It may have seemed like good news when federal officials announced last month that U.S. life expectancy had jumped four months and, for the first time, surpassed 78 years.

But forget about 78. What if someone said that you—not some future generation—should be able to live into your 90s in relatively good health?

In Pictures: The World's Longevity Secrets

That's the premise behind a new National Geographic book, *The Blue Zones: Lessons for Living Longer from the People Who've Lived the Longest*. Partially funded by the National Institute on Aging, explorer Dan Buettner and a team of researchers identified four geographic regions where small groups of people are living particularly long, healthy lives. Blue zones refer to the concentric circles Buettner and his team drew on a world map in blue ink to demarcate the areas with the highest life expectancies, including the Barbagia region of Sardinia, Italy; Okinawa, Japan; the community of Seventh Day Adventists in Loma Linda, Calif.; and the Nicoya Peninsula in Costa Rica.

While many of the factors that appear to have contributed to longer life expectancies of these populations appear to be common sense, such as eating plant-based foods, being active and cutting stress, Buettner says that's not necessarily true today. Americans are bombarded with reports of often conflicting health data (e.g., don't eat carbs, eat carbs, eat only certain carbs), causing them to lose sight of the importance of making smart, subtle lifestyle changes.

"There are so many confusing messages out there," Buettner says. "What the blue zones have to teach us is a very clear, consistent message of what measures demographic populations have done to get more good years out of life."

Buettner is far from the first to travel the globe in search of the fountain of youth. In fact, a *National Geographic* article in the 1970s identified parts of Ecuador and Pakistan as having some of the longest-living populations. These claims were later debunked when it was determined that people lied about their ages or

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Skepticism aside, it makes some sense that certain populations would live longer than others, says Dr. James Goodwin, director of the Sealy Center on Aging at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston. Studies have shown, for example, that residents of rural communities tend to live longer than those based in urban areas; married couples live longer than single or divorced people; and women regularly outlive men by about six years (though the gap is getting smaller due to advances in awareness and the treatment of heart disease).

Much of what Buettner found is also supported by scientific and medical research.

In Sardinia, for instance, he spent time with centenarians who walked a minimum of six miles a day or who, by 10 a.m., had pastured sheep, cut wood, trimmed olive trees and fed and eviscerated a cow. In other words, they incorporated activity into their daily routines. Along those lines, a study published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine in March showed that maintaining aerobic fitness through middle age could, alone, delay biological aging by 12 years.

In Okinawa, Buettner met a woman in her 70s who whispers “hara hachi bu” before she eats, a reminder to consume only 80% of what's on her plate. While scientists have known for decades that animals can live longer when they eat less, researchers are just beginning to determine the extent of the impact caloric restriction can have on humans.

A study published in 2006 in the Journal of the American College of Cardiology, for instance, found that the hearts of people who followed a low-calorie, Mediterranean diet resembled those of younger people. Researchers compared 25 people who consumed 1,400 to 2,000 calories per day for six years to 25 similar control subjects eating typical Western diets of 2,000 to 3,000 calories per day, concluding that the Mediterranean diet could delay aging and increase longevity.

Have you or someone you know reached a much older age than average? What, do you believe, was the secret? Talk about it in the Reader Comments section below.

Many of the Seventh Day Adventists in Loma Linda, Calif., also appear to have added years of life due to their regular participation in a spiritual community. Their involvement not only connects them with a supportive social network, but it also forces them to set aside time each week that tends to be stress-relieving. Similarly, in 1999 researchers from the University of Colorado at Boulder, the University of Texas at Austin and Florida State University found that people who go to church once or more each week may live seven years longer than those who never attend.

Of course, adopting all of these habits over the long haul isn’t as easy as it may sound, especially given our fast-food culture, super-sized portions and the fact that most of us spend our days chained to a desk rather than working the fields. The blue zones currently are in danger of disappearing due to the forces of globalization, which tend to level food culture and social mores. But if people do manage to adopt even just a couple of the lessons gleaned from these populations, they’re likely to see at least one benefit.

“A balanced life,” Goodwin says, “is its own reward.”

In Pictures: The World's Longevity Secrets

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Posted by juliosvalencia | 12/27/09 08:44 PM EST

longevity secret !I have 46 yrs and in the past 3 yrs,I start doing 5 days week aerobic exercises and eat 3 times a day,and drink lots of water a day,I lost 60 pounds and fell like 28 yrs old,I chang [More]

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Posted by AlonzoQuijana | 07/06/08 01:55 PM EDT

I suspect longevity is some mix of genes, a healthy lifestyle and environment. By environment I mean access to decent (not ultra high
tech or heroic) health care; a moderate pace of life; a life with

Tags: Community, stress, longevity, ageing, materialism

Posted by zenqueen | 07/04/08 08:36 PM EDT

The secret is not longevity, but a life lived to the fullest, taking care of oneself to be able to get up at will to do anything we wish with a positive and enthusiastic attitude. I'm a super young 5

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