

Okinawa, Japan

Secrets of the world's longest-living women

The islands at the southern end of Japan have historically been known for longevity, once called the land of immortals. Okinawans have less cancer, heart disease and dementia than Americans, and women there live longer than any women on the planet.

Perhaps their greatest secret is a strong dedication to friends and family. They maintain a powerful social network called a “moai,” a lifelong circle of friends that supports people well into old age.

Okinawans also have a strong sense of purpose in life, a driving force that the Japanese call “ikigai.”

Read more below about the lessons that Okinawa, Japan can teach you about longevity

Despite years of hardship, Okinawans have established a lifestyle and environment to live long, healthy lives. Follow these common centenarian practices to promote your own longevity.

Older Okinawans can readily articulate the reason they get up in the morning. Their purpose-imbued lives gives them clear roles of responsibility and feelings of being needed well into their 100s.

Rely on a plant-based diet

Older Okinawans have eaten a plant-based diet most of their lives. Their meals of stir-fried vegetables, sweet potatoes, and tofu are high in nutrients and low in calories. Goya, with its antioxidants and compounds that lower blood sugar, is of particular interest. While centenarian Okinawans do eat some pork, it is traditionally reserved only for infrequent ceremonial occasions and taken only in small amounts.

Get gardening

Almost all Okinawan centenarians grow or once grew a garden. It’s a source of daily physical activity that exercises the body with a wide range of motion and helps reduce stress. It’s also a near-constant source of fresh vegetables.

Eat more soy

The Okinawan diet is rich foods made with soy, like tofu and miso soup. Flavonoids in tofu may help protect the hearts and guard

against breast cancer. Fermented soy foods contribute to a healthy intestinal ecology and offer even better nutritional benefits.

Maintain a moai

The Okinawan tradition of forming a moai provides secure social networks. These safety nets lend financial and emotional support in times of need and give all of their members the stress-shedding security of knowing that there is always someone there for them.

Enjoy the sunshine

Vitamin D, produced by the body when it's exposed on a regular basis to sunlight, promotes stronger bones and healthier bodies. Spending time outside each day allows even senior Okinawans to have optimal vitamin D levels year-round.

Stay active

Older Okinawans are active walkers and gardeners. The Okinawan household has very little furniture; residents take meals and relax sitting on tatami mats on the floor. The fact that old people get up and down off the floor several dozen times daily builds lower body strength and balance, which help protect against dangerous falls.

Plant a medical garden

Mugwort, ginger, and turmeric are all staples of an Okinawan garden, and all have proven medicinal qualities. By consuming these every day, Okinawans may be protecting themselves against illness.

Have an attitude

A hardship-tempered attitude has endowed Okinawans with an affable smugness. They're able to let difficult early years remain in the past while they enjoy today's simple pleasures. They've learned to be likable and to keep younger people in their company well into their old age.

This is an excerpt from Blue Zones: Lessons For Living Longer From The People Who've Lived The Longest by Dan Buettner, Copyright 2008, all rights reserved.

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