

Men's Health

Pile on years by putting much less on your plate

A Sydney researcher says cutting down the calories will result in a longer life, writes **Jill Margo**.

Eat less and live longer. This simple message comes from one of Australia's leading experts in ageing, who says leanness over the long term can add an extra three to five years to a man's life.

Arthur Everitt, emeritus professor at the University of Sydney, is saying this at a time when Australians' daily consumption of food is at a record high.

Since the 1960s our food intake has increased by 20 per cent and more than 60 per cent of Australians are now overweight or obese. -

The fact that we now are living longer is not related to our rich diet. He says that last century, improvements in public health and medical science delivered an extra 30 years of life to average Australians.

Improvements are continuing and we are still gaining longevity at the rate of two months a year.

But there is more to be had and those hungry for extra years can probably get them if they control their food intake.

While this applies to most of the population, he cautions it does not include the elderly.

Available studies suggest that people benefit from having a bit of weight once they reach their eighties. At this age, cutting food intake can be dangerous and life-shortening.

"But they can significantly improve their longevity if they walk a mile a day," he says. This year, research published in the journal *Preventive Medicine* showed walking an hour a day improves life expectancy for octogenarians.

Although other factors such as genes, hormones and lifestyle influence longevity, Everitt says calorie restriction without malnutrition has a powerful impact

The Japanese consume 20 per cent fewer calories than Americans and live three years longer.



The longest lived people in the world, who inhabit the Japanese island of Okinawa, have had their diet recorded since the 1950s. Their average calorie intake is 40 per cent less than the average American intake and they live five years longer.

On a daily basis, women eat 20 per cent fewer calories than men and they too generally live five years longer.

Everitt began his research into calorie

Italian nobleman Luigi Comaro, very ill at 45, lived to 102 by eating less.

restriction and longevity in the 1950s using a rat colony. He found he could extend the lifespan of rats — about two years — 40 per cent by feeding them less.

As humans can live to 100, lifelong studies have not been conducted. But Everitt says the effect of calorie restriction can be deduced in other ways.

During World War II, semi-starvation in Scandinavia -equivalent to a 20 per cent drop

in calorie intake — resulted in reduced heart disease.

A six-month starvation study conducted on 36 healthy men in the US in the late 1940s, which equated to a 40 per cent reduction in daily calories, reduced their weight, blood pressure, cholesterol and risk of diabetes.

Everitt says people who overeat are shortest lived. In general, through being overweight they lose about five years.

The greatest effect is seen in obesity. Men who are severely obese between the ages of 20 and 30 lose up to 13 years.

Men who are obese at the age of 40 cut their lifespan by seven years, while those who are overweight at 40 cut it by three years.

Everitt believes they can probably reclaim some years by reducing weight.

He likes to quote the famous story of the Italian nobleman Luigi Comaro, who lived a life of gluttony and became very sick at 45. Comaro took his physician's advice to eat less and went on to live to 102.

For an Australian man aged 50, Everitt says a body mass index of 24 will deliver the longest life.

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BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

Earlier this year, Arthur Everitt - who is still working at the University of Sydney at the age of 84 - went to the United States to receive one of the highest international awards for research into ageing.

What made him smile to himself was that the American Aging Association presented him with the Distinguished Achievement Award for scientific work he did half a century ago.

When scientists now researching the role of the pituitary gland in ageing checked the literature, they were surprised to find Everitt had been doing the same work in Sydney in the 1950s - using rats.

He began working as a laboratory assistant in the department of physiology at the University of Sydney in 1942. At the same time, he went to night school for eight years and won a scholarship to do a BSc.

"My interest in ageing was partly influenced by my mother, who was interested in reading the astrological



Arthur Everitt... a lifetime's effort.

forecasts of the day," he says. "As a science student I looked at the position of the planets of birth for all the famous people for which we had the life duration and birth dates.

"I could find no relationship between ageing and the stars, so I decided I would have to work in a more conventional way. I started with mice, but I found they were a little aggressive. They bit me, so I turned to rats, which were more friendly."

His experiments with these rats demonstrated a clear link between leanness and longevity.

Naturally lean himself, Everitt says he has lived on a high fruit and vegetable diet since childhood. His mother began the diet and his wife maintains it while he keeps his sweet tooth under control.

He's had a medical check-up every year for several decades and says that apart from taking medication for elevated blood pressure and having had surgery for prostate cancer five years ago, he's been healthy.

Although he officially retired from his university post in 1985, he has spent the past 23 years working on campus and at the Centre for Education and Research on Ageing at Concord Hospital.

Jill Margo