

****

**The Village of Long Life
ABC News**

**Could Hyaluronic Acid Be an Anti-Aging Remedy?**
Like many of his peers who routinely live into their 90s and longer, Tadanao Takahashi, 93, is in good health. Japanese researchers think this phenomenon may be connected to the local diet. (ABCNEWS.com)

Nov. 2 – Every morning, Hiroshi Sakamoto wakes up and farms his field, usually for about four or five hours a day.

Sakamoto, who lives in the village of Yuzuri Hara, two hours outside of Tokyo, is 86 years old. But his age by no means makes him the elder statesman of his village, nor is a daily routine like his uncommon among his peers.

More than 10 percent of the population of his village is 85 or older – 10 times the American norm. The residents of Yuzuri Hara are not only living longer, but they are also quite healthy. Rarely do they have any reason to see a doctor, and they are hardly affected by diseased like cancer, diabetes and Alzheimer’s. Many have even managed to keep their skin from showing signs of aging. What makes the residents of Yuzuri Hara even more remarkable is that they are living long, healthy lives – even those who engage in unhealthy activities.

Sakamoto, for example, smokes a pack and a half of cigarettes daily and is still in reasonably good health and physically fit. Tadanao Takahashi, 93, has worked in the sun for 50 years, never once using sun block or skin cream, and yet his skin is soft and smooth.

Some medical researchers believe that Yuzuri Hara, known as “The Village of Long Life,” and its residents may hold the key to anti-aging secrets: the local diet that is unique to the village. Unlike other regions of Japan that grow rice, Yuzuri Hara’s hilly terrain is better suited to harvesting different carbohydrates that may prove healthier: things like satsumaimo, a type of sweet potato; satoimo, a sticky white potato; konyaku, a gelatinous root vegetable concoction; and imoji, a potato root.

**The Secret Ingredient**

Dr. Toyosuke Komori, the town doctor who has studied and written books on longevity in Yuzuri Hara, believes these locally grown starches help stimulate the body’s natural creation of a substance called hyaluronic acid, or HA, which aging bodies typically lose. This may ward off the aging process by helping the cells of the body thrive and retain moisture, keeping joints lubricated, protecting the retina in eyes and keeping skin smooth and elastic.

“I have never seen anyone suffer from skin cancer here,” he says. “I have seen a woman in her 90s with spotless skin.”

One of Japan’s leading pharmaceutical companies began researching and developing a pill supplement containing hyaluronic acid. The company tested the pills on 1,000 people, and said roughly half reported smoother skin, less fatigue and better eyesight.

In the United States, hyaluronic acid has been used for years in eye surgery as a shock absorber to protect the retina, and has been proven effective in lubricating arthritic joints.

Synvisc, for example, a Food and Drug Administration-approved product used to treat osteoarthritis, works by injecting hyaluronic acid, or Hyaluronan, which acts as a shock absorber and lubricant.

Dr. Irving Raphael, a Syracuse, N.Y., orthopedist who specializes in sports medicine, explains that these injections coat the surface of the joint to decrease friction, which allows the joint to move more smoothly and cuts down pain.

“When I prescribe it,” he says, “I simply tell my patients I’m going to give them a lube job.”

But, he warns, before prescribing it, he always asks if the patient is allergic to chicken or eggs. That’s because HA is extracted from chicken combs. The mohawk crown on a chicken’s head is washed, sliced and purified.

**Western Skeptics**

While hyaluronic acid has proven useful in orthopedics and opthalmology, many Western experts are skeptical that swallowing it in a pill could actually help prolong one’s life.

“I cannot today imagine any possible benefit,” says Dr. Endre Balazs, a leading expert on HA.

“The only way it acts, as far as I can see, as an anti-aging remedy,” adds Raphael, “is because if you’re not limping, and your joints feel better, you feel younger.”

But HA has been shown to have wound-healing and tissue-reconstruction applications, and some cosmetic companies tout it as an effective ingredient in moisturizers that can soften facial lines, leaving skin elastic and firm. One company even claims it may be the latest development in treating hair loss.

And Komori, 80, who has adopted the local diet of very little meat and a lot of homegrown sticky starches, holds to his theory.

“I feel very strongly that if I had not come here to Yuzuri Hara, I would not have lived this long and healthy a life,” he says. “I probably would have died from some adult disease.”

Komori also points to statistics that since Western-style processed food infiltrated the village a few years ago, heart disease has doubled. With youngsters being seduced by these products, what the Japanese call an upside-down death pyramid has emerged, in which adults die before their elderly parents.

“Although my children ate what I had been eating while they were young and lived here,” says a 91-year-old woman who has outlived two of her six children, “when they moved away they chose to eat differently.”

