



## PERSONAL HEALTH

# A Birthday Milestone: Turning 80!

The secret to a happy and vibrant old age? Strive to do what you love for as long as you can do it.



By **Jane E. Brody**  
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When a 50ish woman at my Y learned that I was about to turn 80, she exclaimed, “80 is the new 60, and you set a great example for the rest of us!”

At least, I’m in good company:

- Dr. Anthony Fauci, national infectious disease guru, is five months my senior, sharp as a tack even under withering political fire;
- Nancy Pelosi, 81-year-old Speaker of the House, also stands up well against fierce opposition;

- Anthony Hopkins, 83, Oscar winner for “The Silence of the Lambs” and a frequent nominee, won again this year for “The Father”;
- [Morgan Freeman](#), also 83, acts with a voice of distinction bested only by his formidable talent. He has four upcoming movies and a TV series.
- Bernie Sanders, former presidential hopeful who will be 80 in September, remains a force to be reckoned with in the U.S. Senate;
- Paul Simon, a month younger than Mr. Sanders, has won 12 Grammys as a singer and songwriter in a now six-decade career. He recently [sold his songwriting catalog to Sony for around \\$250 million.](#))

The list goes on. As my late husband, who didn’t make it to that milestone, would have said, “80 — not a record, but not a bad average.”

Indeed, many have done far better. Every day I read or hear about folks in their 90s who are still remarkably active and productive. Check out [this recent feature in The Times on the indefatigable architect Frank Gehry](#). At 92, his latest project is a spectacular development in downtown Los Angeles. When asked if he’d consider retiring, he replied, “What would I do? I enjoy this stuff.”

That to me is the secret of a happy, vibrant old age: Strive to do what you love for as long as you can do it. If the vicissitudes of life or infirmities of age preclude a preferred activity, modify it or substitute another. I can no longer safely skate, ski or play tennis, but I can still bike, hike and swim. I consider daily physical activity to be as important as eating and sleeping. I accept no excuses.

And, as you can see, I still write, although it often takes me longer than it used to. In my job as a health columnist, I’m paid to be continually educated and inspired by the research and interviews I do for my weekly column. They keep my brain and spirit alive. And when a word or its spelling eludes me, there’s Google and my editors to fill in the gaps.

The cohort of Americans who have lived for eight or more decades is rising steadily and projected to grow faster than the cohort of youngsters under 18 for at least the next 40 years. In fact, as more of us in the late decades of life continue to thrive, morbidity and mortality were rising among middle-aged men and women even before the pandemic. The average newborn today is not expected to make it to 80, thanks largely to poor diet and exercise and rising obesity.

Assuming most people would opt for a long and fulfilling life, Nature permitting, what does this take? What accounts for the growing number of octogenarians and beyond who are accomplished and still accomplishing?

Many clues have emerged during my decades of reporting on health. I’ve already alluded to the importance of regular physical activity, which supports a healthy brain *and* body.

Assuming you don't smoke, which was my husband's undoing, Nature will usually take pretty good care of you for about half a century. Thereafter, it's up to you.

Without regular exercise, you can expect to experience a loss of muscle strength and endurance, coordination and balance, flexibility and mobility, bone strength and cardiovascular and respiratory function. In other words, a sedentary lifestyle is a recipe for chronic disease and decline.

Abandon all excuses, as [Todd Balf did](#) after he became partially paralyzed following spinal surgery for cancer. Though he had long shunned being immersed in water, with a physical therapist as coach, he finally took the plunge and discovered that swimming back and forth in a pool buoyed both his body and soul.

Of course, like any machine, to maintain peak levels of activity the human body requires quality fuel. Growing up, most of us who are now 80 and beyond were largely spared the plethora of ultra-processed foods that now line the shelves of every grocery. My father, the family food shopper, was a big fan of oatmeal and shredded wheat, fresh fruits and vegetables.

Eating out was an occasional treat (and for me, still is). Most meals were prepared and eaten family style at home. Fast foods? Maybe a hot dog when we biked miles to Coney Island or celebrated my birthday at a Brooklyn Dodgers game. I was in my early 20s when McDonalds ballyhooed that it had just sold 600,000 burgers! (The company stopped counting in 1994, [after it hit 99 billion burgers](#) served.)

But exercise and nutrition are not enough. Studies suggest that motivation, attitude and perspective are equally important to a long, healthy and fulfilling life. I was still in high school when my mother died of cancer at age 49, and her premature loss became a lesson for me to live each day as if it's my last with a keen eye on the future in case it's not.

I entered college with plans to become a biochemist and discover lifesaving clues to cancer. But I found working in a laboratory boring and isolating, and in my junior year realized my true love was learning what *others* discovered and communicating that information to the public. So I married biochemistry with journalism, pursued a fulfilling career in science writing focused on personal and public health and, like a horse with blinders, never looked back.

My advice to students: Try to combine your passion with your talent and you'll have the best shot at a rich and rewarding career. I also recommend choosing a supportive life partner who's willing to share the mundane tasks of daily life and step up for extra duty when needed.

Having been raised to save, all my life I've shopped sales and bargains and parlayed the monetary rewards into scholarships for deserving students and fabulous nature, hiking and cycling trips for me, family and friends.

Have I any regrets? I regret taking French instead of Spanish in high school and I keep trying to learn the latter, a far more practical language, on my own. I regret that I never learned to speed-read; whether for work or leisure, I read slowly, as if everything in print is a complex scientific text. Although I'd visited all seven continents before I turned 50, I never got to see the orangutans in their native Borneo or the gorillas in Rwanda. But I'm content now to see them up close on public television.

If and when I finally retire, I'd like to work as a volunteer with young children. They lighten my step, warm my heart and enrich my soul. Their joie de vivre and innate curiosity foster hope that the world of the future will be a better one.

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