
A

SHORT GUIDE

to a LONG LIFE



DAVID B. AGUS, MD

AUTHOR OF THE #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER
THE END OF ILLNESS

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A SHORT GUIDE TO A LONG LIFE



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Acknowledgments

About the Author

*To my wife, partner, and love, Amy Povich, and our genetic experiments gone right, Sydney
and Miles*

NOTE TO READERS

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A BRIEF HISTORICAL NOTE

Hippocrates was a Greek physician in the time of the third and fourth century BC. Modern medicine refers to Hippocrates as the father of Western medicine. He was among the first physicians to convey important “health rules” through his many now-famous quotes. Below are some examples that continue to have amazing relevance to today’s medicine. In fact, one could argue that our modern world has brought science and data into the field, but his initial observations and recommendations were remarkably accurate over two thousand years ago.

Walking is man’s best medicine.

Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food.

Declare the past, diagnose the present, foretell the future.

Primum non nocerum. (First, do no harm.)

It is far more important to know what person the disease has than what disease the person has.

If we could give every individual the right amount of nourishment and exercise, not too little and not too much, we would have found the safest way to health.

A wise man should consider that health is the greatest of human blessings, and learn how by his own thought to derive benefit from his illnesses.

Everything in excess is opposed to nature.

To do nothing is also a good remedy.

There are in fact two things, science and opinion; the former begets knowledge, the latter ignorance.

Hippocrates (c. 460 BC–c. 370 BC)

Introduction: The Power of Prevention

At least twice a week, I tell a patient that I have nothing left in my arsenal to combat his or her cancer. It's over, and in most cases the end is near. I've never gotten used to this gut-wrenching conversation. But I do it as part of the role I've accepted. That we are no better at treating cancer today, with a few notable exceptions, than we were fifty years ago is maddening. More infuriating still is that many of my patients could have prevented their cancer or other life-altering disease had they done a few things differently earlier in life. That makes those conversations even more upsetting. I'm pretty certain that most people could delay or totally prevent a vast majority of the illnesses we see today—including not only cancer but heart and kidney disease, stroke, obesity, diabetes, autoimmune disorders, and dementia and other neurodegenerative disorders—if they just adopt a few healthy habits early on and avoid the ones that lead to illness.

The best way to fight not just cancer but all the other ailments that typically develop over time is to prevent them. A staggering seven out of ten deaths among Americans each year are from chronic diseases like the ones I just named. Heart disease, cancer, and stroke account for more than 50 percent of all deaths every year. About half of us are living with a chronic condition right now.

But prevention is a hard sell. Think about yourself for a moment: can you see yourself twenty, thirty, or forty years from now? We all want to live however we choose today and pay our dues later. I see this payment being made by my patients daily, just by looking into their eyes.

I'd like nothing more than to be put out of my job. Imagine a world where we all die of old age—our bodies go kaput, much like an old car with hundreds of thousands of great miles on it. One day the engine doesn't start and nothing can revive it. In fact, 1951 was the last year you could die in the United States with the cause "old age" being listed on the death certificate. Since then, we've had to name a specific disease, injury, or complication. I find it astonishing to think that we live in a high-tech world with access to a vast array of knowledge about how to stay healthy, and yet preventable noncommunicable diseases now account for more deaths worldwide than all other causes combined. We rarely hear about the person who dies peacefully in her sleep at ninety-nine years young. Instead, we hear about individuals who suffer mightily and eventually succumb after a long "battle."

In our age of information, where health tips are dispensed like candy by the media, the work of being healthy has gotten complicated. Just consider your own search for truth about what's good for you—or what's bad. It's common practice to rely on experts to tell us how to live—news stories covering the latest scientific findings, bestselling books that tout one theory or another, government recommendations, claims on labels, and doctors like me. But this advice is so terribly common that it commonly conflicts. What is a person to do with a hot media account of a new study that finds multivitamins effective in preventing cancer—only to read another media account the next day that says multivitamins can increase your risk for cancer and do nothing for heart health? (And to add insult to injury, you learn that the company that makes the vitamins is the same one that makes the drugs to combat cancer!)

