



It's easy to focus on what goes wrong with the body as people age, but many women live healthy, vital lives into their 90s and beyond. We asked Gina Maranto to talk to women about what has gone right as they've grown older—and what the rest of us can learn from their experiences. —*The Editors*

Having a Ball

Older women share tips on enjoying a long and healthy life

by Gina Maranto,
special correspondent

One day last year June Quinlan drove into the desert near Tucson

to watch a friend whose skydiving team competes at meets around the world. Seeing the parachutists disporting themselves over the Arizona desert so piqued Quinlan's interest that she decided she would like to give it a try. A few weeks later she stepped out of a plane at 13,000 feet, making her maiden jump. Says the 82-year-old, 102-pound widow, "My friend Ginger came over and gave me a kiss while we were in free fall. I was not one bit scared."

In Scarsdale, N.Y., Ethel Danneman, 93, heads out several times a week to her seniors' group, bakes cookies, rereads Tolstoy and Jane Austen and, at regular meetings of a literary club called the Fezziwigs, ardently discusses the novels of Charles Dickens. In Teaneck, N.J., Bernice Smith, 75, regularly swims, does yoga and plays tournament bridge. According to her grandson, a personal trainer who runs his own gym, "It's hard to keep up with her." Florence Johnson, 81, of Ridgefield, Conn., walks or rides a bicycle daily and continues to play tennis, as she has since first taking up a racket at the Everglades Club in Florida at age 11. "I'd like to play more than I do," Johnson says, "but I'm a bit embarrassed that I've gotten so slow."

My own grandmother, a former schoolteacher, died in 1997 at age 92 and up until her last year was energetic and feisty. Although by the time she reached 90 her diminished reflexes kept her from driving, she still served as a tutor for the Memphis Literacy Council, sang in her church choir, planted her garden every spring, mowed her lawn, read her *U.S. News & World Report* cover to cover, cooked daily for herself and her younger sister, delighted in keeping up with three neighbor children, and religiously watched *60 Minutes* and *Wall Street*

Evelyn Streifer, 78, plays tennis almost daily.

Week. By example, she taught everyone who knew her that old age did not have to be sedentary, bleak or isolating.

Is there a secret to keeping healthy as one ages? In talking with 14 women over age 70 and collecting stories about dozens more, I gleaned a great deal of pithy and trenchant advice yet found more exceptions than rules. From Trinidad to San Francisco, these women seemed to have just one thing in common besides longevity: they were difficult to reach because they were hardly ever at home.

Their personal and familial medical histories varied, as did their physical regimes, economic statuses, stress levels and diets. For example, Loretta Dranoff, 76, of Miami has never exercised regularly and says she never worried about what she ate (although she never smoked or drank). In 1985 her husband (and piano partner) of 46 years died. "I had a very hard time for a few years. Murray and I were really together 92 years," she says, "because we were together all the time."

Dranoff now works full-tilt seven days a week running an eponymous Miami-based foundation that sponsors an internationally renowned two-piano competition. She takes medication for high cholesterol but otherwise has no health problems whatsoever.

On the other end of the exercise spectrum, Evelyn Streifer, 78, also of Miami, walks with her husband every morning at 6:15, takes hatha yoga once a week and plays tennis almost daily. Her tennis coach, a former Olympian, "won't let

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Claire Topper, 76, took up sculling when she retired.

me do anything negative. He makes me sprint twice around the court and times me." (Streifer's personal best: 35 seconds.) Some years ago Streifer had a bad attack of arthritis. She credits a change in diet—elimination of red meat and caffeine—with reversing the attack and staving off the debility ever since. Streifer says she exercises because she has always been active and finds that she feels better when she is.

Six years ago she had lymphoma. "I felt I would conquer it," she says; she is now free of cancer.

"I have an open mind," Streifer continues, "and I think that helps. I'm always interested in people and what's happening and in new ideas." Streifer enjoins her peers from dwelling on their aches, pains and illnesses. "You can't talk about those things," she emphasizes. "It limits you."

