

acting your age

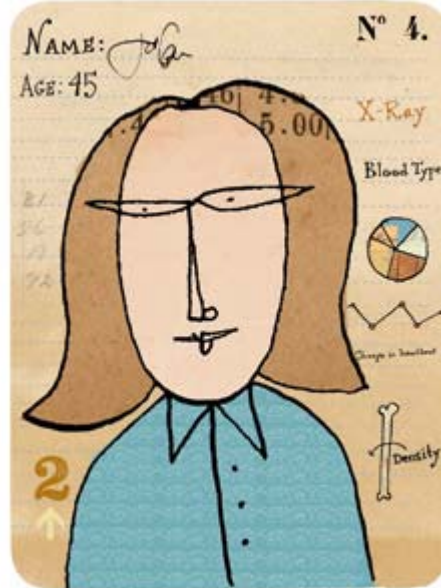
The Princeton Longevity Center sends its clients through state-of-the-art diagnostic tests, determining not only clients' 'biological age,' but also discovering health threats that other doctors' visits might not.

BY LISA ZEIDNER

When it comes to my health, I tend to feel confident if not downright smug. I am slim and, for a person who lives in front of a keyboard, reasonably fit. I eat vegetables, bitter chocolate and unfiltered olive oil, drink red wine and generally avoid gorging on taco chips from bags the size of potato sacks. But since I'm pushing 50, I figured a scalp-to-toenail inspection couldn't hurt.

The Princeton Longevity Center promises "state-of-the-art guidance for staying healthy." If you can spare six or seven hours, the center treats you to an exhaustive battery of tests to determine your biological—as opposed to chronological—age. You get more than tips for staying in peak condition. You get breakfast and lunch. Not only that, with clients coming from as far away as Canada and Brazil, you can get a hotel package (at the pleasant Doral Forrester). You also get to visit the space-aged Electron Beam Tomography machine, which takes speedy, detailed pictures of your heart and organs.

Such hi-tech testing isn't cheap. The Price tag for my comprehensive work-up is just under \$2,500. Since the screening is preventive in nature, it isn't necessarily covered by all medical-insurance policies. Befitting their corporate clientele, the center's quarters, in a sleek new office building, are elegantly furnished and softly lit, like the suites of a really expensive lawyer. In the comfy waiting room, another hi-tech machine brews your personal shot of coffee from more than a dozen



blends. Not that you're likely to do much waiting. The Princeton Longevity Center typically sees only two or three patients a day, orchestrating visits so carefully that you feel like you are the only body in the world, being serviced by your own attentive, concerned medical staff.

After having my vital signs checked and blood drawn, I met with the nutritionist. I'd already faxed her my three-page "food diary." The temptation to lie about food intake must be prodigious, and I confess I was on good behavior while keeping that log, like people who clean up for their housekeepers before they arrive. But, to my surprise—despite the virtuous soy burgers—there were major gaps in my nutrition.

Next, Christopher Volgraf, the exercise physiologist, hooked me up for my stress test. I did passably well, though he was hardly impressed by my stamina. But then, he often sees very

athletic men, who come in for appointments together. They compete for the longest stint on the treadmill, the lowest cholesterol score and for the biggest number of push-ups in a minute.

HOW IRONIC THAT I, WHO WENT TO THIS CHECK-UP EXAM SO BLITHELY, SHOULD TURN OUT TO BE SUCH A POSTER CHILD FOR PREVENTIVE TESTING.

The Physical with Director David Fein was my next stop. Dr. Fein practiced general medicine for 18 years before founding the Princeton Longevity Center. (Dr. Lesley Fein, his wife, is the other resident doctor, who still maintains a practice in internal medicine in West Caldwell.) He'd done his homework, poring over my 27-page health questionnaire, which I had filled out days before, so he knew all of my allergies and family history. Dr. Fein was thorough and good-natured—providing reassurance (forgetting names is a common condition called "anomia" and not a sign of encroaching Alzheimer's) and good tips (quinine works as a palliative for night leg cramps) - before delivering me to Marla Wustefeld and the \$2 million Electron Beam Tomography machine. The EBT is like a CAT scan, but faster, and it delivers less radiation: The heart and body scans, together, take under 10 minutes. You don't have to undress, and the apparatus is not in the least claustrophobic. It's not much more annoying than X-rays

at the dentist, and you don't even have to wear the lead apron.