When I wrote my first book, *The End of Illness*, my purpose was simple: to share what I'd learned from working out on the edge of the cliff that is the war on cancer—a place where we take risks in medicine in the hope of finding innovations to prolong people's lives. While the death rate from cancer hasn't changed dramatically in the past fifty years, progress against other diseases has relied on single discoveries that have allowed us to treat or eradicate them. Examples include the use

statins to prevent cardiovascular disease and stroke, antibiotics to combat infectious diseases originating from bacteria, antivirals and vaccines to tackle and protect against specific viruses, and heightened awareness of the risks posed by behavioral factors such as smoking and poor diet or overeating. Except for these isolated improvements, why aren't we better at treating and curing chronic degenerative diseases that often cannot be blamed on a single culprit?

For decades we've tried to reduce our understanding of the body and its potential breakdowns to a finite cause, be it a mutation, a germ, a deficiency, or a number such as a white blood cell count, glucose level, or a triglyceride value. But this has led us far astray from a perspective that could not only change how we care for the body, but also how we create the next generation of treatments and, in some instances, cures. The original title of *The End of Illness*, upon which this life guide is based, was *What Is Health?* It's a question that bugs me and my colleagues to this day. I don't know what true health is. We can certainly try to measure health in a variety of ways—weight, cholesterol, blood sugar, blood cell count, how you look, and how well you sleep, for example. But that doesn't really tell me much in terms of overall health and how many years and days you might have left. This has motivated me to urge people to begin viewing their total health as a complex network of processes that cannot be explained by looking at any one pathway or focal point. In many instances, it does not seem good to try to understand a certain disease; we just need to control it, much like an air traffic controller manages planes without knowing exactly how to fly one. This radically different perspective on health is what can open the doorway to future solutions, and even cures.

I don't think I fully grasped the thorniness surrounding the subject of health, however, until I started discussing my book and responding to readers. I quickly found myself on the receiving end of questions like, What's your real motivation for writing a book? Why are you hawking prescription drugs? How can a doctor who treats the very rich have anything valuable to give the average person who barely has health insurance? Let me head this last question off at the pass right now by saying that the vast majority of my "prescriptions" in this book are surprisingly simple, such as wearing good shoes (Rule 59) and eating lunch at the same time every day (Rule 3). How much does it cost to keep a fairly regular schedule every day and to walk around more (Rule 16)? Put another way, how much will you save by ditching your vitamins and supplements (Rule 62)? How much easier will your life get once you learn that it's better to buy frozen vegetables than some fresh produce (which isn't nearly as fresh as you think; see Rule 5). And even when I suggest something that comes with a price tag, such as paying for a DNA screening test, there's often an inexpensive, if not totally free, alternative (see Rule 19), which can be even more informative and useful.

When I went on the *Dr. Oz Show* in the fall of 2012, I was billed as the most controversial doctor in America. But I think I'm the absolute opposite. I won't endorse anything that's not backed by well-controlled clinical trials—studies that live up to the rigors of the scientific method. In that regard, I'm one of the most conservative of doctors in America. People tend to label certain things as aggressive or, conversely, mainstream. Many individuals think taking aspirin and statins on a daily basis is aggressive but taking vitamins is mainstream. But the data tell a totally different story, painting a picture in which aspirin and statins can significantly *reduce* your risk of death (what scientists call "all cause mortality") while vitamins and supplements may *raise* your risk for a variety of illnesses, including cancer. I can understand and appreciate someone's suspicion when hearing a doctor push a pill, and her assumption that there must be financial remuneration or incentives involved. For the record, I have no financial ties to any drug company. In the past I have been paid for giving lectures to pharmaceutical management teams, but I've never been involved with any pharmaceutical marketing. If I suggest a certain drug or class of drugs, it's for a good, well-

documented reason: because they have been shown to make a positive difference.

~~I actually don't mind stirring up controversy and inspiring people to ask questions.~~ Spending on food and health together make up more than 30 percent of the U.S. economy, yet our politicians and civic leaders aren't discussing these important issues. They may bicker about how to finance health care reform, but I'd like to see more attention on the reform itself. It boggles my mind to think the conversation remains stuck on figuring out how to pay for health care rather than on diminishing our need for it. Indeed, part of my motivation in writing this book is to make you—the health-care consumer—an agent of change, starting with yourself. Each one of us can make a difference if we each are part of reducing the overall demand for health care. The result will follow one of the fundamental laws of Econ 101: when we start living strong, robust lives, we'll lessen our need for health care, causing the demand to decrease and costs to go down. Simple as that.

