



Cheating Death Is Easier Than You'd Think

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By Christopher Wanjek



When you add up the risks of dying from all sorts of illnesses and accidents — from the 1 in 5 chance of dying of heart disease, to the remote 1 in 3.7 million chance of being eaten by a shark, to the very real risk of bleeding to death from the ears from listening to too much Yanni — your chances of dying come out to be about 110 percent.

At least it seems that way. And weekly reports about how this kind of chemical causes cancer or how that kind of [junk food](#) not only kills you but manages also to spit on your grave might make you feel like just giving up.

But a new study from Harvard School of Public Health, published last week in the British Medical Journal, provides hope that you really can [avoid death](#), at least for a little while, through a combination of positive lifestyle changes.

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How to die young

The research is part of the ongoing Nurse's Health Study, which for 32 years has followed the lives of over 120,000 nurses.

The Harvard team examined approximately 9,000 deaths over the last 25 years and found that 55 percent of those deaths could have been avoided had those participants engaged in regular physical activity, avoided smoking and becoming overweight, and eaten a [healthy diet](#).

This includes 44 percent of cancer deaths and 72 percent of cardiovascular deaths which could have been avoided.

The study was one of the first, and by far the largest, to look at how a combination of lifestyle factors might influence [mortality](#) — and not just, for example, quitting smoking.

The combo was greater than the sum of its parts, although the study found that even modest lifestyle changes, such as 30 minutes per day of brisk walking, could significantly reduced risk of premature death.

Gotta go

Maybe these women would have died in a car accident or tragic meteorite incident had they not died prematurely from a chronic disease. Maybe a fate worse than cancer or heart disease awaited them. That data cannot determine that.

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Yes, you do have to [die of something](#). Chronic diseases such as cancer, however, tend to be the most threatening to one's quality of life.

About half of all Americans will develop some kind of cancer; and on average about 25 percent of those with cancer die from it. While the survival odds are good and are getting better, treatment can be debilitating and expensive.

The Harvard study is more proof that chronic disease prevention through positive lifestyle changes could help you reach a very old age and preserve a high quality of healthy living, until you succumb to the flu or maybe just break in half one day.

While not particularly pleasant, it's better than death by cancer or by Gianni.

Christopher Wanjek is the author of the books "[Bad Medicine](#)" and "[Food At Work](#)." Got a question about Bad Medicine? [E-mail Wanjek](#). If it's really bad, he just might answer it in a future column. Bad Medicine appears each Tuesday on LiveScience.

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