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What the World's "Blue Zones" Can Teach Us About Living Well... and Frugally

With the rising prices of seemingly everything, people are cutting costs wherever they can. Things like gym memberships, meal kit delivery services, and organic produce can seem like extravagances. And it is true that many of us may need to trim our budgets to make it through to sunnier times. But that doesn't mean you need to give up on your health goals. In fact, many of the healthiest habits are 100% free. Now might be a good time to explore simple, cost-free habits that can lead to a lifetime of health.

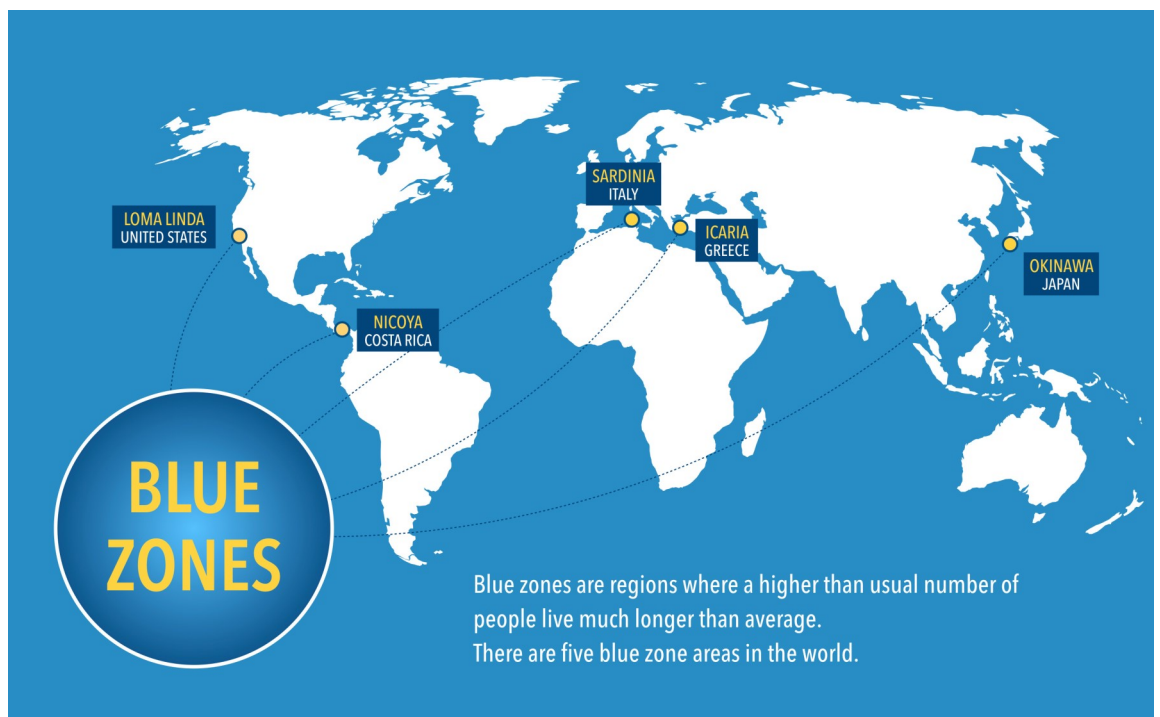
Blue Zones

Regions of the world in which people live the longest are referred to as "Blue Zones." In some of these regions, people consistently live to around 100 years old. And they don't just live longer, they live longer independently and free from chronic diseases.

Researchers have identified at least five Blue Zones and have postulated on the habits of those that live there that may contribute to their longevity. The four zones that were originally identified were Okinawa Prefecture, Japan; Nuoro Province, Sardinia, Italy; the Nicoya Peninsula, Costa Rica; and Icaria, Greece. The list was later expanded to include Loma Linda, California, where inhabitants' longevity may be attributed to their adherence to the practices of Seventh Day Adventism, which includes a plant-based diet.

After examining the lifestyles of people residing in these zones, the researchers suggested possible lifestyle habits that might contribute to longevity.

(Continued on page 2)



Blue Zones & Living Well (continued)

Lifestyle Habits

Regular movement. People who reside in Blue Zones tend to incorporate exercise naturally into their daily activities. This may include walking or biking as a means of transport, daily gardening, etc.

Eating a plant-based diet. People in these zones tend to eat unprocessed, whole foods, including fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, seeds, and nuts. They eat red meat sparingly but may include fish in their diets.

Moderate alcohol consumption. Drinking one or two small glasses of wine a day, often with meals shared with others, is common in these zones.

Knowing your purpose. People who feel they know their purpose in life tend to live longer. In Japan, the term “ikagai” means “reason for being”. One’s purpose might be children, family, friends, work, or hobbies.