The other chief reason for writing this book is probably pretty obvious: I want these rules to reach as many people as possible. After *The End of Illness* came out, many people asked me to distill my Health Rules down to a prescriptive list for them to keep on hand. They wanted a cheat sheet. In my previous book, I spent a lot of time going through the evidence; I won't be doing that here. I also won't be using any medical terminology or fancy language to convey my ideas. This is as pure and direct as it gets—less about theory, research, history, and science and more about the basic practices you can follow in your daily life. Nothing is meant to be a rigid directive. Of all the rules I present, the most important one is this: you have to find what works for you. The sixty-five rules here are each accompanied by a paragraph or two of explanation. A few, however, require little or no clarification (Rule 29: Smile) and I hope you just accept them at face value.

My goal is that this book will allow you to take the confusion out of knowing how to live to be healthy—to feel as fabulous as possible at any age. As I said in my previous book:

My recommendations won't be terribly exacting. I'm not interested in telling you how to live your life or what you should be eating for dinner. I'm also not here to diagnose you. Instead, I want to empower you to take control over your body and the future of your health. The suggestions offered here are more like lifestyle algorithms—mental devices for thinking through our myriad lifestyle choices. Those choices must be tempered by our values and individual codes of ethics and behavior. Because there is no single answer to the question of what is health, these guidelines will produce as many different "healthy styles" as there are people living them.

My objective is to help you make the most of your health, whether or not you're currently battling an illness. I'd like to encourage you to take a hard look at your understanding of health and open up your mind to a change in perspective. It can significantly improve your life.

That we need simple reminders of what it means to live a healthy life despite the volume of advice transmitted daily in the media is a telling sign of our confusion. I can only hope that as you read this book you gain not only the knowledge you need to take advantage of modern science and medicine, but also the wisdom to discern the good from the questionable to make the best decisions for yourself. I also hope that your future will be determined by the power of choice, and, when necessary, that it will guide you down pathways of healing. Only you can end illness.

I've divided this book into three sections. The first, "What to Do," gives a clear set of just that—things you can do that will make you the architect of your health kingdom. The second part, "What to Avoid," offers my rules for the things to stay away from that can harm your health. Some of these will be obvious, such as limiting risky behaviors and avoiding less-than-perfect ingredients in food, but some won't be so apparent, such as how not to fall prey to hyperbole in the media and how not to hoard your medical information. I'm going to help you learn how to separate the hype from the helpful and see the ways in which you can benefit from sharing your medical information with the world. Part three, "Doctor's Orders," makes my recommendations even more straightforward by listing out a plan based on which decade you're in (twenties, thirties, forties, and so on). This is your real cheat sheet—the bulleted list of agenda items you should tend to at each particular age. The

nature of this book's structure and content makes for some repeated ideas, and two different rules may take you to the same place. My hope is that presenting these principles in different ways will make them more memorable. Enjoy the read, and I trust that a handful of these rules will stick with you and improve your life.

Before we begin, let me first present important ground rules.

Ground Rule 1

Health information is a moving target. Recommendations today may change tomorrow. For now, the following rules are relevant based on the data we have available that convincingly show the best practices for reducing your risk of disease. While it's true that you can find single, unrepeated studies that contradict my ideas, that's not how science works. When scientists weigh in on a topic they can't just rely on single studies that support their view. Instead, they have to consider all the studies on a topic and examine the results of each. That is exactly what a meta-analysis does. Hence all of my prescriptions are rooted in studies that meet this gold standard. They always will be. And the day comes when science uproots an established "truth" or does a complete 180 on a universal accepted fact, then I will welcome that new viewpoint with excitement and resolve (and a new rule).

Ground Rule 2

The rules in this book are not meant to be blanket recommendations, especially when it comes to prescription medications. The point is to have a discussion about them with your doctor and family and also to consider your inner core values. So take the time to sit, think, and talk through any new direction you decide to take in your life. Remember, too, that health is in constant flux (see Ground Rule 1). You need to adapt to changes as you age. In science-speak we say that humans are "emergent systems"—they are constantly changing, developing, and evolving. The body is an incredible self-regulating machine. You don't need to do much to support its health and optimize wellness. In the last hour, for instance, about one billion cells were replaced in your body without your having to think about it.

Ground Rule 3

You are in charge of you. This book is designed as a manual to help you know when to be introspective and when to question things. If I suggest something that offends you or that you flatly reject, just move on. At the heart of my message is the importance of knowing how to have a productive conversation with yourself and your physician; it's also about raising your awareness about the things you do today that affect your tomorrows. When you come across a rule that makes you feel uncomfortable, remember that none of these is absolutely perfect. Instead of dismissing it, ask for better studies and, in turn, better technology. We have to be pushing for progress. Here's a quick example: aspirin may be touted as a miracle drug (Rule 22), but it's still flawed, given the side effects it can cause, namely bleeding and upset stomach. We should question why the National Institutes of Health doesn't spend large sums on making better aspirin so we can reap its miraculous benefits minus the potential side effects.