Audrey Finkelstein, 82, who hosts a

Thursday evening radio show on the National Public Radio station in Miami, agrees. As one ages, she observes, one needs to "have a different attitude about pain." Five mornings out of seven, Finkelstein walks two miles; the other two mornings, she lifts weights. But

"HEALTH IS A COMBINATION OF PHYSICAL WELL-BEING AND MENTAL WELL-BEING."

Finkelstein didn't always exercise. "My husband and I started walking about 25 years ago," she recounts. Now she doesn't want to stop: recently hobbled by tendinitis in her knee, Finkelstein got a cortisone shot and kept on walking.

In general, she declares, "you have to stay occupied with something you enjoy doing." And as for physical activity: "You're never too old, and it's never too late to start."

To the strains of opera on the stereo in her Miami home, Claire Topper, 76, opines, "Health is a combination of physical well-being and mental well-being. One mixes with the other."

French by birth and an immigrant to New York City after World War II, Topper had long nursed a desire to learn how to scull. So, after retiring eight years ago, she took lessons and has been rowing ever since, most lately out of the Miami Beach Rowing Club. Widowed, she says she somewhat jealously guards her "aloneness," keeping close ties principally with family and friends in France. Topper rises every morning at five, feeds her two cats, Minette and Ebony, and by seven can often be found pushing off the dock for an hourlong solo row down Indian Creek.

Asked if she had any health tips for younger women, Topper replies, "Count your blessings. Be aware of your blessings and give thanks for them. Be very careful about what you say, think and



Audrey Finkelstein, 82, hosts her own radio show.

do. Life is a boomerang. What you do comes back to you.”

Echoing Topper, Una Harris, 68, a grandmother who jogs three to four miles three days a week in her native Trinidad, also points to spiritual well-being as key—the cause, she believes, of her unflinching good health as she approaches 70. “God is my strength and ability,” she says. “For me, health is love. You must give of your time to others and share.” Harris, who has been singing all her life, continues to compose her own music and visit churches throughout the Caribbean.

Ethel Danneman, the 93-year-old Dickens lover, offers the most comprehensive counsel—her Ten Commandments of Health:

1. Marry only for love.
2. Walk a lot; walk every day.
3. Eat moderately.
4. Drink moderately.
5. Develop good friends.
6. Enjoy good books.
7. Enjoy good music.
8. Play mental games: recite the 50

states, the presidents—anything to keep your mind active.

9. Don’t gossip.
10. Speak well of others.

Oddly enough, several other women pointedly included admonitions against gossiping as part of their health advice. Others suggested: “Don’t surround yourself with negative people.” Says Charlotte Siegel, 77, who lives in North Miami, “Develop a positive attitude. Dance! Dance every day!”

Rhoda Feldman, a 76-year-old in San Francisco, tends to agree that looking on the sunny side is a good philosophy to maintain as one ages, although she finds that easy because “I’m basically a good-spirited person.” But Feldman admits the evidence can be rather confounding: “I know complainers, people who are grumpy all the time, and they sometimes live longer than people who are cheerful and pleasant to be around.”

Moreover, she’s unwilling to generalize about other factors. She herself seems to have suffered no ill effects from having smoked for 52 years (she quit 13 years

ago) or from having grown up on a rich, Russian-inspired diet (now she and her husband limit their fat intake and eat fish and emu, little red meat and lots of fruits and vegetables). To a certain extent, she speculates, longevity is just luck.

Not long ago a friend she had not seen for a few years approached her at a luncheon. “‘Rhoda,’ she said, ‘you look so marvelous. You look so healthy. Have you had any surgery?’” Feldman says she had to think a minute before replying. “‘Well, I had my appendix out when I was a child.’ ‘No, no,’ said my friend, ‘I mean have you had any plastic surgery?’” Feldman laughs. “If I don’t look in the mirror, I forget how old I am.”

While scientists continue to study how aging results from a combination of the assaults of the environment and the inevitability of cellular genetics, these active, vibrant women might agree on one final bit of advice: Life is too short to act your age. 54

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