

Andre Ethier strikes out to end Saturday's game.



DODGERS FALL, HEAD HOME IN A 2-0 HOLE

SPORTS

ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER SUNDAY

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Why do some people thrive into their 90s? UCI researchers are asking them.

IT'S THE ...

AGE-OLD QUESTION



MINDY SCHAUER, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

95-YEAR-OLD RUTH STAHL

Stahl zips around Dana Point in her lime-green Volkswagen Beetle. "Everyone knows me by my car," she says.

• **AGLOW:** At one point, Ruth Stahl didn't seem headed for a long life; she was exposed to acute radiation in her 20s while painting glow-in-the-dark dials on warplanes.

• **HEALTHY:** She eats well, takes vitamins and an afternoon nap. She drinks a glass of red wine daily.
• **EXERCISE:** Stahl does a daily 3-mile power walk and shoulder-stands in yoga.

Interested in what it takes to live to old age in good health with your brain cells still firing strong? So are two researchers at UCI.

They set out in search of the secrets to growing old. And who best to teach them than a bunch of old people?

The researchers have spent the past decade tracking down Orange County's "oldest old" – the 90+ crowd.

They pick the seniors' brains until they die, and then they examine the participants' brains in the lab; the seniors have promised UCI their post-mortem brains.

Ruth Stahl, Irene Lehman, Carmela LaRusso and Jane Whistler own four of the 400 brains the scientists are currently picking.

These women are staying vital in their golden years in their own ways.

STORIES BY LORI BASHEDA
ON NEWS 3-5

Study participant Ruth Stahl, 95, of Dana Point shows off fun shoes that reflect her lively personality.

HINTS FROM 90+

Some of the findings that researchers from The 90+ Study have published in scientific papers:

- People in the study who drink moderate amounts of alcohol or coffee are living longer than those who abstain.
- People who are overweight in their 80s are living longer than normal or underweight people.
- More than 40 percent of people age 90 and older suffer from dementia.
- Nearly 40 percent of people with dementia who are 90 or older do not have significant Alzheimer's neuropathology in their brain.
- Nearly 40 percent of people *without* dementia have significant Alzheimer's pathology.
- If you lead an active, extroverted life and are something of a thrill seeker, you might be genetically primed to live into your 90s or longer. A variation of a gene involved in transmitting dopamine, a key component of the brain's reward and learning system, was found to be far more frequent among the 90+ crowd.



PHOTOS: MINDY SCHAUER, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

MYSTERY OF THE AGES

Ruth was dusted with so much radiation in a World War II airplane factory that in her early 20s she glowed in the dark.



LORI BASHEDA REGISTER WRITER

Jane smoked a pack of Pall Malls a day for 19 years. And Irene was a pack-a-day Chesterfield woman. They drink wine, or in Irene's case scotch, before dinner. They say no to vitamins and yes to ice cream.

Yet they have made it to old age.

Actually, they didn't just make it, they own it.

At 95, 99 and 106, they do yoga headstands, raise cactuses to sell on eBay and tell their broker to buy Twitter stock.

Clearly there are some things that they did wrong.

So what did they do right?

That's what researchers at UC Irvine are trying to figure out.

"We've got a whole generation that has accomplished



Dr. Claudia Kawas, left, and Maria Corrada, professors at UC Irvine, are studying people 90 and older for clues about the secrets of good health, longevity and dementia.

people, it's a disabled life, not an active life."

Kawas and Maria Corrada call it the 90+ Study because you have to be at least 90 years old to receive an invitation.

Participants are also asked to make one promise: When you die, give us your brain.

So far, the researchers have collected 210 brains. And more than 100 more have been promised, including the brains of Ruth, Jane and Irene.

Their quest for the brains of "the oldest of the old" began in 2003.

Kawas, a neurologist, and Corrada, an epidemiologist, had just come to UCI from Johns Hopkins.

They heard about the Leisure World Cohort Study that a USC research team did back in 1981 (primarily to study estrogen in women). The team had mailed 14-page

questionnaires to 14,000 senior citizens who lived in Leisure World in Laguna Niguel, asking about lifestyles, exercise habits, medical history, what they drank and ate.

Kawas and Corrada saw it as a potential gold mine and began tracking down people who had filled out the questionnaire. It took detective work - knocking on doors, cold-calling relatives.

At least 9,000 of those who filled out the questionnaires in 1981 had already died. But if the researchers found someone alive who was at least 90, they were invited to join the study.

Most eagerly signed up. "They want to leave a legacy," Kawas said. "A possibility of helping future generations."

Over the past decade, 1,600 people have enrolled, making it one of the largest studies of the 90-plus population in the world. Only 400 of them are still alive.

Participants are visited

twice a year to be given blood tests and perform tasks such as counting backward by threes from 100.

A third of the participants have since left Leisure World, scattered to 33 states. One moved to Rhode Island this summer, where she is still a practicing psychotherapist at age 100, traveling to Manhattan to see clients.

A member of the 90+ team flies to the out-of-state seniors and makes videos of the visit.