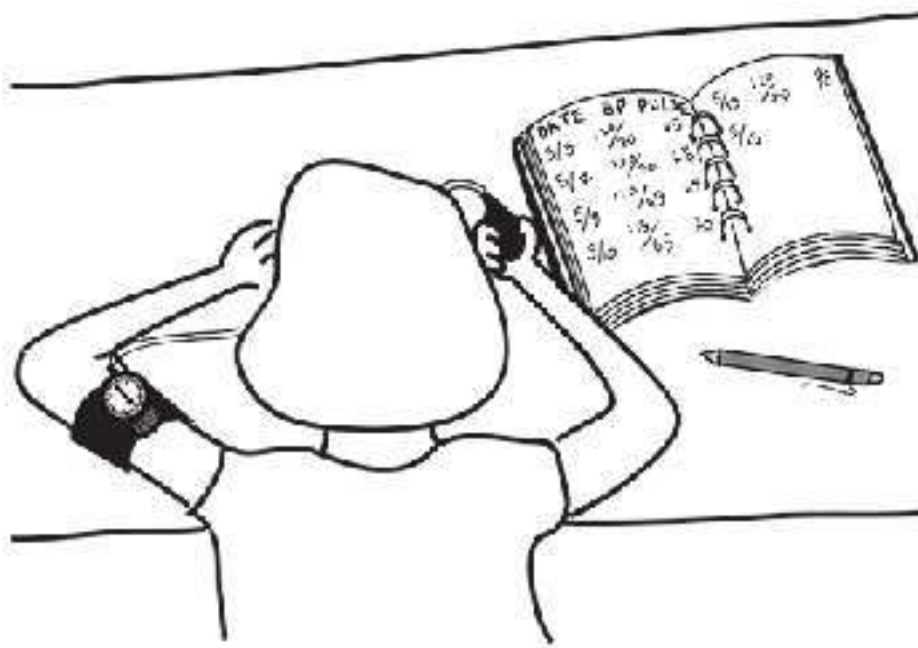
One final confession: I admit that I was so moved by Michael Pollan's *Food Rules*, which was inspired by his bestselling *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*, that his book provided the model for this

one. I reference Pollan a few times in *The End of Illness*, for I deeply respect his take on dietary issues and think he states the facts brilliantly. So as much as *Food Rules* lays out a set of concise memorable rules for eating wisely, my *Short Guide to a Long Life* similarly presents my set of rules for *living* wisely. This of course will include a few rules about eating and buying food, but I will also address all the other factors that play into good health. I've done my best to keep it short and sweet while still keeping my promise to bestow on you the recipe for a long and healthy life.



What to Do

1 Listen, Look, Feel (and Record Your Body's Features)



These days it's easier to know your blood pressure and heart rate than it is to find a pay phone. If I had to put one rule above all others, it would be this: get to know yourself. It's why I'm starting the entire list of things to do with a directive to take inventory of your body's features, characteristic vital signs, and other health parameters that are relatively easy to obtain. Let's bring the concept of *listen, look, and feel* home. Obviously, aim for the measurements you can take with tools at your fingertips or at a local pharmacy, or that don't require any hardware at all, just your inner thoughts and sensations. Include notes such as how you feel in general, how well you're sleeping, whether you harbor any aches and pains, and what kinds of activities or foods seem to irritate your body. How many of us never stop and ask: Do I feel healthy? Is it hard for me to get out of bed in the morning? Is there a pattern to the times when I feel lousy and, conversely, fantastic? You'd be surprised how effortless it can be to decode the mysteries of your own body's quirks and rhythms just by tuning in!

If you want to get more technical, then gather clues to your body's signals by recording the following information daily over the course of three months: the time of day, your blood pressure, your pulse, and what's going on at that time (e.g., you just ate breakfast, you're anxious upon waking up, you're relaxed in front of the television, or you've received a piece of bad news in the mail). Pick different times of the day to do your self-examination, as this will inform you of times when, say, your blood pressure is high or your mood is low. You'll then want to repeat this exercise throughout the year, preferably once every couple of months, to note changes. Don't wait until you're in the doctor's office, which is typically a rare occasion for most of us. Do, however, bring your personal health diary with you to share at your next appointment. You can buy or access equipment to take your blood pressure at most pharmacies, and some tools can even be downloaded as an application for your smart phone (see Rule 2).

