

**PART 1**  
**THE JOURNEY**

# The Hero's Journey

## Judson Brandeis, MD, Urologist

*The privilege of a lifetime is being who you are.*  
— Joseph Campbell

### What is the journey of life for a man?

Each of us is born with individual gifts and walks a unique life path of hardship and opportunity. With mindfulness and determination, we all have the chance to become the hero of our own story. Some men start early in their quest for fame and fortune. Others are late bloomers.

Although Darwin was just 22 when he began the voyages that informed his life's work, he was 50 years old before he published *On the Origin of the Species* in 1859, the theory for which he is best known today. Or Sam Walton, who opened his first Walmart at age 44, and Bill Wilson who turned his life around and co-founded Alcoholics Anonymous at age 40. Central to success in life is the ability to adapt to new circumstances and to keep learning. At the age of 51, after almost a decade as chief of urology at a major Bay Area

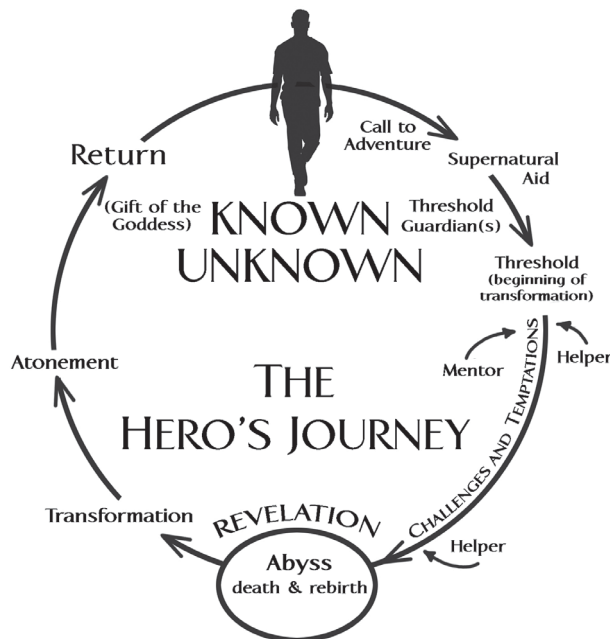


Figure 1.1. Steps in the Hero's Journey, based on the work of Joseph Campbell.

hospital and head of a successful urology practice, I left hospital medicine to focus on men's sexual health and rejuvenative medicine. The transition wasn't easy, but it brought creativity and drive back into my professional life at an age when many men are looking to coast or slowly wind things down.

Heroes come in all shapes and sizes, and motivations. Hollywood heroes like James Bond and Rambo are fearless and run toward danger. The movies glorify these men, but the real stories are more complex. Many are reluctant heroes, ordinary people who find themselves faced with an extraordinary challenge. Think of John McCain, a navy pilot, who after being shot down spent six years in the Vietnamese POW camps but refused early release in solidarity with his fellow prisoners. Or Jackie Robinson, born into a family of sharecroppers in rural Georgia, who braved death threats to break the color barrier in the all-white Major Leagues.

Life circumstances pushed these men into extreme situations that they faced with self-doubt and trepidation. Many heroes wish someone else would handle the task for them, but they rise to the occasion in the end. Often men in these situations aren't comfortable with their role as heroes, but they understand that this is their life path and grow into the role. The inner struggle for the unwilling hero is his desire to return to normal, but this is an impossible dream. Our hero is no longer the same innocent boy who began the journey to manhood.

### MILESTONES IN THE JOURNEY

One source of insight into the hero's journey is the work of Joseph Campbell, who spent his life studying the epic stories of world cultures and exploring their underlying meaning. The hero's journey in mythology is a process of personal transformation, from an inexperienced boy into a mature man of wisdom. It is helpful to understand how this process unfolds in Campbell's model.

**The departure.** Every boy is born into a culture with traditions and beliefs. His life begins at home, where he understands his surroundings, people, and traditions. There is comfort in knowing the world in which he lives. He takes for granted that this is the way that things are supposed to be. Yet to achieve manhood, he must put aside security and challenge conventions and himself to create a new reality and identity. To accomplish that, he must leave the comfort of the familiar, so the initial phase of the hero's journey is the departure.

Think about the place where you were born and raised and how far you have journeyed since then. For some of your friends, the comfort of home prevented them from achieving their full potential when opportunities arose. The high school quarterback and prom queen may never leave town to test their abilities at the next level. Some men would rather be a big fish in a small pond, but in doing so, they miss the chance to reach their true potential.

