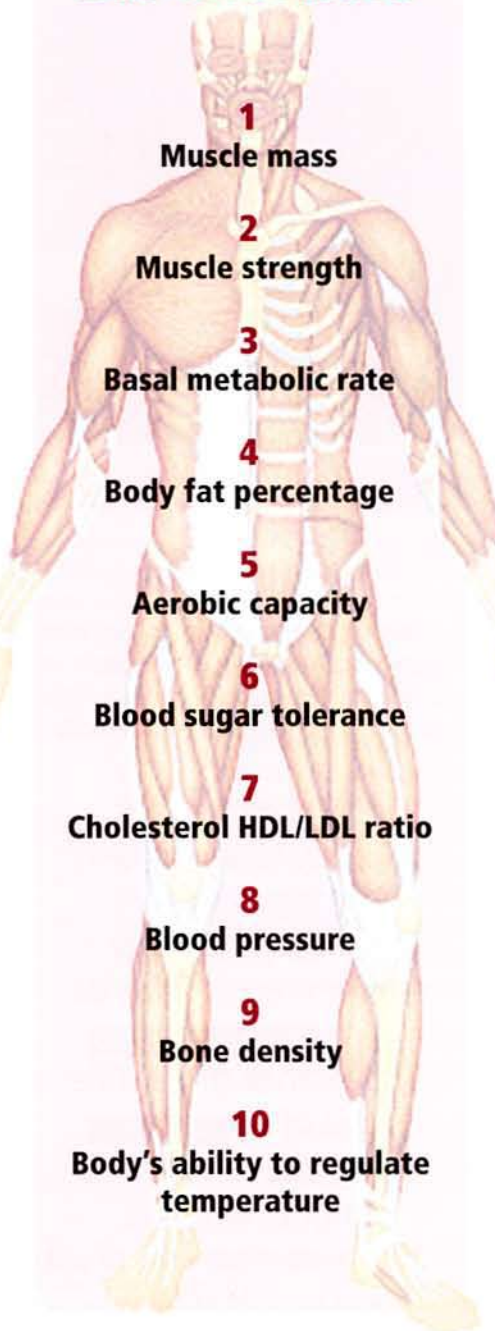
Bone density. Calcium tends to be lost from bones with age, making the skeleton weaker, less dense and more brittle. Besides calcium, the body needs other important vitamins, minerals and nutrients including protein to make up the bone matrix. Weight-bearing exercise will also stimulate bone formation.

Body's ability to regulate temperature. The body system functions best at between 36.5-37.5°C. Factors such as decreased sweating, decreased thirst and water intake may affect a body's ability to regulate temperature.

Since the 10 bio-markers can be measured, it is a good idea to ask your doctor to do so on your next check-up. Dr. Chen suggests that we establish our own benchmarks at age 20 onwards and every decade thereafter to monitor our own ageing process. " We can then claim that at age 40, we have a body of a 20-year old," he explains. Dr. Chen says such benchmarks are currently lacking in Asian populations but ideal for personal assessment and country-wide comparisons. He quotes one recent study which examined 319 healthy men in Singapore between ages of 30 and 70 which documented five determinants of the ageing process namely cardio-health, bone health, sexual health, general health and endocrine state (*Managing Aging Men in Asia: A Strategic Approach* by VHH Goh, CF Tain, TYY Tong, HPP Mok and SC Ng from the Department of Obstetrics & Gynaecology, Faculty of Medicine, National University of Singapore).

With such benchmarks, Dr. Chen adds, one can gauge whether changes in our food choices, supplements

10 Bio-Markers



Relationship of Exercise to Growth Hormone Effect

Type of exercise	Intensity	Growth Hormone Effect
Stationary bike	Moderate High	145% increase 166% increase
Running (men)	Moderate	Non to moderate
Running (women)	High	Elevated IGF-1, 75% increase in 24-hr serum GH
Weight training	High	Rapid and sustained increase in both men and women



Source: Klatz, R. *Grow Young with HGH*. Harper Collins 1997

consumption and exercise regime have had any effect on our efforts to stay young.