I'm a big believer in what's called personalized medicine, which means customizing your health care to your specific needs based on your physiology, genetics, value system, and individual circumstances. Medicine is finally at a place where we have the technology to tailor treatment and preventive protocols to an individual, just like a seamstress can tailor a garment to a person's body.

But it all begins with you. You won't be able to enjoy the benefits of personalized medicine until you take a close look at your unique body.

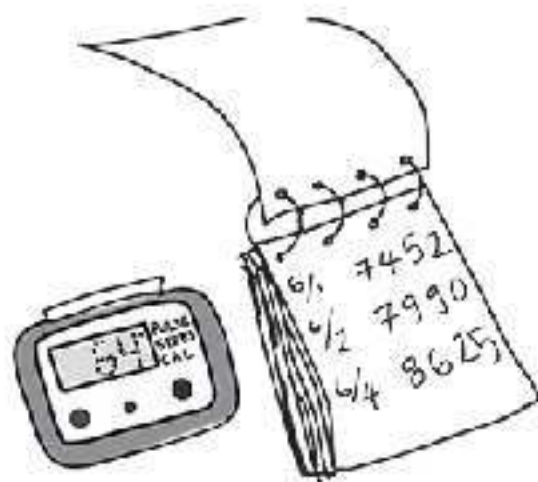
Below is a list of general questions to ask yourself during your personal checkup every couple months after you've completed the intense three-month initiation diary:¹

- How would you rank your overall energy levels?
- Anything abnormal to report (skin, hair, sensations, breathing, appetite, digestion)?
- Do you suffer from any chronic conditions?
- How bad is your stress level on a scale of 1 to 10?
- Are you happy?
- What do you want to change in your life?
- What is your weight? (Aim to measure your weight once a week or every two weeks.)

Of course, these questions should also be asked on day 1. And be honest.

1. Go to www.davidagus.com for a free comprehensive, downloadable questionnaire.

2 Measure Yourself



Every day I read about some new gadget or app on the market that can help track my health and happiness. (At last count, there were more than seven thousand self-tracking smart-phone apps alone, and the market for self-tracking gadgetry is exploding.)

How many steps did you take today? How long were you in dreamy REM sleep last night? How fast did you eat lunch? What's your pulse? How many calories are you burning? What's your blood oxygen level? What's your brain's electrical activity at night? How stressed are you? What emotion are you feeling? You can answer these questions if you have the right device. (Although I should hope you can take a good guess as to how stressed and emotional you are sans a digital reader.)

If you really want to take Rule 1 to the maximum, then consider measuring yourself a bit more formally with the help of nifty devices. In 2007, a couple of brainy *Wired* editors saw this coming: someday when we'd be able to track ourselves digitally as Sanctotrius of Padua did manually when he weighed everything that came in and out of his body over a period of thirty years in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The *Wired* editors coined the term the "quantified self," and this kind of effort has already become a movement. Even if you don't subscribe to the idea of wearing a piece of Star Trekky equipment, most of us keep mental track of certain things in our lives such as weight, sleep quality, and activity level—if just to make sure we're within the parameters we'd like to follow.

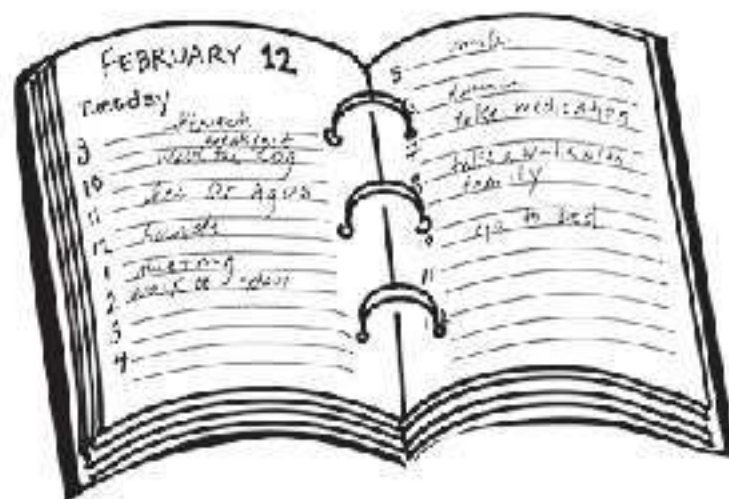
But seriously, you might want to consider adding a tracking app or device of some kind to your life. I can't even begin to list them all here, and by the time you read this a whole new generation of useful software programs and devices will surely have hit the market. You can track, calculate, plan, and research just about anything health related these days and personalize that info. Some apps can be programmed for your location and, say, notify you of the foods in your geographical area that are in season and provide information on local farmers markets. Pretty soon we'll be able to wear little devices that can clue us in to our body's dynamics all day long. Not that we all may want to wear such gadgets 24/7, but these could be incredibly powerful tools for creating and maintaining baseline numbers, and in some cases for training ourselves to know when we could benefit from some behavioral modifications. It's hard to take yourself from a raging bull in terms of stress back down to a calm, cool cucumber, but if a device or app could alert you that you're entering a danger zone, it might motivate you to make effective changes to reduce your stress.

