

Myths about Aging

People over the age of 80 are the fastest growing group in the US. Experts estimate that by the year 2040, over a million people in the US will be over the age of 100.

Most people believe certain things about aging: that old people have poor health, lose their memories, lose interest in sex, and become a burden to their families or to society. Research shows that these things are not true for many older people.

Myth – “Getting older means poor health.”

It's true that as we age, our bodies change. However, we know lots more about a healthy lifestyle and how much it can affect your health. Smoking, poor diet, and lack of exercise can cause tiredness, lack of stamina, and health problems. For example, heart disease is the number one cause of death for people over the age of 65. But heart disease, like many chronic health problems can be prevented or treated with lifestyle changes. Lowering high blood pressure and high cholesterol, reducing fat in the diet, getting regular exercise, and not smoking reduce the risk for heart disease and can improve your health.

Also, modern medicine has given us replacement and repair treatments for several problems that used to cause permanent disability and loss of function. Successful joint replacements, cataract surgery, and cardiac surgery or coronary artery stents allow today's older adults to live longer with fewer symptoms.

Myth – “Getting older means getting senile.”

Although Alzheimer's disease is a serious problem for some older adults, fewer than 13% of people over the age of 65 suffer from Alzheimer's disease. Most people never have serious problems with memory loss. Staying physically and mentally active will help keep your brain in shape.

Many things can cause memory problems. These include the use of some medicines, tiredness, stress, depression, and some medical conditions. Do not assume that memory changes are a normal part of aging. If you or your friends or family worry about your memory, see your healthcare provider.

Myth – “Getting older means being alone and lonely.”

Most older adults live close to at least one of their children. Although the percentage of elderly parents living in the same home with their children has decreased over the years, the percentage of elderly parents living 10 minutes away or less from their children has increased.

Over two-thirds of older adults talk regularly with neighbors, and many are active in the community. More older adults than ever before are involved in recreational and social activities outside the home.

Myth – “Getting older means the end of sexual activity.”

Sexual activity is likely to change over time for older adults. This does not mean that sex at age 68, 78, or 88 cannot be enjoyable, but it is different. There are positive and negative changes. Sex may be less about performance (intercourse) and more about close physical contact.

Many older adults are greatly relieved that they no longer have to worry about pregnancy when they have sex. Also, older adults know more about what brings them pleasure sexually. They may be more willing to let a partner know what pleases them.

Health problems often affect the sex lives of older adults, such as alcoholism, arthritis, diabetes, heart disease, and hormonal changes, as well as the use of some medicines. However, quite a few treatments have been developed to help improve sexual performance. Talk with your healthcare provider if you think that a physical problem is affecting your sex life.

A number of older people--women more than men--don't mind not having sex. Some may not really want issues of having sex reintroduced into their lives. In this way, there may be some truth to this “myth.” Even if sexual activity has stopped, affection, closeness, and companionship are important at all ages.

Myth – “You can't teach an old dog new tricks.”

Physical activity keeps your body strong, and mental activity keeps your mind sharp and your memory strong. If you continue to learn and challenge yourself, your brain will continue to function at its best. Your brain will be able to store and retrieve information more easily. Ways to exercise your mind include:

- Learn to play a musical instrument or to speak a foreign language.
- Play Scrabble or do crossword puzzles.
- Start a new hobby, such as crafts, painting, or bird-watching.
- Volunteer or find other ways to stay involved with other people.
- Read for enjoyment and to stay informed about what is going on in the world.

Other factors that can help keep the mind sharp are regular physical activity, a strong social support system, and a positive attitude.

Myth – “Getting older means being useless.”

Because older adults have traditionally retired from paid work, they have often been seen as no longer having anything to contribute. However, one third of older people work for pay; one third work as volunteers in churches, hospitals, and other organizations; and many help take care of family members, friends, and neighbors. Being retired offers the chance to contribute to the lives of others in ways that working adults do not have time to do.

Getting older may offer challenges, but there are also a lot of positive aspects. Older adults are more able take things in stride. This can reduce anger, anxiety, and stress. Many older adults tend to be comfortable with who they are and

satisfied with their lives. Aging may be inevitable, but disease, depression, and disability are not.

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