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### Drop Dead Healthy: One Man's Humble Quest for Bodily Perfection

Dr. John Russell:

A 41-year-old writer faces his own mortality through an illness, and decides to apply the best available information to become the healthiest man in the world. Welcome to ReachMD Book Club. I'm your host, Dr. John Russell, and I'm joined by AJ Jacobs, author of "Drop Dead Healthy." AJ, welcome to the show.

AJ Jacobs:

Thank you so much. Great to be here.

Dr. John Russell:

And, I almost consider you a bit of an immersion journalist. Have you ever tried to figure out exactly kind of what you've done with your last few books?

AJ Jacobs:

Some people call me a method writer, because I sort of dive into, like, a method actor, but whatever you want to call me is fine.

Dr. John Russell:

So, for people who aren't familiar with your books, I think they are kind of wonderfully written, very funny. You wrote a book called "The Know-It-All," where you spent a year reading the Encyclopedia Britannica, a year of living biblically, where you lived eight months according to the Old Testament, and four months according to the New Testament. So, how did you decide to become the healthiest man on the planet?

AJ Jacobs:

Well, this came about because I was in terrible shape. So, ate what I wanted, I never exercised, and I also, I wasn't fat in the traditional sense, but I was what they call skinny-fat. So, I liked like a snake that had swallowed a goat, sort of six months pregnant. And my wife said to me, "Listen, you've got to get in shape." And I said, "All right, if I'm going to get in shape, I am going to try to do it the way I do my other projects," which is dive in and test every bit of medical advice that I can find, and see what works and what doesn't.

And so, that's what I did, and I tried to revamp every part of my life, the exercise, diet, sleep, stress level, posture even, my sex life, just anything that I could find.

Dr. John Russell:

So, in reading it, you stated your goals were longevity, freedom from disease and pain, and developing a sense of emotional, mental, physically well-being? Does that sound about right?

AJ Jacobs:

That sounds very right.

Dr. John Russell:

So, what did you learn about diets? Why don't we start there?

AJ Jacobs:

Well, diet, I mean, there's two parts. There's the quantity and the quality. So, for quantity, obviously, like most Americans, I was eating way too much, and I probably still do. But there are ways to do portion control that you can train yourself. One of my favorites was chewing, chewing your food, like your mother told you, because as you know, it takes 20 minutes for the stomach to tell the brain that it's full. So, the faster you eat, the more you eat.

So, I started chewing more. There's actually a very passionate chewing community out there that I didn't know about. They call themselves Chewdaisim. So, I sort of adopted Chewdaisim as my movement.

Dr. John Russell:

I had a grandmother that did that. I think it was a popular kind of medical thing in, I think, the 20s or 30s. She'd finish dinner about an hour after we did.

AJ Jacobs:

And did you have to sit there and watch her, or had everyone left the table by then?

Dr. John Russell:

I think eventually, you know, when we were teenagers, we had left the table. But you also started eating off kids' plates.

AJ Jacobs:

Yes, because as you know, the size of the plate makes a huge difference. So, the smaller plates encourage us to have smaller portions. And you still feel full. It's a psychological trick, and I decided just take my kids' plates. They were right there, and I decided, why not take their silverware too? So, I was using smaller forks, which slowed me down even more.

Dr. John Russell:

How about super foods? What did you kind of have as your arsenal of your go-to healthy foods?

AJ Jacobs:

Well, I sort of was, Marion Nestle, who's a great nutritionist, she's written a whole bunch of books. One was called "What To Eat," and I am not a huge believer in super foods, because I think it places too much emphasis on one food over the other. I think pretty much all vegetables and fruits are super foods. That's really what you got to focus on. So, I ate mostly fruits and vegetables. Of course, you know, beans, and I did eat some animal proteins, like eggs and milk, but that was more as a side part.