Tools are critical to our success in so many areas in life—e-mail and cell phones allow us to communicate, the Internet to research, cars to get where we are going. Why would we think that we don't need such help with our health? The tools are already at our disposal. They aren't meant to

make us totally self-absorbed; they are meant to help us take better care of ourselves. Using them will propagate the incentives we need. Make it a goal to study yourself consistently and keep charts. Listen to your body, and remember—only you know your body best.

For a constantly updated list of interesting apps and devices, go to <http://davidagus.com/mhealth>

Automate Your Life



Your body loves predictability. Did you get up today at the same time as yesterday? Will you eat your next meal at roughly the same time you ate that meal yesterday? One of the best ways of reducing stress on your body and keeping its preferred, balanced state of being (homeostasis) is to maintain a regular, consistent routine on a daily basis, 365 days a year, to the best of your ability. Yes, regardless of weekends, holidays, social demands, late nights at the office, and other body-busting, schedule-disrupting events.

The four chief areas where you can make great strides in honoring your body's homeostasis are your sleep-wake cycles, eating times, periods of physical activity, and schedule for taking any prescribed medications. Just as your body aches for a consistent sleep schedule, it also craves a regular eating routine. If you were to step into a body that's been deprived of its expectation of eating lunch at noon, for example, you'd witness biological activities going on that would likely surprise you. Your body won't just show signs of hunger; it will also experience a surge in cortisol, the stress hormone that tells your body to hold tightly to fat and to conserve energy. In other words, if you don't eat when your body anticipates food, it will sabotage your efforts to lose or maintain an ideal weight.

By the same token, don't throw a wrench into that finely tuned body of yours by sporadically snacking or eating randomly when you're not hungry just to counteract an emotional state such as boredom, loneliness, or depression. If you don't normally snack at 3:00 p.m. every single day, then don't reach for that apple fritter to lift your late-afternoon lull. But if you need an afternoon snack, have it at a regular time. And go for a handful of nuts, a piece of whole fruit, veggies dipped in hummus, or some cheese and crackers rather than the processed fried dough.

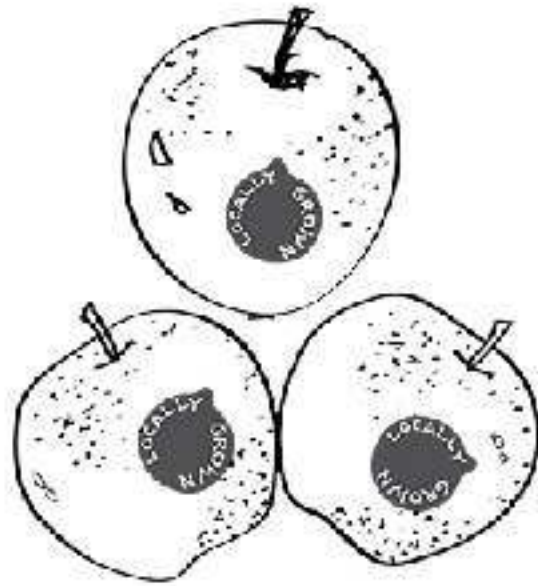
4 Mobilize Your Medical Data



Do you have copies of all your medical records, and are they accessible online somewhere? Why not? What if you land in the emergency room and cannot talk but have a potentially fatal allergy to penicillin—the very drug a doctor is about to inject into you?

