

# Mayo Clinic Q & A - Dr. Stephen Kopecky - 11 29 21

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

mayo clinic, book, habit, eat, exercise, steve, prevent, people, disease, cardiologist, cancer, lifestyle, legume, alzheimer, healthy habits, good physical shape, healthy, day, steps, year

## SPEAKERS

Dr. Halena Gazelka, Narrator, Dr. Stephen Kopecky

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**N** Narrator 00:01  
Coming up on Mayo Clinic Q&A,

**D** Dr. Stephen Kopecky 00:03  
We cannot prevent aging. We can slow aging. But we can prevent disease, it's certainly possible to do. And if you do a certain lifestyle, you can affect that.

**N** Narrator 00:15  
Most of us want to live a long, healthy life. But how do we do that? Well today on Mayo Clinic Q&A, we'll take a look at an evidence-based approach to preventing common diseases and maybe find some answers for living that longer, healthier life.

**D** Dr. Stephen Kopecky 00:29  
But the real answer is there is no just one thing. Because if you are exercising, eating great, but you're sleep deprived and super stressed, you just can't sustain the rest of your healthy habits. So, you really need to take care of everything.

**D** Dr. Halena Gazelka 00:44  
Welcome, everyone to Mayo Clinic Q&A. I'm your host, Dr. Halena Gazelka. Well, we all know that our health affects our longevity and our quality of life. It's often very difficult to convince ourselves to do the little things that could help keep us healthy. There is a new book that might help us it's called Live Younger

Longer: 6 Steps to Prevent Heart Disease, Cancer, Alzheimer's, Diabetes and More. Here to discuss is Mayo Clinic preventative cardiologist and the book's author, Dr. Stephen Kopecky. Welcome back to the program, Steve. Thanks for being here, and congratulations on your new book.

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Dr. Stephen Kopecky 01:21

Thank you very much. It's a lot of fun.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 01:23

Wonderful to have you here. And what a wonderful time of year for a book about our health. Because oftentimes, even though we know it should be a year-long effort, we start thinking about this again, and we start thinking about a new year and how we're going to face a new year. So, perfect timing.

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Dr. Stephen Kopecky 01:41

Right, we point out in the book that January 17, you know, of course, what that date is. It's the date the average American breaks their New Year's resolution.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 01:49

Oh, my goodness,

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Dr. Stephen Kopecky 01:50

Because we try to change so much. We try to do so much at once and say I'm gonna change my diet completely, I'm gonna change my exercise routine completely, and we last a little less than three weeks.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 02:01

Okay, well, you'll have to tell us some techniques. Now, I understand that you had self interest in mind when you wrote this book that you're a cancer survivor, Steve.

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Dr. Stephen Kopecky 02:13

Right. I had a cancer in medical school, it was just kind of a bump in the road to me. But then 14 years later, I had a wife, three children, the youngest which was two-years-old, and premature death was not an option at that point. I wasn't even 40 yet. And so, I figured I had to do something to change my chances of getting cancer because my sister had just died of breast cancer.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 02:36

Oh.

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Dr. Stephen Kopecky 02:36

And so, I really looked into it. And I was a treating cardiologist at the time, not a preventive cardiologist. So, this was all new to me. But I looked into it, and found that even though I had two cancers, the odds are I was going to die of heart disease, because that's the number one killer for men, certainly. And then I realized that anything I would do to prevent heart disease would also prevent cancer. So, it kind of went together very, very well. And I tried all sorts of things, you know, big changes, it never lasted. So, then I started looking into the science of changing. It has to be tiny, little habits. You know, there's a great quote from Dr. Charles Mayo it says, It is unfortunate that people do not understand what small things diseases come. So, it's tiny little things that get us. It's death by 1000 cuts. And you can overcome that with just small steps over a lifetime.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 03:31

That's amazing. That's wonderful. Thank you for sharing, candidly, your own story with us. And now, in the book you mentioned that, Steve that there are things that we cannot change. We can't change our genetics, we can't change our age, we can't change our sex. What can we change?

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Dr. Stephen Kopecky 03:47

Yeah. Well, that's a very good question. You know, we cannot prevent aging. We can slow aging, but we can prevent disease. I mean, that's certainly possible to do. And if you do a certain lifestyle, you can affect that. Now, you mentioned genes, and you know, if we have, say, a bad lifestyle, or bad genes, if you have bad genes for heart problems, your risk goes up about 40%. If you have a bad lifestyle for heart problems, meaning you may not exercise, you may eat the wrong foods, you're not very active physically, you smoke or have diabetes, your risk goes up 400%

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 04:26

Oh, my goodness.

