

The lucky ones walk out younger

A new technique can reveal your body's true biological age, says Christine Doyle.

The Daily Telegraph put four people of different ages through their paces

Thanks to medical advances, we are expected to live longer than our parents and grandparents. Whatever one thinks about the desirability of reaching 100, we all want to know how fit and healthy we will be as we grow older.

One idea, popular with American 'ageing and life extension experts', is to separate the biological age from the chronological one. At any stage in your life, you could be biologically younger – or older – than your actual age, and this may be a consequence of the way you are living.

The latest technique is a computerized Biological Age Scan, developed in California and pioneered here by Heather Bird, who founded the HB (Health Body) clinic in Harley Street, London. The scan measures 12 "bio-markers of ageing" and assesses how well or poorly you compare with the average result for your age. Your fingers leap nimbly – or numbly – in response to flashing lights. You listen to sounds fading until you can no longer hear them. You blow into a tube, linked to a computer, to measure lung capacity and expiratory force. After about 45 minutes, the lucky ones walk out of the clinic "younger" than when they came in.

The bio-markers analyse memory, lung function, hearing, vision, muscle movements and reaction times common to a large range of daily mental and physical activities. The decline of these faculties has the most direct affect on the quality of life and the chances of ill-health in old age. The clinic also provides blood tests and heart risk assessments, and there are trained "anti-ageing" doctors to plan a health maintenance programme to address problem areas.

Bird, who has worked for the World Health Organisation and as a nursing assistant for the elderly, says "Our aim is a truly holistic approach to being healthy. So many people want a quick fix when something is wrong. We advocate a long-term focus from an early age. Eventually, I think an age scan should be available in every high street." Beauty treatments and cosmetic surgery might make you look better, but in the end she says, what goes on inside the body is what makes the real difference. "Many people think you cannot influence your genetic inheritance. We know this is not true. Much is down to environmental influences and the way we live."

Bird, who was born in America, says her family and upbringing inspired her ideas. "We always ate well. My parents were keen on cherishing the body, not abusing it with fatty, processed foods, take-aways or excessive alcohol. Look at the huge rise in adult diabetes. I have seen it happen with someone I grew up with. She has become a typical, overweight American, who can hardly move, has diabetes and whose future quality of life does not look good."

Critics of the growing enthusiasm for turning back the clock might suggest that we are in danger of developing the American anti-ageing neurosis from a very young age. Cynics also point out the commercial interest in the anti-ageing industry – treatments can come at great cost.

Yet, we are all keen to appear and feel a little younger. I was delighted that my biological age scan knocked six years off my age.

HB Health anti-ageing packages – including the Biological Age Scan – cost from £200. Tel: 020 7323 1388, or log on to www.hbHealthOnline.com

Test of time: *Telegraph* volunteers - Caroline Matthews, Louise Dowman, Iain Derrick and Tatiana von Saxw Wilson - discover their 'real' age at the HB clinic

Tatiana von Saxe Wilson, a publisher and restaurateur, has unlimited energy: "I feel on top of the world and am always having new creative ideas."
Height: 5ft 2in Weight: 8st.

Age: 58. Tatiana eats healthily. She is sensitive to wheat and dairy foods, so she avoids these. However, she does little exercise. "I used to play tennis, but now I do virtually nothing."

Biological age: 66. "I am shocked. I thought I would do very well. I have so much energy, eat well, watch my weight and feel so healthy."

Dr. Lynette Yong comments: "Tatiana has an exuberant, youthful personality, but her lung function was poor. Other tests were not in line with her age, though she was strong on muscle movement linked to decision-making and visual reaction. My advice for Tatiana is to build up muscle and bone strength with exercise. This will preserve flexibility, prevent ageing fragility and invigorate the cardiovascular system. Aerobic exercise stimulates neural pathways and prevents the decline of co-ordination, balance and reaction times."

Iain Derrick is a public affairs consultant. Each week, he commutes from Newcastle upon Tyne, where he lives with his wife and two small children, to Brussels.

Height: 5ft 11in Weight: 13st.

Age: 33. Iain feels healthy, but admits to being overweight. "My diet is a high fat zone – no doubt due to corporate meals and eating irregularly." He drinks about half a bottle of wine a day "to unwind" When he was younger and fitter, he played football. Now, he runs or jogs "every two weeks".

Biological age: 35. “I’m astonished. I thought I would be older. The tests have made me concentrate on the way I live. I have joined a gym. The next step is to change my diet.”

Dr. Young: “Iain did extremely well on lung function and several other tests. The body has a physiological memory, so his early footballing might be paying off. He did not do so well on some reactions tests. That might be because much of his work is mental, but his diet may not give him all the nutrients his body needs. Preserving the body’s ability to repair and regenerate itself is very important as we age.”

Caroline Matthews is a lawyer in the City of London. She works 11-hour days. **Height:** 5ft 10in **Weight:** 10st.

Age: 29. “I love my job, but it is demanding and stressful, so I think it’s important to stay healthy. I eat well – much more fish than meat, a wide range, of fruit and vegetables, and lots of water. I take sea kelp, garlic pills and multi-vitamin pills.” Caroline does a weekly Pilates class and runs or works out in the gym. “when I can squeeze it in”. She drinks alcohol “socially”, does not smoke and “feels healthy”. “I don’t get enough sleep because of my long working hours and late nights.” She snacks on chocolate when tired, “but I feel worse when the energy burst wears off”.

Biological age: 32. “My lung function was particularly good and most of the tests were in line with how a 29-year-old should be. But I did not do well on some, such as feeling vibration as it grows fainter.”

Dr. Yong: “Caroline did less well on tests of muscle movement and visual reaction times. I think she did not concentrate so well, because she was in a bit of a rush. Stressful jobs lead to surges of adrenaline and stress hormones, that can have an adverse effect on body organs and the immune system. She should focus more on how to switch off from her job.”

Louise Dowman has two young children and a stressful secretarial job. She commutes for three hours every day.

Height: 5ft 3in **Weight:** 7st. 11lb

Age: 42. “I am on the go from 6am until I finish cooking supper and sit down around 9:20pm. I eat a lot of fruit, red meat and chicken – I don’t like fish and am not keen on pasta or bread.” She drinks little alcohol and takes “no planned exercise” – though cleaning, gardening and shopping provide natural workouts. If she flags, she keeps herself going on “coffee, about 10 cigarettes a day or chocolate, which I love”.

Biological age: 38. “Given my unhealthy lifestyle, I am amazed. Now, I can be 40 all over again.” In eight out of the 12 tests, Louise’s results were above average; although she smokes, her lung function was exceptionally good. “I did less well in detecting vibration and the memory test – which was disappointing. My visual accommodation from far to near sight was also poor, but did not surprise me.”

Dr. Yong: “Louise’s results are outstanding. At her age, women become more vulnerable to the ageing process, and their biological age often begins to outstrip their birth age. Louise seems to have been born with youthful genes. And I was impressed by how she copes with stress. Louise should guard against letting her genetic advantages run out. Stopping smoking would be a good start. I would suggest antioxidant vitamins A and C, fish oil supplements and selenium, to help offset the effects of smoking on the lungs, immune and cardiovascular system, and the skin. With regular exercise, Louise’s biological age could be even younger.”