We use our phones and computers today for just about everything, with one exception: storing our medical records and keeping our health information updated. Aim to have all your records stored in your “mobile cloud” so they are always accessible to you. Give a trusted family member (spouse, parent, sibling, adult child) or friend your passwords so they can access those same files when and if it becomes necessary. Everyone needs a partner in health care. Pick someone. Give that person full access to all of the places where you keep your medical data. If you don’t have your medical records nicely organized in digital files, request copies of your files from your doctors. Spend a weekend afternoon creating digital copies of them using a scanner. You can also keep them on a USB key chain that you take everywhere. This task may sound daunting, but it’s just a few hours of work from which you can benefit for the rest of your life. It is unusual that patients of mine have a medical emergency between the hours of 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. when the office is open and we can access their records. Problems always seem to happen in the middle of the night, on a weekend, or when someone is traveling! We each have different health profiles, but that distinctiveness can present a challenge to doctors who don’t know anything about us, yet have been given the job of treating us. Having your entire medical record on file to hand over just might save your life.

5 Eat Real Food (and Don't Let the Apple Fall Far from the Tree)



The best way to summarize the sad need for this rule is simply to quote Michael Pollan from his book *In Defense of Food*: “That anyone should need to write a book advising people to ‘eat food’ could be taken as a measure of our alienation and confusion.”

And indeed, every day people ask the question, What should I eat?

Answer: real food.

What constitutes real food? With the exception of flash-frozen fruits and vegetables, anything that *doesn't* come with a label or an FDA-approved nutrition facts label is likely to be real, as ironical as that sounds. If you walk the perimeter of your grocery store (produce section, butcher, fishmonger), you'll find real food. Steer clear of those aisles lined with boxes and bottles and other food impostors that come in pretty packages. If you read a label that lists ingredients you cannot pronounce or define without a graduate-level textbook in chemistry, put that item back on the shelf and walk away! Focus on consuming foods that are as close to nature as possible, which will also help you to avoid problematic ingredients that you don't know you're sensitive to.

Watch out for health claims, too. If a food product has to tell you that it's good for you (with descriptions and health claims on their packaging that say things like “low fat,” “low in sugar,” “lite,” “cholesterol free,” “baked not fried,” “antioxidant rich,” and “all natural”), then it's probably not very real. Think about it: in order for claims to be made, the food must be packaged somehow and pass some sort of test or criteria for the seal of approval. This means that the food cannot possibly be as real and as close to nature as possible. Orange juice, for instance, will come with lots of health claims (“a full day's worth of vitamin C!”), but the quiet, lonely whole orange sitting in a produce basket will do more for your health than an eight-ounce glass of fiberless fructose. If they have to tell you why you should be eating it, you *shouldn't* be eating it. What's more, many people think they are eating healthily when they buy diet frozen dinners, fat-free ice cream or frozen yogurt, 100 percent natural fruit juice, low-fat cheese, energy bars, diet soda, organic hundred-calorie snack packs, and so on. But if you look at the nutritional content of these foods, and the order in which the ingredients are listed, which reflects their prevalence, you're likely to find more sugar, saturated fat, salt, and ingredients with weird names than anything else.

And one more note about this rule: go for seasonal items when you buy fresh produce. If you find yourself eating blueberries and heirloom tomatoes in February or brussels sprouts and kiwifruit in June, then you're likely eating fruits and veggies that have fallen too far from the tree. In other words, they have traveled a long way to get to your GPS coordinates. The minute a fruit or vegetable is picked is the moment it starts to change chemically and lose nutritional value. Too many fruits and vegetables are available year-round now thanks to shipping technologies. We may live in a world where we can access pretty much any type of food all year long, but it comes at a major expense to our nutrition. By the time the vast majority of produce reaches the bins and aisles of your local supermarket, it doesn't contain nearly the same amount of nutrients as when plucked from the plant or yanked from its roots. If fruits and vegetables are picked before they are ripe—which many of them are to help them endure the long shipment—they have less time to develop a full spectrum of vitamins and minerals. The produce might look ripe on the outside, but it will never have the same nutritive value as it would have if it had been allowed to ripen fully before harvest. In addition, during the long haul from farm to fork, fresh fruits and vegetables are exposed to lots of heat and light, which also degrade some nutrients, especially delicate vitamins such as C and the B vitamins, thiamine. What we end up with in our mouths is a nutrient-poor product that may also contain some chemicals that we would like to avoid.