**The call to action.** Other men refuse the call to action out of a sense of duty or obligation to family or friends, due to the fear of failure, or the lack of internal motivation. A hero's journey must come from within, although frequently, a mentor facilitates the quest for independence and achievement. This guide could be a wise parent, an athletic coach, a teacher, or a religious figure. Think about a pivotal figure in your life who inspired you to trust yourself and your instincts. Sadly, many men shrink back from the call to action and live mediocre lives, wondering what could have been. Fortunately, at any age, you can do something truly remarkable. Consider the life of Nelson Mandela. After serving 27 years of a life sentence, the South African government released him from prison at the age of 71. At 75, he became the first black president, in a fully representative, multiracial South Africa.

***As George Eliot wrote,  
"It's never too late to be what you might have been."***

Astronaut John Glenn joined the NASA space program at 37 (just shy of the program's cut-off of age 40) to become the first American to orbit the earth and the third American in space. At the age of 43, he joined the U.S. Senate, where he served for 24 years.

**Point of no return.** Once a man leaves the familiarity of home, he becomes more deeply committed to the journey, and at some point, there's no turning back. Houdini, for example, knew from a young age that he wanted to be a magician, despite his parent's objections. He ran away from home by hopping a freight train, eventually ending up in New York City, where he had to panhandle on the streets to eat. He went on to achieve astonishing success. Elon Musk made \$180 million when he sold his stake in PayPal in 2002. Musk then invested all his time and money in SpaceX, Tesla, and Solar City. By 2008, he had completely run out of money and found himself in divorce court. His total commitment to the realization of his innovations enabled Musk to succeed beyond his wildest dreams.

**Forging a new identity.** As the journey begins, the hero entirely separates from his known world. One crucial aspect of the quest is to discover and then forge a new identity. Although he reveals his willingness to undergo a change, he soon encounters danger or setbacks that test his will and skills. Our hero realizes that he no longer has the safety net of his previous life and must fend for himself. Early setbacks, followed by success, give him the confidence to move forward. In 1919, Walt Disney was fired from one of his first animation jobs at the *Kansas City Star* because his editor felt he "lacked imagination and had no good ideas." Disney later acquired Laugh-O-Gram animation studios, which he drove into bankruptcy. These early failures gave no hint of his colossal vision and the success Disney achieved later in life.

**A multitude of trials.** As the quest deepens, the hero moves toward initiation. The first step is the road of trials, a series of tests the hero must undergo to begin the transformation. Often it appears that the hero will fail these tests. The odds are against him. Frequently a mentor or higher power helps our hero with advice or gifts. In the Greek epic *The Odyssey*, Odysseus encounters a multitude of trials, including Lotus Eaters (addiction), Cyclops (monsters), the Laestrygonians (cannibals), Circe (sorcery), the Underworld (life in hell), Sirens (enchantment or delusion), Calypso (seduction), Scylla and Charybdis (confrontation with massive danger, forcing the choice between the lesser of two evils), and finally Helios and Poseidon (conflict with God). These dangers are all metaphors for different aspects of human reality. Along the journey, temptations of the flesh and of material wealth may lead a man to abandon or stray from the quest. Who can forget how Robin Givens distracted “Iron Mike” Tyson or how sex and drugs destroyed so many rock-and-roll legends? Imagine the fantastic music Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, and Kurt Cobain could have made had their lives had not been cut short.

**Saboteurs.** Friends and family may have positive intentions, but they can also derail a quest and hinder a man's development. Men on a hero's journey are often called selfish, unrealistic, or crazy. Your ability to identify obstructions on your path and align with supporters is critical to your mission's success. Because few people complete their hero's journey to mature adulthood, most people will unconsciously attempt to sabotage your journey.

**The live-or-die moment.** The next step in the journey is entering the dragon's lair: consider, for example, the bravery of the American soldiers landing on the beach in Normandy. The live-or-die moment of the journey is often accompanied by despair when everything seems to be lost. At this critical juncture, our hero gains access to a previously unavailable part of himself – one last breath of energy, strength, or creativity to defeat the overwhelming forces he must confront. The hero must call on inner power that he does not know he possesses. Audie Murphy was one of the most decorated soldiers in World War II. In December 1945, the Allied generals ordered Murphy and his unit to hold against a German counterattack. After the Germans hit the M10 tank destroyer, causing it to burst into flames, Murphy ordered his troops to fall back. Alone, he covered their retreat and held off the Germans by mounting the burning tank's .50 caliber machine gun and calling in artillery strikes. His position was attacked on three sides by six tanks and waves of infantry. Wounded and out of ammunition, he returned to his company, refused medical treatment, and organized a successful counterattack. For an hour, the Germans tried every available weapon to eliminate 2nd Lieutenant Murphy, but he held his position.