I will tell you, I tried every diet out there. So, I tried, you know, the paleo diet, and the vegan, the raw food diet. I did one diet where it's called calorie restriction, and you're supposed to be hungry all the time, like on the verge of starvation. And there is some scientific evidence that it might lengthen your life a bit, but I got to tell you, who wants that? I don't want that life. I want that life cut short. I want to eat a waffle now and again.

Dr. John Russell:

Now, with the paleo diet, I think your stories about the paleo diet really struck me as very humorous.

AJ Jacobs:

Well, I loved hanging out with the paleo folks in New York, because they are hard-core. And we wouldn't just do diets, we would go and do paleo exercise, because they think we should exercise like cavemen. Cavemen didn't go to the gym. So, we would go out into Central Park in our shorts, and take our shirt off and throw boulders and climb trees and crawl around in the dirt. You know, everyone says, "Oh, did you drag women by the hair?" You know, it was everything but that.

Dr. John Russell:

So, there's a lot written about exercise, and the one thing that really stands out is your treadmill desk. We talk about that a lot at work, that, you know, setting up a treadmill desk. Do you still have your treadmill desk?

AJ Jacobs:

I'm on it right now. I turned it off because I was worried that the hum in the background might not be good for radio. But yeah, as soon as I hang up, I'm going right back on. I love it. I mean, I thought that it would tire me out, but it actually gives me more energy. And I know treadmill desks are not practical for everyone, but I always say, "Just, any way you can move, just getting up every 20 minutes, walking around a bit, or incorporating exercise into your everyday life."

Like, I have seven-year-old twins, so when I talk to them, I try to go down to their level. So, I sort of squat down. So, I'm doing, like, 50 lunges a day just having conversations with them.

Dr. John Russell:

There's probably a lot of science in parking your car further away, and kind of walking up flights of steps and things like that.

AJ Jacobs:

Exactly, and I started doing running errands. I mean, that's what they're called, running errands. So, I figure, why not? So, I would run to the drugstore and buy a toothbrush, and run right back. I don't do that as much anymore, but I do, I quick-walk errands.

Dr. John Russell:

You also write a lot about noise pollution. I guess, living in New York City, that's a big problem.

AJ Jacobs:

Yeah, it was very interesting to read the research, that this is sort of an under-appreciated health problem, and that there is a lot of links between noise pollution and being exposed to it at work and at home, and heart disease. So, it really does evolutionarily, it raises our blood pressure, because it's supposed to signal a threat of some kind. So, I try to live a quieter life, and it really made a difference in my quality of life. So, I went through dozens of earplugs and earphones.

Dr. John Russell:

Yeah, but kind of the germs, kind of the hand-washing and all that.

AJ Jacobs:

Well, you know there's a huge debate, of course, about some people subscribed to the theory that we are too germaphobic, and that we're ruining our immune systems. I think there might be some truth to that, but I am still very much on the wash your hands as often as possible show, and I went to the top hand-washer in America, this great microbiologist at NYU who taught me how to wash my hands. You know, you got to get under the nail, you got to get the wrists too, don't forget about the wrists. And so, I am very much pro-hand washing.

Dr. John Russell:

I'm curious, during that kind of year or so of doing the book, did you have any colds, if you kind of wash your hands that obsessively?

AJ Jacobs:

I think I did have one cold in the two years. But it was certainly a huge improvement. I used to get colds all the time. And I think part of that was stress. Stress really lowers your immune system, so I worked very hard on trying to manage stress. You know, I can never eliminate it, but I try to manage it. So, that was a big part of my journey.

Dr. John Russell:

This is ReachMD Book Club, and we're speaking with AJ Jacobs, author of "Drop Dead Healthy: One Man's Humble Quest to Physical Perfection." So, what did you do about improving your brain health during this?

AJ Jacobs:

Well, yes, I tried a bunch of different strategies. You know, there's the whole idea that crossword puzzles might stave off Alzheimer's for a bit. It won't get rid of it, but it'll delay it, and I think that there's an argument that the brain is like a muscle, and you have to use it. So, I would do things like I'd brainstorm, for 15 minutes every day, about whatever, just to get that muscle going. And I think that right now, this whole idea of brain exercise is a little over-blown. The hype has gone out of control.

