

Letters to Dr. Walter Bortz II

Dear Dr. Bortz: I have heard the term "Blue Zone" several times recently connected with old people. Do you know anything about it?

– Jane Fielder, Santa Cruz, CA

Dear Jane:

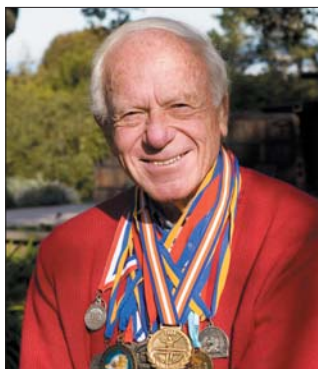
Thank you for your question. I know a little bit about Blue Zone and I want to know more. Wikipedia reports the fact that the first use of the term was by a group of population experts who were investigating centenarians living in Sardinia in 2004.

Since the original use of the term, four other populations including Okinawa, Costa Rica, Greece and the Seventh-day Adventists in Loma Linda, California have been added.

A recent book about these people was published by the National Geographic Press 2008. Its author, Dan Buettner. Its title, *"Blue Zones: Lessons for Living Longer from the People Who Have Lived the Longest."*

The researchers involved in these surveys have observed that four separate characteristics are shared commonly by all five population groups. First, constant moderate physical exercise, said to be a central part of life; second, the lack of smoking; third, a largely plant food diet; fourth, high levels of social engagement, particularly with family members.

I have observed that if these are the features of the Blue Zones what might be the characteristics of a Red Zone? People who don't live as long as they are intended to. Such a theoretical population



would include the people who are physically inactive, smoke, have a high fat, high sugar diet and are socially disengaged.

Does this group sound familiar? My friend Jack Farquhar wrote a fine book *"The American Way of Life is Dangerous to Your Health."* The Blue Zones have much to teach us.

Dear Dr. Bortz: I'm 73-years-old and am regularly involved in several programs in our excellent senior center. Over lunch, we often share stories about our health experiences and I'm struck by how many of my aging friends are on a number of medicines of infinite variety. Almost all are taking vitamins, minerals and anti-oxidants of multiple formulations. I take nothing. Am I missing out on something?

– John Conrad, Sunnyvale, CA

Dear John: I'm with you. I'm almost 80 and I'm happy to report that the drug and vitamin companies derive zero of their income from the pills and capsules I take.

I note advice from my medical school professor of medicine,

Dr. Wood. He taught us freshmen students, "I have done a lot more good in my life by stopping medicine than by starting it."

Jane Brody's always excellent column in the *New York Times* in January 2002 was titled *"Healthy Aging With Nary a Supplement."* She records a recent Lancet medical journal article which projects that half of the children born after 2000 in advanced countries can expect to live to be a hundred.

A side comment, however, is that people who rely on vitamins, minerals and anti-oxidants are wasting their money as the scientific evidence provides no benefits and may conceivably even be harmful.

In the same column she relates Hippocrates' advice of 400 BC: "All parts of the body, which have a function if used in moderation and exercised in labors in which each is accustomed, become thereby healthy, well-developed and age more slowly, but if unused and left idle, they become liable to disease, defective in growth and age quickly."

Don't look to the pharmacist for a guarantee on a 100 healthy years. Look in the mirror.

Dr. Walter Bortz II is one of America's most distinguished scientific experts on healthy aging and longevity. He spent his entire career at Stanford University where he holds the position of Clinical Associate Professor of Medicine. An active marathoner, he has written six books and is working on his seventh: Next Medicine. Would you like to contact Dr. Bortz? Email him at DrBortz@aol.com or visit www.walterbortz.com.