**Transformation.** In the end, our hero overcomes his greatest adversary and achieves the objective that he set out to complete. The successful completion of the quest brings money,

power, love, and fame. However, these actual treasures become secondary to the personal transformation that has occurred. Edward Aikau was a champion surfer from Hawaii, but he is best known as the first lifeguard on the island of Oahu, where he saved more than 500 lives. Eddie would brave waves that often reached 30 feet or more when no one else would go out. Instead of enjoying the accolades of being a champion athlete, Eddie chose the thankless job of a lifeguard.

**The long road home.** After the climax of the quest comes the long passage home carrying the riches earned during the struggles. Dangers and roadblocks clutter the path back. During the return journey, our hero must deal with whatever mental baggage remains from his upbringing and life that may present itself later as weakness. Before the final homecoming, there are often more unforeseen obstacles to overcome. This ultimate test of our hero's fortitude further defines and deepens his mental and emotional growth. The strength he has built during the quest enables him to overcome this final obstacle.

*Lewis and Clark reached the Pacific Ocean in November 1805. In March 1806, the weary explorers headed for home and St. Louis. They retrieved their horses and crossed the Bitterroot Mountains. On the return trip, the expedition separated into two parties in Idaho to explore the country more thoroughly. During that time, Blackfoot warriors attacked Lewis's company. To make matters worse, Lewis was wounded in a hunting accident. Lewis and Clark reached the end of their 8,000-mile journey in St. Louis on September 23, 1806.*

(Not every quest is successful. The massive effort can make or break a man.)

*Tragically, Lewis committed suicide several years later at the age of 35. On the other hand, Clark became one of the leading officials in the West and an advisor to many American presidents.*

Ironically, when our hero returns, he finds that he no longer fits into the world that he once knew. His worldview and capabilities have expanded far beyond the world he left. Unfortunately, this has become a significant issue in the United States as many Afghanistan and Iraq war veterans have had real difficulties fitting back into civilian life. It has also been the reality of many Vietnam vets and has probably been true of soldiers returning from war throughout history.

What's the point of all of this? I believe that we are born on this earth with a purpose and a Hero's Journey waiting for all of us. Unfortunately, most of us never reach our true potential. We are too comfortable or too afraid to change, or we stumble and fall while battling the dragon and do not have the persistence to keep fighting. For those who succeed, it comes down to determination. Do you have the drive to do what you know is right? This book is intended as a resource for men on how to live a better, healthier life, written by

national experts in their respective fields. Our website will provide additional resources for you to live your best life. Many of the most effective interventions are free and simply require personal commitment and determination. I wish you all the best on your own journey, and I hope that you inspire and mentor the next generation of heroes.

### THE HERO'S JOURNEY: IMMIGRATION

The immigrant's journey is often synonymous with the hero's path. This assumption has been true since the First Peoples began migrating out of Africa 60,000 years ago and is still true today. Here is one such story:

*Rajesh was born in Judwadli, a little farming town in Southwest India, where his parents owned a small cotton and peanut farm. There was no electricity or indoor plumbing. He remembers taking a lantern to the outhouse at night and finding a cobra in the toilet. Life wasn't easy: his mother passed away when he was young, and his father favored his older brother. Fortunately, the local schoolteachers noticed his aptitude for math and encouraged him to go to a better school in the neighboring town. His father and grandparents wanted him to take over the family farm and discouraged him from continuing his education. Even though his parents were illiterate, he was able to go to boarding school, studied hard, and got top scores on the national math and science exams so that he could attend university. His family tried to drag him back to the farm by cutting off the few rupees that paid for his board. At that point, Rajesh had no source of support but his own drive. He remembers those times now at age 85: "Whatever hurdle comes in, you face it."*

*After graduating from the university, he found employment in India in the public works system for a year but learned from friends of opportunities in America. He began dreaming of going to the U.S. and was one of the only students in his class to pass the engineering certification exam. To gain admission to an American college, he had to travel to Bombay to apply for a scholarship to the engineering school at the University of Kansas.*

*"Only eight dollars in your pocket when you leave for the U.S." Rajesh recalled. He took a steamboat to New York and was 30 days at sea.*

