

Is this the key to a younger body and immune system? By Kathleen Troher

Active cyclists who have pedaled their way into the golden years are reaping huge health benefits, from greater muscle mass and healthier hearts and lungs to hardier immune systems.

At the behest of 82-year-old Norman Lazarus, a professor emeritus at King's College in London, researchers at the college and the University of Birmingham studied 125 amateur cyclists, ages 55 through 79. They compared those cyclists with a group of people ages 57 through 80 and with a younger group ages 20 through 36. All of the noncycling group were healthy but did not exercise regularly.

Lazarus told National Public Radio that he was inspired to push for the study after noticing that he and his cycling buddies, all of whom had exercised regularly on their two-wheelers much of their lives, were not experiencing many of the frailties, such as joint problems or chronic illness, that affect so many other people as they age.

The researchers issued their findings earlier this year, and they confirmed what Lazarus and his cycling seniors were saying: Regular exercise, or, in this case, riding a bicycle regularly, was preventing them from suffering the ravages of old age.

The male cyclists in the study had to be able to ride 62 miles in 6½ hours, and females had to be able to ride 37 miles in 5½ hours, according to the study, published in the journal *Aging Cell*.

In a series of lab tests, researchers found cyclists did not lose muscle mass and strength like the noncyclists did. The cyclists also stopped the clock on increased body fat and cholesterol, and the men's testosterone levels remained high.

One of the most surprising findings was that the cyclists' immune systems were equivalent to those of healthy young people in the study, as measured by the presence of immune cells, known as T-cells. The cells are produced by the thymus gland and typically start to decrease as the thymus begins to shrink after age 20. Depleted immune systems are one of the greatest barriers to health in the elderly.

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Wishing you joy and good health,
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