I just had time to eat a very good lunch before being spirited off for my vision and hearing tests, bone scan, lung-function test and second meeting with the exercise physiologist. There, Chris gave me a thorough functional-fitness assessment, measuring, for example, the goniometric range of my shoulder's internal rotators, providing a detailed program of stretching, aerobic and resistance training programmed for my particular middle-aged weaknesses.

Back to Dr. Fein for my "debriefing." My bone and lung test were fine, and my body scan revealed no nasty surprises. (There have been some issues with false positives on body scans; on the other hand, they do catch some tumors and other problems. One patient learned that he only had one kidney. "I told him to not volunteer as a donor," Dr. Fein quipped.) Then came the bad news. Dr. Fein loaded my heart scan on his big flat-panel monitor and revealed my EBT results. I had a fair amount of calcium deposits on my arteries, a harbinger of blockage. My surprisingly elevated calcium score places me in the 99th percentile for women in my age group, despite having no other risk factors. I have excellent blood pressure, excellent cholesterol scores and no strong family history. Are there false positives on the heart scans? I asked. Evidently not. Studies prove that there is a strong correlation between high-calcium burdens and heart-attack risk.

I would score Dr. Fein in the 99th percentile for bedside manner. With the aid of a heart model, he patiently explained more about calcium, blockage and heart disease than I expected to need to know at my age. I dutifully took notes—Nancy

Drew, Girl Reporter—but my poor heart was having a rough time adjusting to the notion of my imminent demise. Dr. Fein, however, was reassuring about my being able to slow the progress of the condition through diet, exercise, vitamin supplements and careful monitoring.

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"We're seeing a revolution in preventive medicine," he said. "Literally once a week, we find aortic aneurisms, the first symptom of which is generally sudden death. We can pick up coronary artery disease 15 to 20 years early. People can then make appropriate changes in their lifestyles."

Eating right and exercising is hardly a revolutionary prescription for longevity. But there's no question that my day in Princeton has provided me with new motivation. Studies confirm that patients who have EBT scans are much more likely to make productive changes. For encouragement, my own personal nutritionist and exercise physiologist have already followed up with me by email, and I've spoken to Dr. Fein several times about questions that occurred to me after I picked myself off the floor and put the results in perspective.

I hadn't been handed a death sentence. Actually, I stood a better chance of dying in a car accident, chatting on my cell phone on Rt. 95 during rush hour,

on the way home from this appointment. Still, with more than 40 percent of women dying of heart disease, compared with 23 percent for all cancers combined, it's surprising that EBT testing is not more of a part of routine health screening. Given my low-risk factors, no internist would have prescribed this battery of tests for me. How ironic that I, who went to this check-up exam so blithely, should turn out to be such a poster child for preventive testing. The Princeton Longevity Center may well have saved my life.

At day's end, I was told that my biological age exactly matched my chronological age—I suppose it could have been worse. As a souvenir, they handed me a spiral-bound "Personal Wellness Plan," thick as a car-repair manual, complete with my test results and enough charts, graphs and visuals to do any corporate presentation proud. Some of its bulk in boilerplate ("eat breakfast!"); still, it has a biblical feel. I'm calling it *The Book of Lisa*. In the back is a CD, allowing me to review my bum-heart scan in the privacy of my own home, or to bring to my cardiologist.

I know what I'm going to give my husband for his birthday: his own special day at the Princeton Longevity Center, complete with colonoscopy. The EBT test is noninvasive, quick, less than half the price of a regular colonoscopy and, what's more, covered by most insurance policies. Dr. Fein showed me sample footage of how the software allows him, he says, "to go cruising through the inside of your bowels. The detail is incredible. Is that wicked, or what?"

Indeed, it is—like *the Magic School Bus*, those anatomical adventure books for children.

Lisa Zeidner, the author of the novel The Layover, teaches at Rutgers.