*"It is a blow to the mind when you land in New York. I had never seen an escalator or neon lights. You get depressed because you feel so backward, and they seem so advanced. I did not even know how to turn on the faucet."*

*Although he had tuition paid for a year, he washed dishes at night to support himself in Kansas. He sought out a church charity to get an overcoat for the cold Kansas weather and rented a basement room in a house with three other students. Rajesh drove a used car he purchased for \$30. During college, he started designing and building bridges with a structural engineering*

*company in Kansas City. One day, he received a letter from his friend Mahendra Kardani, telling him about the beautiful weather and the beaches in California.*

*In 1966 Rajesh drove his VW bug to Los Angeles, stayed at the YMCA, and found a job with CalTrans in downtown LA, building the California highway system and designing overpasses.*

*Secure in his job, he went back to India determined to find a beautiful bride. Their courtship and honeymoon lasted three days. In the ensuing years in Los Angeles, they had two beautiful children, while Rajesh designed and built his own house. During economic downturns, he was able to purchase properties, so he and his wife were able to send both their children to dental school to become professionals.*

*When asked about moments of doubt on arriving in a new country without a safety net, Rajesh replied, "I believed I could do anything. I never looked at the negative. Failure was never an option—there was never a possibility of failure."*

*Things were going well until 1994, when Rajesh's heart failed. He went to the Emergency Room at Kaiser one afternoon with chest pain and a cough. Given his accent and quiet nature, he could not adequately explain his symptoms and was sent home with cough medicine. Three days later, he returned to the hospital near death. He barely survived a six-vessel bypass. A large part of his heart had died, and at that point, his heart function was 30% of normal.*

*Determined to see his children married and to have grandchildren one day, Rajesh changed his eating habits and took up yoga, walking, and meditation. However, two years after his heart surgery, he began having difficulty walking and experienced pain in his legs. His physician diagnosed problems with the veins in his legs. Within a year, he was nearly paralyzed, and an MRI showed severe impingement of the nerves in his back. He underwent a six-hour spine operation, but it took a full year for Rajesh to walk normally again.*

*Rajesh and his wife had both worked for CalTrans for almost 40 years and retired with full pensions. He enjoyed his children's weddings and the birth of six grandchildren, who are now all teenagers. Rajesh still walks every day, does yoga, and meditates. Angiograms of his heart show collateral blood vessel growth and no new blockages. He is still able to count cards when he plays blackjack and tells clever stories to his grandchildren (who include my four children).*

**Not every hero plays major league sports, flies a fighter plane, or plays guitar in front of thousands of screaming fans. In fact, most heroes are quietly thriving in your neighborhood. They are also working to inspire and prepare the next generation of men to take the sacred hero's journey of their age.**



## Chapter 2

# Smart Ways to Reduce Your Health Risks

## Judson Brandeis, MD, Urologist & Michael Abassian, MPH, Researcher

*I'm not afraid of death, I just don't want to be there when it happens.*  
— Woody Allen

The goal of this chapter is to inform you of your risks and offer you practical strategies for reducing those risks. There are so many things that can be done to materially improve the quality of your life. Here is what you need to know to take better care of yourself.