"Our biggest challenge is that 95-year-olds are tired," Kawas says. "They can't see. They can't hear. They get tired when they walk in the door. It's a lot easier to work with five Alzheimer's rats in a lab."

In fact, a third of those in the study are now in the throes of dementia. Solving that riddle would be the Holy Grail. It's a race against the clock, Kawas says.

More than 4 million people in this country have demen-

tia. The number of people in the dementia-ripe age range (85 and older) will quadruple by 2050.

And there is no consensus about what causes Alzheimer's, the leading cause of dementia, let alone a cure or, better yet, sure-fire prevention.

In a nutshell: One camp of researchers believes that a buildup of protein plaque in the brain causes Alzheimer's. Another camp believes that protein tangles are to blame. And there are outliers who don't agree with either theory, saying it's more complicated than that.

Kawas' collection of brains lends itself to this last conclusion. Forty percent of the people in the study who displayed no signs of dementia in life had post-mortem brains that were riddled with plaques and/or tangles.

Just last month the researchers won a \$9.5 million grant from the National Institute on Aging to fund their study for another five years.

The grant will pay for MRIs and PET scans on the brains of study participants who have no dementia so the researchers can track changes and then compare the images with the post-mortem brains.

So far, Kawas has lost 10 percent of the brains promised her because they weren't handed over and chilled within 12 hours. The team phones relatives to remind them that, when the time comes, they have a brain to deliver. Researchers mail refrigerator magnets to caretakers so that the phone number is right there.

"To get the brain on top of (the years of visits)," Kawas says. "It's a gold mine."

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Jane Whistler, 99, lives on her own in Laguna Woods and enjoys reading all day long. "I've always been sort of positive," she says as a reason for her long life.

FLOURISHING DESPITE THOSE BAD HABITS

Jane Whistler hasn't always lived by the book, but she'll be 100 soon.

By LORI BASHEDA
ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Jane Whistler could be a poster girl for a lot of things we've been told not to do.

"I eat anything and everything," she says.

Smoke?

"Sure!"

A pack of Pall Malls a day for 20 years.

Vitamins?

"I don't bother with those."

Before dinner she drinks one glass of white wine.

After dinner she eats vanilla ice cream.

And she doesn't even have good genes. Her dad died in his 30s of the flu, her mom died in her 40s of cancer, her brother died in his 50s.

Yet Jane is about to turn 100.

"Why am I still here is beyond me."

Her husband died 26 years ago.

"I'm ready any time," she says. "I don't worry about it at all. I just hope I'm gone before I lose my eyes."

Jane reads a book a week in her sunny Laguna Woods living room, where she gets around with a cane because her balance is going (she has fallen twice, once

breaking her kneecap, once her pelvis); right now she is deep into "Fall of Giants." And she reads the Los Angeles Times every morning.

She used to garden until she had to lean on a cane. Now she has a woman come in to do light housework who takes her grocery shopping.

"I keep her to soothe (Jane's kids') feelings," she says. "I don't want them fretting."

In fact, to spare her kids, now in their 70s, she called a cab to take her to Saddleback Hospital when, at 96, her appendix ruptured.

"If I don't make it, sayonara," she told the nurse to tell her kids.

Jane used to be a nurse herself, after graduating from Columbia University nursing school in 1947. She quit to have the kids and took up the mantle of volunteer-mom.

If she had to take a guess how she has lived a century: "I've always been sort of positive. I think that helps," she says.

"I don't think I've lived healthier than anyone else."



Jane Whistler says she smoked a pack of Pall Malls a day for 20 years.



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Carmela LaRusso, 92, gardens, works as a receptionist and reads up to two books a week. She says she wouldn't move to her senior community if she had to do it over again: "When I come home at 9 all the lights are off. Everyone is sleeping."

EMBRACING LIFE TO THE FULLEST

Carmela
LaRusso isn't
content to just
sit around at 92.

By LORI BASHEDA
ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Carmela LaRusso holds a job as a parish receptionist, raises barrel cactuses and sego palms to sell on eBay, and is plotting to buy stock in Twitter when it goes public.

She's 92.

Look for clues to her long and active, some might even say boisterous, run and you will find these interesting details.

She smoked a pack and a half a day of Camels for 40 years until cigarettes hit 50 cents a pack.

And, as she proudly puts it, "I have never taken a vi-

tamin pill in my life."

She does shun fast food and snacks like chips, cooking herself healthy meals. But she also dallies in post-dinner desserts, mostly butter pecan ice cream or chocolate pudding.

If she had to take a guess, though, she believes the secret to her longevity is that she embraces life.

"I like to get out and meet people," she says.

The 4-foot-10 (she's shrunk) grandmother gave her interview sitting sideways in a chair with her legs flung over the arm like a teenage girl.

Carmela grew up on Long Island and you can still hear it in her voice.

"I have (an occasional) blah day," she says. "Who doesn't?"

But every day, stiff bones be darned, she gets out of bed at 6, drinks a cup of in-

stant coffee, turns on channel 15 to see what the stock market is up to, reads the Los Angeles Times, conquers the Jumble and is off.

She just got her driver's license renewed to take her to age 98.

"I laugh when I think of it," she says.