You may have noticed, most of the habits listed above are absolutely free. It costs nothing to incorporate daily movement into your routine, such as walking on your lunch break, taking the stairs instead of an elevator, parking your car a little farther away in the parking lot, etc.

Eating a plant-based diet is also inexpensive. Replacing animal proteins with plant proteins such as beans can actually reduce your food bill. Yes, fresh produce can be expensive, but look for sales and consider stocking up on frozen fruits and vegetables. Produce is usually frozen shortly after harvesting, making frozen produce more nutritious than fresh produce that has been sitting on the shelf for an extended period of time. Organic produce can be costly, but not all produce needs to be organic. Check out the “Dirty Dozen” and “Clean Fifteen” put out by the Environmental Working Group. These list the types of produce that retain the most pesticides despite washing and should be purchased organic, and those



that can be easily rid of most pesticides by washing, and can be safely purchased non-organic.

If you drink alcohol, ideally you are drinking moderately. If not, cutting back will save you money. If you don’t drink, there is no need to start. Research on the health benefits of alcohol consumption are constantly shifting and abstaining is probably the best choice.

Identifying your ikagai, or reason for being, may be easy for you, or it might take some consideration. Is it your career, family, friends, faith, pets, a hobby you are passionate about? Maybe it is a combination of those things. Whatever it is for you, make sure to spend time every day nurturing it and acknowledging it. Maybe take a moment first thing in the morning, or just before bed, to consider your reason for being and how it fit into your day. Take a look at the Spirituality Corner on page 8 in this newsletter to consider journaling as a way to identify and acknowledge your ikagai.



Critics of the Blue Zone research say that the data it is based on is flawed due to faulty record keeping. In other words, in areas in which birth and death records are not adequately kept, the number of centenarians might be inflated. Older people might not actually know the exact year they were born, and their deaths might not be recorded, making it seem that people are living longer than they actually are. However, some of these same critics agree that the lifestyles of people in these Blue Zones are consistent with what we know about aging and longevity. **Physical activity, plant-based diets, and strong social connections do improve one’s chances for a longer, more fulfilling life.** And people in these areas of the world are not subscribing to meal kits, paying for gym memberships, or on-line social network apps. These habits are built into their daily lives, and are, for the most part, free.

Food Safety at Home

Safe food-handling practices are not just for restaurants and health care kitchens. **Every person who cooks at home should know some basic food safety practices that can help prevent food-borne illness, reduce food waste, and save money.**

Hospitalizations from food-borne illness increased by about 25% in 2024, and many more people become ill from food and are never properly diagnosed and included in these numbers. The CDC estimates that 1 in 6 Americans gets sick annually from contaminated food or beverages. Food-borne illness can even be fatal, especially for the very young, old, or immune-compromised. It can also result in serious life-long health consequences.

Educate yourself and those you live with on these simple practices to greatly reduce your chances of food-borne illness.



Cleanliness is Key

One of the most critical aspects of food safety is maintaining cleanliness in your kitchen and handling food properly.

Wash your hands: Always wash your hands with warm, soapy water for at least 20 seconds before and after handling food, especially raw meat, poultry, seafood, or eggs. It's also important to wash your hands after using the bathroom, handling trash, or touching pets.

Clean surfaces: Countertops, cutting boards, and utensils should be washed thoroughly with hot, soapy water before and after food preparation. Consider using

separate cutting boards for raw meats and fresh produce to prevent cross-contamination.

Clean fruits and vegetables: Even if you plan to peel or cook them, it's important to wash all fresh produce under cold running water to remove dirt, pesticides, and bacteria.

Prevent Cross-Contamination

Cross-contamination occurs when harmful bacteria or pathogens from raw foods, particularly meat and poultry, spread to other foods. To prevent cross-contamination:

Use separate cutting boards and utensils: If possible, use separate cutting boards for meat and vegetables. If you only have one cutting board, chop all your vegetables and other foods first, then chop your raw meats. Afterward, wash your cutting boards thoroughly with soap and hot water.

Avoid using the same knife for raw meats and other ingredients: Always clean knives and utensils between uses to avoid spreading harmful bacteria.

Store raw meats properly: Raw meat should be wrapped or placed in a sealed container and stored below other foods in the refrigerator to prevent juices from leaking onto other foods.

Cook Foods to the Proper Temperatures

Cooking food to the correct temperature is one of the most effective ways to kill harmful bacteria. Different foods require different internal temperatures to be considered safe for consumption (see the table on the next page).

Use a food thermometer: Ensure your meats and other dishes reach the recommended safe internal temperature. The table on page 4 shows safe minimum cooking temperature for common foods.