### OUR DOUBLED LIFESPAN

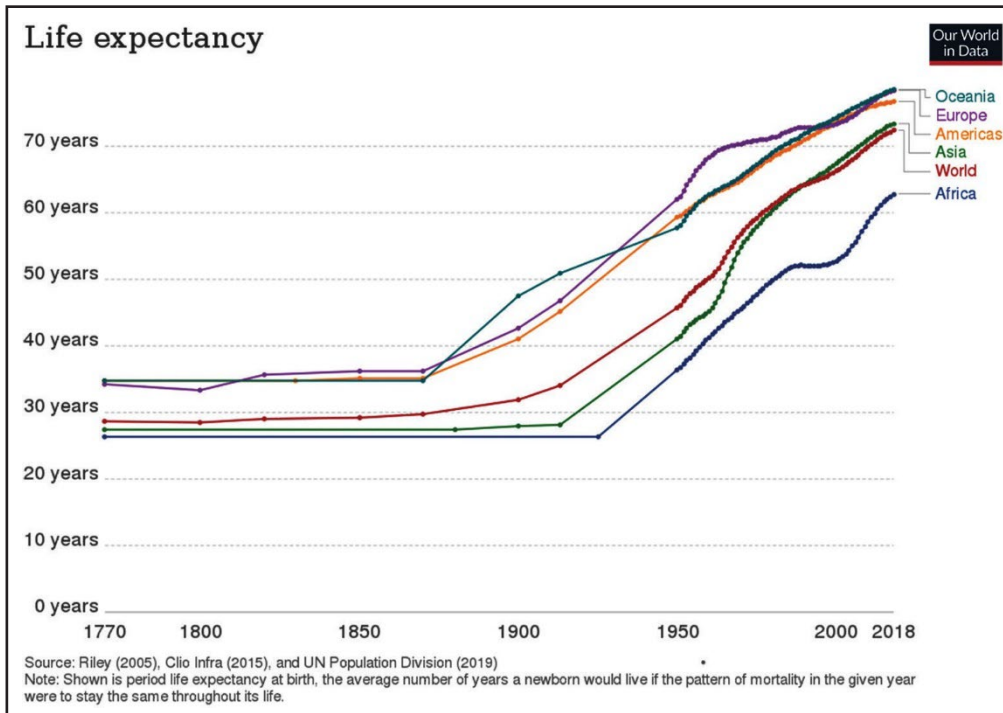
**The good news: You will probably live to 76.** The average life expectancy for men in the United States reflects a gain of about 40 years over the last 150 years, when male lifespan averaged 35 years of age. Major advances in medicine and public health have extended and improved our lives and increased our lifespan spectacularly.

**The bad news: We're losing ground.** For the first time in 150 years, longevity is declining for American males. In middle age, for example, white males are dying at such a high rate, they are statistically increasing the death rate for all middle-aged males as a group. This chapter and the demographic trends it describes are the call to action that *The 21st Century Man* seeks to address.

**Protect yourself by knowing your risks.** There's an old saying: "If you'd have known better, you'd have done better." (It's remarkable, the number of people who don't know what's wrong with living on fast food.) So this content is intended to support you in rethinking coping strategies that may have become bad habits....

### CUTTING YOUR RISKS IN HALF

Taking a closer look at the numbers, heart disease and cancer are responsible for almost half (46%) of deaths in men, so reducing just those two risks essentially cuts your risks in half. There is a surprising amount of similarity in the underlying causes of heart disease and cancer. If you develop a healthy diet, stay physically active, and avoid tobacco, that will also reduce your health risks by about half.



**Figure 2.1. Increased life expectancy reflecting the development of public health and antimicrobial therapy. (Max Rosner, Martin School, Oxford, U.K.).**

**Progress in reducing the risk of heart disease.** Heart disease is significantly preventable. Study after study has shown that modifiable risk factors make a tremendous difference in the quality of life and life expectancy in terms of risk of heart disease. A prospective cohort analysis funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has shown that:

- Smoking cessation can reduce the risk of heart disease by about 40% *within five years*—almost cutting the risk in half.
- Exercise in your 40s is crucial to heart health, whether or not you exercised in your 20s or 30s. Statistics show major decreases in heart disease for individuals who exercise, even those who begin exercising in midlife.
- Exercise can also reduce cancer risk. Individuals who start exercising past their 40s can still reduce cancer mortality.

**Cardio risk—24.2% of fatalities.** Cardiovascular disease encompasses a range of conditions that affect the heart and blood vessels, including myocardial infarctions (heart attack), aneurysms, stroke, and heart failure.

***Heart disease is responsible for one in every four male deaths, causing 350,000 male deaths in the United States in 2017 alone.***


What is particularly concerning is that half of the men who die from coronary heart disease have no warning: no signs or symptoms to give them a heads up. We can be at risk of heart disease and not be aware of our vulnerability if we lack the symptoms. For this reason, cardiovascular risk assessment is now an important part of routine annual checkups.

**Cancer risks—21.9% of fatalities.** Cancer continues to be a leading cause of death for men from 40 to 80 years of age and beyond, with about 900,000 men diagnosed with cancer annually, and 320,000 men lost to some form of the disease in 2019 alone. More than 40% of men will be diagnosed with cancer at some time during their life—almost one in two. The risk of cancer rises dramatically when we reach 50. The chance of a cancer diagnosis:

- From birth to 50 years of age is just over 3%.
- Risk from 50 to 59 years of age is 6%.
- For 60 to 69-year-old men, risk rises to 13%.
- For men 70 and over, risk is about 32%.

The most common newly diagnosed cancers involve the lungs, prostate, and digestive tract, reflecting the effects of smoking and poor diet.