Healthy Ageing Nutrients

Dr. Chen notes that Malaysians have lost touch with the function of eating, namely to nourish our body. "The role of food is forgotten," he laments, because we have let our choice of food to be influenced by entertainment, social status (eg. imported sweets and fine foods) and cultural activities (eg. festivals). Once you have an understanding of the role of food and how it affects the bio-markers, it is easier to change your eating habits, he maintains.

Dr. Chen believes that nutrition is an integral part of health maintenance and treatment. He advocates fresh fruits and vegetables and healthy-ageing nutrients such as multivitamins,

essential fatty acids, antioxidants, phytonutrients and herbs. He also sees the benefits of probiotics to facilitate digestion of food and absorption of nutrients, plus detoxification to help flush out waste products in the body.

“The higher our capacity to repair cells damaged by free radicals and other environmental hazards, the lesser the appearance of tell-tale signs of pre-mature aging such as chronic fatigue, wrinkles, pigmentation and dry and rough skin.”

Exercise & Stay Young

Dr. Chen agrees that the exercise habit is not predominant in Malaysia. He says that an understanding of how exercise works plus discipline and scheduling can help to inculcate the good habit. "If you want to burn fat, go for aerobic exercise. But remember it is duration (after 30 minutes) and not the intensity that will burn the fat," he explains. Stretching exercises are good for the elderly because their connective tissue lose elasticity with age and disuse.

Many types of exercises are actually anti-ageing because they trigger the release of Human Growth Hormones (HGH) naturally. Dr. Chen recommends toning exercises for women with two soft dumb bells as these will release HGH.

Foundation of Youth

In laying the foundation of youth, Dr. Chen explains that the body has built-in mechanisms for self renewal to keep our body tissues and organs functioning optimally. It repairs damaged cells and replaces them with new ones to maintain youth and vitality. Advancing age slows down the self renewal process but we can take action to maximise our body's own powers. He identifies 3 keys in the foundation of youth:

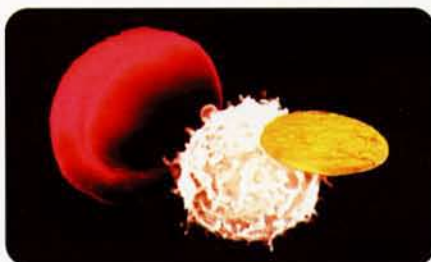
1. **Protecting healthy cells.** The better our ability to protect our healthy cells, the longer and healthier our lives will be. Protection is against destruction by harmful free-radicals and other toxins. The defense mechanisms are to maximise antioxidant intake, avoid oxidants and boost immunity.
2. **Repairing damaged cells.** The higher our capacity to repair cells damaged by free radicals and other environmental hazards, the lesser the appearance of tell-tale signs of pre-mature aging such as chronic

fatigue, wrinkles, pigmentation and dry and rough skin. Dr. Chen notes that to make new cells, we need fats to make the lipid membrane; amino acids to make proteins and nucleic acid to make DNA. Enzymes that carry out the repair mechanisms in the body also need many vitamins and minerals.

3. **Replacing dead cells.** The more efficient our ability to replace dead cells, the lower the chances of developing chronic degenerative diseases. A dead cell is replaced with an exact replica, provided that the DNA damage is minimal and the necessary building blocks are available. Dr. Chen notes that all cells in the body can regenerate except nerve cells and we can maximise the

body's own regenerative powers or opt for very expensive live cell therapy.

Live cell therapy is not new in that the French and Chinese started consuming raw placenta from animals in 500 BC. Placenta contains live cells that contain many growth factors and enzymes which drives the fetus to grow. The young cells impart their vigour to old and degenerating cells, stimulating



renewal and regeneration. Sheep cells are normally used as they are disease free and have proteins that are bio-compatible with humans. Dr. Chen notes that live cell therapy is very popular in Europe, especially among the rich and famous. Modern live cell therapy was founded by Dr. Paul Niehans in Switzerland who started the famous Clinique la prairie in 1931. According to Dr. Chen, there is a 6-month waiting list and cost starts at Euro\$18,000. Patients have to repeat the expensive process every three or four years.

In conclusion, Dr. Chen says that regardless of income levels, cultural background and health status, it is never too late to change so that we can age without getting old. Start the journey today. Don't just add years to life. Add life to years. 😊

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