

Tortoises are famous for living for a long time. They can often live for two hundred years. I don't think I want to live that long, but, these days, we are all living longer. This article about long life made me think a lot. Do I want to live to be a hundred? Do you?

A long and healthy life?

How long will a baby born today live? A hundred years? A hundred and twenty years? Scientists are studying genes that could mean long life for us all.

There are already many, many people who live to more than a hundred. In fact, there are now so many healthy, elderly people that there's a name for them: the *welllderly*. These are people over the age of eighty who have no major illnesses such as high blood pressure, heart disease or diabetes.

There are many scientific studies of communities where a healthy old age is typical. These include places like Calabria in southern Italy and the island of Okinawa in Japan. In Calabria, the small village of Molochio has a population of about 2,000. And of these people, there are at least eight people over a hundred years old. Researchers ask people like this the secret of their long life. The answer is almost always about food and is almost always the same: 'I eat a lot of fruit and vegetables.' 'I eat a little bit of everything.' 'I never smoke, I don't drink.'

So, in the past, scientists looked at things such as diet and lifestyle for an explanation of long life. But these days they are also looking at genetic factors. Researcher Eric Topol says that there are probably genes that protect people from the effects of the ageing process. The new research into long life investigates groups of people who have a genetic connection. One interesting group lives in Ecuador. In one area of the country there are a number of people with the same genetic condition. It's called Laron syndrome. These people don't grow very tall – just over one metre. But Laron syndrome also gives them protection against cancer and diabetes. As a result, they live longer than other people in their families. On the other side of the world, on the Hawaiian island of Oahu, there's another group of long-lived men. They are Japanese-Americans but they have a similar gene to the Laron syndrome group.

In Calabria, researchers constructed the family trees of the 100-year-old people. They looked at family information from the 19th century to today. They think that there are genetic factors that give health benefits to the men. This is interesting because generally, in Europe, women live longer than men.

So what really makes people live longer? Probably, it's a combination of genes, the environment and one more thing – luck.

Key Words

diabetes (n) a medical condition which affects the amount of sugar in a person's blood

diet (n) the food an animal or person usually eats

disease (n) a serious problem that affects someone's body and health

elderly (adj) quite old or very old

factor (n) a cause of something or an influence on a result

healthy (adj) strong and not ill

high blood pressure (n) an illness that affects the way your blood moves around your body

illness (n) a problem with your health

lifestyle (n) the way that a person lives and the activities they do

research (n) the careful study of something in order to learn facts about it