CONDITION	NUMBER	PERCENT
Heart disease	659,041	23%
Cancer	599,601	21%
Accidents-unintentional injury	173,040	6%
Chronic respiratory diseases	156,979	5%
Stroke-cerebrovascular diseases	150,005	5%
Alzheimer’s disease	121,499	4%
Diabetes	87,647	3%
Kidney disease	51,565	2%



**Figure 2.2. Estimated deaths from all causes in males, U.S., 2019.**

In terms of prostate cancer, tracking the PSA (prostate-specific antigen) after the age of 50 can lead to early intervention before malignancy in the prostate spreads. Overall death rates from cancer in men have been declining since the early 1990s. (Death dates that are declining in prostate, myeloma, and bladder cancers are due to changes in environmental and behavioral risk factors and better screening, detection, and treatment.)

## WHAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE?

Knowing the factors that increase the risk of common, fatal cancers can empower you to make life-saving changes. You'll also want to look for patterns within your family and put greatest emphasis on likely genetic risks factors. Issues to address when reducing cancer risk include smoking cessation, reducing excess body weight, eating nutritiously, and getting enough physical activity.

Many men are physically active when they are young, and then stop exercising later in life and never pick it up again. Surprisingly, their health risks are far worse than the risks of those who begin exercising later in life and continue to do so.

**Chronic illness.** The United States is in the midst of a significant demographic shift that began in the twentieth century. By 2030, all the baby boomers will have reached the age of 65, and approximately 20% of the United States population will be of retirement age. We will be a society with more chronic diseases, given the rates of heart disease and cancer as we age. Chronic respiratory disease, liver disease, cirrhosis, and diabetes are also on the increase, with impact on quality of life. Chronic conditions such as diabetes can feel overwhelming and can be difficult to reverse.

***It's important to remind yourself that you have the power to make significant changes in your health risks.***

**Diabetes and sexual vitality.** Diabetes directly accounts for more than 46,000 male deaths each year. Men make up about 65% of all type 1 diabetes cases. Type 2 diabetes prevalence increases with age:

- 10% of those ages 45-54
- 20% of those 55-64
- 23% of men 65 and older.

These numbers show the impact of diabetes across our population. On a human level, symptoms suggest that diabetes (and prediabetes) impairs quality of life in ways unique to men, reflected in low testosterone, decreased sex drive, erectile dysfunction, and impotence.

**A proactive approach.** We cannot control the effects of culture, education, or poverty on our health when we're young. However, in adulthood, we can understand the benefit of being proactive. What's more, we can choose to move step-by-step toward our health goals. We can have the greatest impact on our risks of heart disease by:

- Quitting tobacco
- Addressing nutrition, weight gain (especially around the waistline), high blood pressure (hypertension), and body mass index (which all have the same underlying nutritional causes)

- Becoming physical active
- Moderating alcohol use (seven drinks a week or less is the recent finding, associated with lower risk of obesity).

Five-year survival rates for the most common cancers in men range considerably, with prostate cancer having an overall survival rate of about 98%. In comparison, the five-year overall survival rate of pancreatic cancer is just over a depressing 9%.

### **Guys, Check in with Your Doctor . . . .**

In the United States and globally, men are generally not good at utilizing primary care services. Qualities associated with masculinity in our culture such as self-sufficiency, independence, and strength are reflected in unwillingness to seek care.

Many men don't bother to get checkups, which is sobering.

Why bother? By optimizing your lifestyle, you can cut your risk of stroke by 80%. And blood tests are now available that will screen for several types of cancer (often before symptoms develop). The point here is that screening is worth the effort—it could save your life.

There is strength in taking action to reduce our risks. And if we are struggling, we need to become proactive about our health, scheduling that long overdue appointment with our primary care provider. We owe that to ourselves.

***(For healthy approaches to weight loss, please see chapters 31 to 36; for realistic strategies to get back in shape, see chapters 37 to 43; and for effective ways to reduce a tobacco habit, see chapters 44 and 45.)***

### **KEY TAKE AWAYS**

- The leading causes of death for 40- to 80-year-old men are heart disease and cancer.
- The most important risk factor you need to avoid is smoking, which contributes to virtually all types of cancer, including lung, prostate, and colorectal cancer.
- Make an absolute commitment of a healthy diet that includes fresh fruits and vegetables, and work toward a moderate to vigorous level of physical activity.
- Access to good quality health insurance, obtained for most Americans through employment, is a powerful predictor of positive health outcomes.

**For additional references and resources, please  
see**

*The Ten Commandments of Men's Health*