Like, you can't totally change your intelligence, but you can do something. It's definitely worth doing something, and keeping active, reading crossword puzzles, and also, being with other people. Being alone is, I found, kind of dangerous for your brain, for extended periods of time. So, being social, going out to dinner with your friends can be healthy for you.

Dr. John Russell:

So, how about your thoughts about the sun?

AJ Jacobs:

Well, the dermatologists scared the heck out of me about the sun. I mean, they recommend doing a shot glass full of sunscreen every two to four hours. That is a lot of sunscreen, and not just in the summer, but in the winter, because the sun is still shining in the winter. So, I do put on more sunscreen. I do put it on every morning, but I can't do that two to four hours that they recommend. But obviously it's a huge problem, and I am a fan of the shade now.

And I wear sunglasses, because they scared me with the idea you can get eye cancer. So, I am certainly more careful than I was.

Dr. John Russell:

So, what did you learn about drinking? What should we be drinking?

AJ Jacobs:

Well, there are studies that talk about how alcohol drinking is linked, correlated with longevity. If you drink one drink a day, or two if you're a big man, then you will live a little bit longer. And there are several theories about why this might be, could be that it lowers the stress, could be just that when you're drinking, you might be out with friends, you're more social. And being social is very good for your health.

I was just happy to read those. You know, that was my favorite part of this, was justifying my own vices. So, I was very excited to read about alcohol, and of course, dark chocolate filled with antioxidants. You know, you really should only have, like, a tiny little nanopiece. But naps, naps are very healthy. So, I was all for naps. You know, anything I could find, there was nothing like, you know, that said that heroin was good for you. So, it's not like I did that. But there are some vices that you can justify.

Dr. John Russell:

So, at the end of the two-year experiment, what was your final report card, health-wise?

AJ Jacobs:

Well, I did improve in all the metrics that I was measuring. So, you know, my heart rate went down, my cholesterol. But the one thing that I think made the biggest change was probably my energy level, which is hard to quantify. But I just felt I had so much more energy, and I do think part of that is trying to move all the time, working on a treadmill, because I think when you're sitting, at least for me now, it's a bit of a problem. When I'm sitting at my desk, I sort of get lethargic, and I find my forehead, like, plunks down onto the keyboard after a while. So, that has been one of the biggest benefits.

Dr. John Russell:

So, the book is done, so what are the things that you still do now? Do you still wear a bike helmet walking around the streets of New York?

AJ Jacobs:

I've decided to be bold and courageous, and I have given up the bike helmet. That was just for a couple of days, to see what it was like to be the safest person alive. Because, you know, people underestimate safety. Safety is incredibly, you know the old saying that more people die in the bathroom than die from getting struck by lightning, certainly. So, but anyway, back to your question, I love still walking on the treadmill while I work. I eat mostly vegetables. I chew my food, and I love spending time with my friends, which is really scientifically linked to a healthier life.

And I also don't get stressed out. One of the problems is, you can become unhealthily obsessed with being healthy, and just thinking all the time about what to eat, and is this asparagus, does it have any GMOs, or is it locally grown? You know, sometimes, if you're so obsessed with that, you can't live your life. You can't go out to dinner with friends. So, I say moderation in all things, including moderation. So, it's okay to, you know, have a feast once in a while. It's okay to pig out at Thanksgiving.

Dr. John Russell:

AJ, thank you so much for being on the program, a great book, "Drop Dead Healthy." I think people can learn a lot about kind of studies that are out there, and it's kind of fun to take this journey with you. Thank you so much for being on the show.

AJ Jacobs:

Thank you, John, I had a great time.

Dr. John Russell:

This is Dr. John Russell. You've been listening to ReachMD Book Club. To download this program or others in the series, please visit [ReachMD.com](https://ReachMD.com). Thanks again for listening.