Unless you can buy truly fresh produce that's in season and has been delivered recently from a nearby farm, head on over to your grocer's freezer section and opt for frozen fruits and vegetables, often labeled as "fresh flash-frozen." Fruits and vegetables chosen for freezing tend to be plucked or picked at their peak ripeness, a time when—as a general rule—they are packed with the most nutrients. Eat fruits and vegetables soon after purchase, including the frozen variety. Over many months, even the nutrients in frozen vegetables inevitably degrade. And for produce that you can't buy truly fresh, please don't insult the sweet fruit and vibrant veggies by letting them languish in your kitchen's fruit bowl or crisper in the refrigerator. Enjoy them as soon as possible.

All of this leads us to the question, How can you know what's truly fresh? Ah, see the next rule.

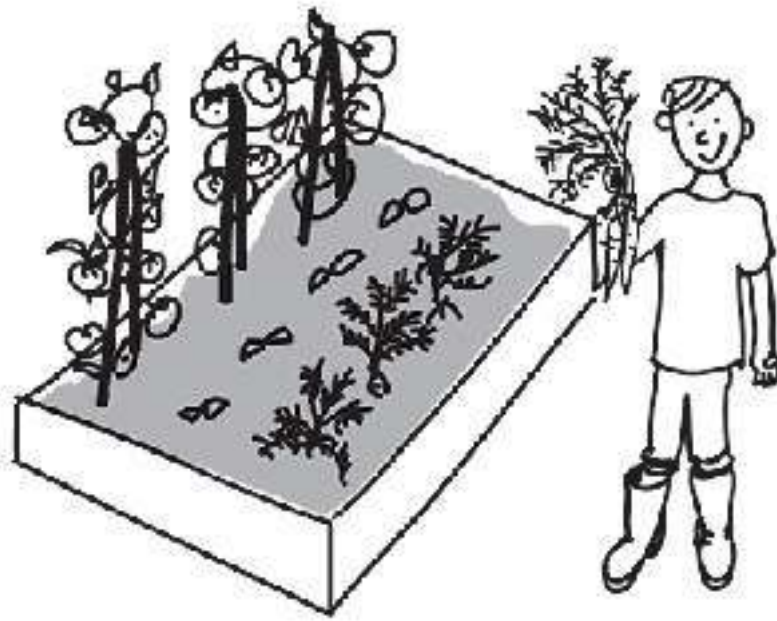
6 Know Your Grocer



Short of being a farmer who knows exactly what's in season, you can learn all the information you need to make smart purchases just by chatting up your local grocer. The people who stock the produce section, for instance, will tell you what just came in, where it came from, and how it was farmed. The guy manning the butcher counter can share details about the ranchers who supplied the meat, and the woman behind the fish counter can offer information as to which fish is the freshest, most sustainably caught. Don't be intimidated by these folks. They love imparting their knowledge.

And when you do venture out of the grocery store and into your local farmers market, that's where you'll want to introduce yourself to the people who are that much closer to the source of your food. Get to know your local farmers as you would your grocer. Farmers markets rarely sell imported items, so what you find there will be the freshest possible. If you can buy most of your fresh produce from a local farmers market, you can automatically avoid the nutrient-poor, processed, nonseasonal fare. You may have to spend a little more for your groceries, but this is where it really counts. You get what you pay for: you'll be eating high-quality foods and enjoying a high quality of life that won't cost you bundles in health-care bills for illnesses you could have avoided. Besides, high-quality food just tastes better, so you're more likely to be satisfied with less of it, thereby controlling your calories.

7 Grow a Garden



This should be a mandatory rule for anyone with children, especially young ones. I know of no better way to teach principles of health and good eating than to show kids what real food looks like in the growing phase. This will force you to learn what blooms in May versus what crops up in December. And there's just nothing you can buy in the grocery store or even at your farmers market that compares nutritionwise with food you pick a few feet from your kitchen and use immediately for cooking or just eat raw.

Don't panic if you live in an itty-bitty apartment or lack a green thumb. Be willing to experiment and start with easy plants that work in your climate and space. Your local nursery will be able to give you all the details and equipment you need (think pots, soil, seeds). You needn't own an acre or have a huge amount of unused area in your yard. A simple window box will suffice. And you can just start by growing herbs and spices (parsley, basil, mint, sage), then graduate to some of the more advanced crops as your space allows, such as peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers, green beans, snow peas, lettuce and Swiss chard. In some places, you can grow a garden all year round and rotate which crops you're cultivating based on the season. Better yet, make this a community effort and join forces with neighbors. Split up who grows what and share in the bounty. Now, that's neighborly for a good cause and community health.

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