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Dr. Stephen Kopecky 04:27

So, the epigenetics is that the way we conduct our lifestyle affects how our genes manifest. And you can actually do that by doing things every day to prevent that from happening.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 04:40

Wow, that's amazing. I didn't know. You know, we always seem to think that genetics predetermine us to have something, but not necessarily, I guess.

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Dr. Stephen Kopecky 04:51

Yes, no that's very true. And even breast cancer from which my sister died is, you know, a very small percentage of that is genetic, but mainly its lifestyle. And that's what many of the cancers and most of the heart disease, Alzheimer's, all these things come from. Certainly, diabetes comes from a lifestyle. So, the things we do, and what we write about in the book is basically a compass. If you think of a north, south, east, and west, so North is nutrition, which is now the number one risk factor for early death and disease in this country and this world. East is exercise. South is things like smoking and spirits or alcohol, but also the two forgotten risk factors, I call them stress and sleep. And then West is weight, the weight isn't quite as important as people think. If you get into really good physical shape, your weight really doesn't matter that much. Because when you get into good physical shape with activity and exercise, then you lose your abdominal fat or visceral fat, which is very pro-inflammatory and causes a lot of these diseases that we don't want like cancer, heart disease, Alzheimer's.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 05:55

So, is that compass the habits that we should develop in life?

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Dr. Stephen Kopecky 05:59

Right, the compass or the habits, the steps that we should develop in life. And you know, so many people come to me as a preventive cardiologist and say, Doctor, what, I'm taking this supplement. I understand this supplement will really protect me. Or Doctor, I'm eating this superfood, you know, this single food is going to protect me, right? Or I have this exercise machine or this exercise workout, that's going to protect me from everything. I say, it's not just one thing, it's a multitude of things that all fit together. So, for instance, we give examples in the book, like if you are sleep deprived, and/or stressed, and who isn't stressed these days. But if you get a vaccine, you know, if we had a vaccine that we said was 20% more effective, we would say I want that vaccine. But if you're sleep deprived, or very stressed, your benefit from the vaccine is reduced 20% because your immune response just can't pick it up and do the things it needs to do. So, we really have to take care of ourselves. And the issue with our country, with our health care system, it really is designed to wait until we get disease, and then treat the disease. So, the prevention unfortunately is all on us. We need to prevent and take care of ourselves.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 07:12

Steve, I think one of the hardest things about making lasting change is making it last. You mentioned January 17, that people often break their resolutions. What is the answer to incorporating long lasting positive change in life?

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Dr. Stephen Kopecky 07:29

Yeah, that's a great question. And, you know, if you look at diets, you know, the average American goes on a couple of diets a year, and they last, you know, two to three months, whatever. Our weight in our lifetime goes like this, you know, we lose, we gain we lose, we gain. So, the answer, I think, is to make small sustainable steps that you can live with. And when I say small steps, like for diet, I tell patients one bite, one bite of something healthy, I mean, take off some processed meat off your plate, or processed foods and put on something like a legume or a bean or black bean or something. After a couple of years, that one bite difference will lower your risk of having a heart attack. So, it's really small things that you can

live with. And that's very important. Now, you know, these holiday times are really tough, because we all want to go back to Grandma's or Mother's or whatever and eat some of her great food. I tell people have that great food, just don't eat that great, maybe unhealthy food every day. Have a little bit of it, or have some while you're there, put some other things on your plate that are healthy. So, enjoy it certainly. Don't deprive yourself, but just not every day. Have some smaller amounts. And when you can control what you eat, try to make things a little better. You know, the fruits, the vegetables, the legumes, the fish, white meat poultry, have your main source of fat, the olive oil, extra virgin olive oil, and a few nuts. These are things that you can eat and really enjoy them. But you got to work to find the things that you really like best and everybody's a little different.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 09:05

Steve, what does literature or data tell us about how long it takes someone to actually form a positive new habit. I'm thinking of myself, I get up at 4 a.m. every morning to exercise, but I can tell you that several years ago that wasn't a very welcome task to me, and it took me some time to make that such a part of my routine that now I wouldn't even consider skipping it.

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Dr. Stephen Kopecky 09:33

Yeah, that's a great point. Great question. The, you know, kind of the common thinking is it takes about three or four weeks.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 09:40

Okay.

