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HEALTH // AGING & LONGEVITY

Longevity scientist studies how one part of your body can extend ‘health span’ — it’s not the brain

By **Erin Allday**, Staff Writer
Feb 22, 2026

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Eric Verdin, president and CEO of the Buck Institute for Research on Aging, shown on the institute’s campus in Novato in 2024.
Laura Morton/Special to The Chronicle

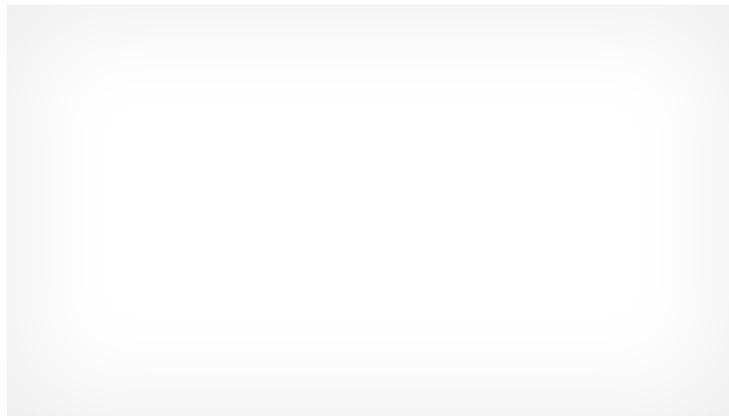


Eric Verdin spends his days thinking about something many of us would rather not: aging.

As president and CEO of the Buck Institute for Research on Aging in Novato, an independent nonprofit that studies the biology of aging and age-related disease, he leads one of the country's premier research centers devoted to understanding why we grow old — and how to do it better.

The language around his field has evolved. "Aging" is considered a negative term, he says, so the conversation has shifted to "longevity." But Verdin is quick to clarify that the goal isn't simply squeezing out more years at any cost. It's extending our "health span" — the years we remain active, independent and free of serious disease.

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His own research zeroes in on the immune system. Along with the brain, it's one of the strongest predictors of how well — and how long — we live. That makes everyday habits such as eating enough fiber, supporting a healthy gut microbiome and finding sustainable ways to exercise more important than many people realize.

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Verdin will share more about the science of aging and what it means for our daily lives at the Chronicle's Aging and Longevity Summit on Monday. The event is sold out of in-person tickets, but you can buy a ticket [here to watch the livestream on Feb. 23](#).

Below is an edited Q&A with Verdin.

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Q: What does longevity mean to you?

A: We used to talk about studying aging, and everybody said that was a downer, no one wants to hear about old people and aging. So then it became longevity. We (at the Buck Institute) do study aging, but the goal is to increase healthy longevity.

Longevity has many meanings, and for some people it means increasing maximum life span. But we are more interested in increasing what we call the health span, which is the healthy years of life. We all aspire to a long life, but not under any conditions.

Q: Your work focuses on aging and the immune system. Briefly, what is the connection between longevity and a healthy immune system?

A: When I started really digging into aging, I thought the immune system has one unique property that makes it a great candidate to be playing a dominant role: It's a distributed organ. You have immune cells everywhere in your body. When your immune system goes awry, it's affecting every organ.

There was a [recent study at Stanford](#) measuring every organ, and all of our organs age at different rates. It turns out there are two organs most predictive of mortality, and it's the immune system and the brain.

These two factors point to the fact that immune aging is a really critical component for the whole aspect of aging.



Research scientist Jingqi Fang, left, and CEO Eric Verdin of the Buck Institute for Research on Aging discuss a grant application at the campus in Novato last September.
Lea Suzuki/S.F. Chronicle

Q: You look at how nutrition helps, or harms, our immune system. What are we doing wrong when it comes to nutrition and aging?

A: There are some unique aspects of the immune system that are highly impacted by nutrition. One example is the gut and your microbiome — half of your immune system lies in the gut wall, and it's there because inside of our gut we have a whole microorganism, which is trillions of bacteria. The immune system is there to make sure those bacteria don't get inside of you. But your immune system, by being so close to all these bacteria, is receiving signals from the food that you eat.

We mainly don't eat enough fiber — that's a huge one. We could probably eat five times more fiber. Another thing people do wrong is they try to correct their microbiome with probiotics — that doesn't work. You want to eat prebiotic, like a combination of fiber that promotes healthy bacteria, or post-biotic, so fermented foods like sauerkraut and kombucha, yogurts, kimchi.

Q: What do you do daily to keep your own immune system healthy?

A: Exercise. You can exercise mice, and you can harvest their microbiome and transfer it to mice that don't exercise, and they get the same benefits. So your microbiome changes in response to diet, but it also changes in response to exercise.

I'm always getting asked, 'What is the best exercise for your health?' And my answer is it is the exercise you can do. If you don't want to run, you don't like to sweat, but you're walking or gardening or something else? Whatever you can do in a sustainable manner is great.

Q: What should people in their 50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s be doing to stay healthy and strong? Is there different advice for each decade?

A: It's more on the individual, because we all function at different levels. Not everybody is going to be exercising for an hour every day, which is the optimal I think to do. Some people don't exercise at all, and telling them an hour a day is the worst thing to say.

When we think about aging, the sooner you start a healthy routine, the better you'll do in the long term. I compare this to investing in a bank account: The earlier you save, the bigger your capital when you retire.

But it's never too late to start. That's really critical. Most people have a very fatalistic view of their age. I tell this story of a guy who was 72 and felt like he was on the way down. His grandson took him to a rowing practice, and the coach told him to try. And so he started rowing, and he became a world champion at age 92.

The key is there are no standard recipes for everybody. You have to find something that gives you joy.

Q: You've been at the Buck Institute for almost a decade — what's changed in our understanding of aging in that time?

A: The biggest advances in the field of longevity are these biomarkers of aging. You cannot change what you cannot measure. We now have tools to determine how fast you're aging, and we can see your trajectory. We're moving from an observation science to an intervention science.

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Erin Allday
STAFF WRITER



Erin Allday covers gender and sexuality for the Chronicle. Previously, she was a longtime health writer with a focus on covering infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS and the COVID pandemic. A Southern California native, Erin has lived in the Bay Area since graduating UC Berkeley. She joined the Chronicle in 2006.

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