Food Safety (continued)

Safe Minimum Cooking Temperatures

165°F	All poultry whole & ground (chicken, turkey, ground turkey, turkey patties, etc.) Reheated foods (previously cooked) Microwaved foods
155°F	Ground meats (hamburger) Processed meats (hot dogs, pastrami, etc.) Eggs that will be eaten later (quiche, frittata, etc.)
145°F	Solid cuts of meat (fish fillet, beef steak, etc.)
135°F	Cooked vegetables & fruit

Store Food Safely

Storing food properly can help prevent the proliferation of bacteria in your food and also extend its shelf life, saving money.

Refrigerate perishable items promptly: Refrigerate perishable food within two hours of purchasing or cooking it. Don't leave groceries in the car for extended periods of time, especially on warmer days.

Store leftovers properly: The less time food spends in the "temperature danger zone" of 40°F to 140°F, the better. Cooling down leftover hot food quickly can be done by packaging it into small or shallow containers. Label leftovers with the date they were cooked, store them in the refrigerator, and eat them within 3–4 days.



If the food won't be eaten within that time, consider freezing it. Using up leftovers quickly and safely by knowing when they went in the fridge can save money, reduce food waste, and prevent foodborne illness.

Set your fridge to the correct temperature: Your refrigerator should be set to 40°F or lower to slow the growth of harmful bacteria. Freezers should be at 0°F to keep foods safely frozen.

Don't overcrowd the fridge: Ensure air circulates properly around food to maintain an even temperature.

Thaw Foods Safely

Thawing frozen food incorrectly can cause bacteria to grow rapidly. Avoid thawing food on the countertop, as it can sit in the temperature danger zone (40°F to 140°F) for extended periods. Instead, use one of these methods:

Thaw in the refrigerator: Food will thaw slowly and safely if left in the refrigerator. Remember to store thawing meats below other foods.

Thaw in cold water: Place the food in a leak-proof plastic bag and submerge it in cold water, changing the water every 30 minutes.

Thaw in the microwave: If you need food thawed quickly, use the microwave's defrost setting, but be sure to cook it immediately afterward. Food thawed in the microwave is likely to be in the temperature danger zone.

Food Safety (continued)

Practice First In, First Out (FIFO)

Ensuring that your food pantry is organized can help prevent using expired or spoiled products. The FIFO method helps you keep track of your older items and ensures you use them before they expire.

Label food items with dates: Place older items in front and newer ones in the back.

Check expiration dates: Regularly inspect the expiration dates of products like canned goods, dry foods, and spices to ensure they are still safe to consume.

Know the Signs of Food-borne Illness

Even with all the right precautions, there's still the possibility of food-borne illness. Understanding the symptoms and taking immediate action is crucial.

Symptoms: Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, stomach cramps, and fever can be signs of food-borne illness.

Seek medical attention: If symptoms are severe, persistent, or involve dehydration, seek medical attention. Vulnerable populations such as the elderly, children, pregnant women, and those with weakened immune systems are at higher risk of complications.

Stay Informed

Pay attention to any food recalls in the news, and discard products that might be contaminated. You can also visit reliable resources such as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the USDA for updates on food safety best practices.

Remember, food-borne illness is more common than we think, and can result in hospitalization and even death--or at the very least, some very uncomfortable hours in the bathroom. **Taking some simple precautions in the home kitchen can greatly reduce your chances of getting sick from the food you eat.**



Ultra-Processed Foods Quiz!

If you attended the latest **Health & Wellness In-service** in March 2025, you participated in an interactive quiz on ultra-processed foods. If you missed the in-service, it can be found in video format on the intranet in the Health & Wellness Folder, or in the Cornerstone Training hub. Here is another quiz to test your knowledge!

1. Which of the following beverages is NOT ultra-processed?

- a. Vitamin Water Energy
- b. Cranberry Juice Cocktail
- c. Spindrift Sparkling Water, Grapefruit Flavor
- d. Gatorade

2. Your vegetarian friend is coming to dinner. What non-ultra-processed meal can you serve him?

- a. Vegan Veggie Dogs
- b. Gluten-free Macaroni & Cheese
- c. Dairy-free frozen pizza
- d. Pasta with canned tomatoes

3. What makes a food ultra-processed?

- a. It contains ingredients you wouldn't find in a home kitchen
- b. It's made with sophisticated manufacturing techniques using machinery
- c. It contains additives like flavorings, colorings, and preservatives
- d. All of the above

4. What should you look for when purchasing yogurt?

- a. Short ingredient list
- b. Live active cultures
- c. Little or no added sugar or artificial sweetener
- d. All of the above



5. Which of the following is NOT a typical characteristic of ultra-processed foods?

- a. They are usually convenient and have a long shelf life
- b. They often contain a high amount of fiber
- c. They may have ingredients not typically found in a home kitchen, like emulsifiers or artificial flavors
- d. They are often high in added sugars or unhealthy fats

6. Which of the following is often a sign that a food is ultra-processed?

- a. The food has a short expiration date and needs to be consumed soon
- b. The food requires a lot of preparation, like chopping and cooking
- c. The ingredients list includes unfamiliar or chemical-sounding additives
- d. The food is rich in natural fiber and protein