Besides taking a job as a receptionist ("I want to be paid for what I do. I have skills"), she is a Eucharistic minister at St. Nicholas Parish in Laguna Woods, and lists her hobbies as gardening and saving money.

She wonders if her genes might have something to do with her spunk. She has a grandmother who lived to 104.

But even if she dies tomorrow, Carmela says she's ready.

"Death? It happens to everybody. Nobody's ever missed it."



I have never taken a vitamin pill in my life."

CARMELA LARUSSO

GLOWING IN GOOD WAYS

Despite exposure to risky material, Ruth Stahl feels ‘amazing’ at 95.

By LORI BASHEDA
ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

If you made a list of things you might want to avoid in order to live a long life, acute radiation exposure and repeated inhalation of spray paint fumes probably would be on it.

Unless, apparently, you’re Ruth Stahl.

During World War II, Ruthy was in her 20s, living in Philadelphia, when she took a job painting dials on warplanes. The paint contained powder so the dials would glow in the dark for pilots doing nighttime missions.

Eventually, Ruthy also glowed in the dark.

“One night, Mother looked over at me and here I was, all aglow.”

After the war, she became a gooper, the early term for crafting enthusiasts who spent their days using goopy things like glue and spray paint to make things like tin-can wreathes.

“Spray cans were like food to us,” she says. “You had to have a spray can to live.”

In fact, she is still spraying, most recently her patio chairs.

The kicker: Ruthy is 95. And not just any 95, but the kind of 95 you want to be.

Blond bob. Painted toe-



Ruth Stahl rests her feet after her daily 3-mile power walk on a recent morning in Dana Point.

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nails. Cork wedges, with bling.

“I feel amazing,” she says.

So what is Ruthy’s secret?

Could the daily multivitamin and fish oil supplements have anything to do with it? The nap every afternoon? The good genes? (her mother and grandmother lived to 97). The chat with God every day?

If she had one guess as to what her secret is, she would lean in and tell you this:

“I’m very, very, very busy.”

Up at 6 every morning, she begins with yoga and *shoulder stands* and is out of the house by 7 for her 3-mile power walk with younger friends (she is widowed and never had kids).

It’s a walk to the Regis-

ter for coffee and a sticky bun before church on Sunday, a walk to the Ritz for coffee on Monday, lunch with the ladies on Tuesday, Bible class on Thursday and an IHOP breakfast with friends every Saturday. There’s barely enough time for tending the gardens at her ocean-view Dana Point home.

Ruthy eats healthy. Dessert is half an apple, 10 al-

monds and three walnuts. She drinks a glass of red wine every night.

After nearly a century of living, she reports only a pain in her left foot, occasional trouble finding the right word and waning strength.

In fact she recently quit golfing her favorite course, Aliso Creek, because she could no longer hit the 90 yards needed to make it

over the water.

But she just bought a new five wood and is plotting a comeback.

Ruthy drives herself to the course – in a lime green VW Bug with ribbons streaming from the antenna.

“I just had an awfully good time,” she says of her life. “Well, there’s so much to do in the world.”

STAYING BUSY – AND CURIOUS

Irene Lehman has had setbacks, but at 106 she’s eager to keep on.

By LORI BASHEDA
ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Irene Lehman is 106 years old, and that should be impressive enough.

But what makes Irene even more impressive is that she still reads two books a week, has her own teeth, sits on the library board at the Freedom Village retirement home in Lake Forest where she lives, and plays bridge every Friday afternoon.

She thinks she would still be driving too (not to mention drinking scotch and water) if it hadn’t been for the bacterial meningitis she got a few years back while visiting a friend in Vermont.

“The meningitis really spoiled everything,” she says.

Doctors told her kids that she wouldn’t survive.

Her kids told the doctor not to count her out so fast. Sure enough, she pulled



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Voracious reader Irene Lehman, 106, is on the library board of her assisted-living community. She admits to having some bad habits over the years, but at the same time she’s had the benefit of good genes.

through, though it robbed her of the use of her right leg and her peripheral vision, forcing her to give up her driver’s license – and

scotch.

Irene still lives alone, though. Her husband died a half-century ago.

A woman comes every

day to tidy up and make her breakfast and then lunch. Lehman gets dinner at the Village Restaurant.

So what’s her secret?

“I think the fact that I’ve had a busy life and a happy life,” she says. “I’m a curious sort of person. And I love meeting new people.”

After graduating from Pomona College she went on to graduate school at NYU, later becoming an assistant buyer for Wanamaker’s, an East Coast department store.

Irene says she did a lot of walking in her 80s when she lived in Leisure World.

“I didn’t go in for formal exercise.”

Her cure for stress and sadness throughout her life, she says, was to sit down and play the piano.

These days she relaxes with albums on her record player, usually Mozart or Wagner.

Any bad habits?

“Heavens yes,” she says. A pack a day of Chesterfields.

“My daughter heckled me until I quit.”

Lehman does report good genes though. Her mother died at 97 and a sister made it to 99.

With 106 years behind her, she still isn’t ready to call it quits.

“Most of the time I’m anxious to keep going,” she says. “I want to see how my grandsons turn out.”