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Dr. Stephen Kopecky 09:41

That's really based on a plastic surgery study decades ago. That's how long it took people to get used to the changes from their plastic surgery. So, really the habit, you know, the term break a bad habit is not a correct term. Nothing could be more untrue. You never actually break a habit, you just replace it with another habit that you enjoy just as much, if not more, and is healthy. So, for instance, you didn't, when you started exercising in the morning, you didn't just one day, say I'm going to do this. It was like a process. First you started getting up at that time of the morning. And then you started putting on your tennis shoes that time of the morning. And then you started to actually maybe sit on the bike or the treadmill, and not just do anything, you just stand there. Then it's a process. It's little steps one at a time that you can live with and sustain. And the secret is when you do it, get some dopamine in your brain going, because that's what lays down the habit for memory. And the way you do that is to reward yourself, you know. So, I get up every morning also, and if I'm in the kitchen at 5 a.m., I'm making coffee. And sometimes, you know, it's a habit, and a habit by definition is something you do while your brain can do something else. The brain loves habits because it doesn't have to spend energy on them. So, I'll make the coffee, I'll drink it and I look around I think who made this coffee? Is Linda my wife here? Nobody is in the kitchen but me, and I made the coffee obviously. So, you know the habit is something that you just get into the process of doing. If you can make it a healthy habit, that's the best part. And that's exactly what you've done, Halena.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 11:17

That's wonderful. I love hearing about incremental change. Because I do think it's true that people just take too much on it once. And so, this is good news for us.

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Dr. Stephen Kopecky 11:28

Yeah, you know, if I wrote a book that said here's how to make a million dollars in a month, or here's how to raise a perfect child in a month. You'd say this guy doesn't know what he's talking about. You can't do that in a month. You know, you have to save a little bit of money every week with your paycheck so you can retire. You need to always be there for your kids as they're growing up so, you know, they can learn from you. And the same thing with our habits. We need to in our healthy habits, we need to just incrementally slowly change them.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 11:58

Steve, where can we find the book?

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Dr. Stephen Kopecky 12:02

Well, of course Mayo. It's a Mayo Clinic Press book, and Mayo has it. You can find it on just about every, you know, online, Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Target. I was talking to one of my friends the other day in Seattle, he said it's in four bookstores in Seattle. So, really it's all over, but everything is bought online these days. So, I encourage, you know, BAM, or one of those, Books A Million, all those have them.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 12:29

We will make certain that we have a link to it on our Mayo Clinic News Network site as well.

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Dr. Stephen Kopecky 12:35

Yes. I appreciate that very much. It really is very readable. I tell people, it's a very scientific book, scientifically based, but it's easy to read. It's a classic Mayo Clinic, you know, built for a patient to read and understand and get a take home message from it.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 12:53

Do you have any last words of wisdom for us today, Steve?

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Dr. Stephen Kopecky 12:57

Well, yeah, sure. I usually get asked, What's the one thing? What's the one thing that we need to do? And the answer is, you know, it's a two-part answer. First is, if there's one thing that you're doing that's really way off the charts, like not good, like smoking, or say you're very, very sedentary. Or say you're eating lots

of ultra-processed foods every day which is 57% of the calories we eat in this country, then change that. Try to change that a little bit at a time. But the real answer is there is no just one thing. Because if you are exercising, eating great, but you're sleep deprived and super stressed, you just can't sustain the rest of your healthy habits. So, you really need to take care of everything. And sleep, for instance is one of those things that if we miss some sleep, we've missed it the rest of our life. Unlike calories, we can always make up the calories we miss for eating, but we can't get back the sleep. And the stress is something that we all have to deal with. We cannot, you know, you can't say okay, stress is going to go away. It never will if you have a job or a family or anything else. But you can kind of mitigate it or make it so it's not quite so bad, and it's not quite so harmful to you.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 14:10

Wonderful. Thank you for being here today, Steve.

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Dr. Stephen Kopecky 14:13

Halena, thanks for having me. I appreciate it.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 14:16

And we thank each of you for joining us today to hear about Dr. Stephen Kopecky's new book, Live Younger Longer: 6 Steps to Prevent Heart Disease, Cancer, Alzheimer's, Diabetes and More. I know I'm gonna go pick up a copy because I learned something new today. I hope that you did too. And we wish each of you a wonderful day.

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Narrator 14:36

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