7. What effect can consuming too many ultra-processed foods have on health?

- a. Improved digestive health and weight loss
- b. Increased risk of obesity, heart disease, and type 2 diabetes
- c. Enhanced mental clarity and energy levels
- d. Strengthened immune system

(Continued on page 7)

Ultra-Processed Foods Quiz (continued)

8. Which of these is an example of a common ultra-processed snack food?

- a. Home-made cookies
- b. A store-bought bag of potato chips
- c. A smoothie made with whole fruit
- d. A plastic container of cut-up fresh vegetables from the produce section

9. What percentage of the typical American diet is made up of ultra-processed foods?

- a. 20-30%
- b. 30-40%
- c. 40-50%
- d. 60-70%

10. Minimal processing is necessary for some foods to be safe and convenient to store and eat. Which of the following types of food processing is NOT considered to be ultra-processing?

- a. Drying
- b. Fermenting
- c. Pasteurizing
- d. All of the above

Answers:

1. c 2. d 3. d 4. d 5. b 6. c 7. b 8. b 9. d 10. d

Are you passionate about...

Health & Wellness, Cooking, Gardening, Fitness, Dancing, Cultural Diversity, Health Education or Journalism?

Become a Wellness Ambassador for your campus!

Contact Margaret Clayton, Director of Nutrition & Wellness, at mclayton@cbhi.net.



Spirituality Corner: Journaling

by Erin Lubniewski, Occupational Therapist at Crestwood Treatment Center Fremont

What inspires you? What are you afraid of? What are you grateful for? These are just a few examples of journaling prompts designed to help us connect with the deepest parts of ourselves. **It can be a powerful spiritual practice to reflect and record our thoughts in this way.** Through an intentional journaling practice, we may discover greater understanding, meaning, purpose, and connection.

A journaling practice at its most fundamental is simply recording your thoughts. Pen to paper is often the most effective practice based on how our brain processes and remembers, but some people might find that typing or audio recording works best for them. What's important is the act of contemplation and reflection. In the quiet, try to hear your inner voice.

Some people may choose to free associate, writing whatever thoughts arise, without worrying about grammar and punctuation. Others may choose inspiration from writing prompts, sacred texts, poems, or dreams. Gratitude and prayer journals are other common writing styles. Some people record when they see divine intervention play out in their life, prayers answered, or when they have opportunities to share their innate gifts with others.

If journaling sounds like something you'd like to explore give one session a try to see what you think. Set aside a time where you won't be interrupted, ideally in a quiet space. Set a 5-minute timer (or as long as you want) to automatically go off so you don't have to worry about watching the clock. Take a piece of paper and a pen and write about whatever comes to mind until the timer goes off. If free association sounds intimidating, here are some prompts to help focus your thoughts. If the journal session feels beneficial, try making a habit out of it by setting aside a specific time to do it.

Journaling is another tool we can use to practice spirituality, to help improve our wellbeing by finding answers to important questions within.

Journaling Prompts:

1. *What did I read today that encouraged me?*
2. *Where did I see good in my life today?*
3. *What are some patterns in my life I've noticed recently?*
4. *What are my fears?*
5. *When have I felt close to the universe or my higher power?*
6. *What are my dreams?*
7. *If I could interview my future self what would we say to each other?*
8. *When have I been the happiest?*
9. *If I could ask a spiritual leader or someone I admire one question, what would it be and what response would I like to hear?*
10. *What words would I like others to use to describe me?*
11. *How have I experienced the divine in my life?*



Recipe: One-Ingredient Banana “Ice Cream”

No matter how much you love bananas, it’s hard to eat a whole bunch before one or two turn brown. When that happens, I usually peel them, place them in a bag, and toss them in the freezer. Frozen bananas can be used for smoothies or banana bread, but in the warm days of summer, you can also make this incredibly simple, delicious, and refreshing “ice cream” using just one ingredient—frozen bananas! Of course, this isn’t quite as creamy and rich as real ice cream, but it is also fat- and dairy-free, and much faster than lugging out an ice cream maker.

If you want to get a little fancier, stir in chocolate chips, peanut butter, Nutella, shredded coconut, or whatever other ingredients you like to pair with bananas.



Ingredients

4 frozen bananas

Directions: In a freezer or food processor, blend frozen bananas until smooth. If you like the consistency of soft serve ice cream, serve immediately. For firmer results, store it in an airtight container and return it to the freezer for an hour or two. Scoop and serve with your favorite banana-friendly toppings.

“Healthy eating isn’t about counting fat grams, dieting, cleanses and antioxidants; it’s about eating food untouched from the way we find it in nature in a balanced way.”

~ Pooja Mottl

Any Health and Wellness News Questions?

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