

Health Changes as You Grow Older

Why does our health change as we get older?

One hundred years ago people lived an average of 47 years. Today many men live to be at least 75. Many women live to be at least 80. Because people are living longer, they have good reason to be concerned about staying healthy in body and mind as they age.

We all change physically as we grow older. Some body changes are normal. Much of the ill health in older people, though, happens because they did not take good care of their health when they were younger. There are things you can do to stay as healthy as possible. You may even be able to improve your health.

Appearance changes

As you get older, hair gets coarser. It loses color, but gray or white hair can be quite attractive if properly cared for. Nails also become coarser.

Skin grows thinner, gets drier, takes longer to heal when injured, gets wrinkles, and is less elastic. You bruise more easily and broken vessels sometimes show through the skin. Many changes to the skin that seem to be from aging actually happen from being out in the sun too much. Using a sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher on your skin can help prevent skin damage.

Physical changes

Your skin gets injured more easily. Bruises, scrapes, and cuts happen more easily and more often. Your skin also may get less sensitive to pain. Heating pads or hot water bottles might hurt you before you know there is a problem.

Your heart may not pump as well. Hardened, narrowed arteries or high blood pressure make the heart work harder. As a result, you may get tired more easily.

Pollution from the air or from smoking may hurt the lungs and cause shortness of breath.

As you get older, your body does not control your temperature as well as when you were younger. This can cause problems, such as:

- Being in a hot place may raise your body temperature to a dangerous level.
- When you are in a cold environment, your body may not control the loss of heat from your body as well as it used to. As a result, it is easier to get too cold and you need to be careful about spending a lot of time in cold temperatures.

Wear and tear on the joints can cause them to become stiff and sometimes painful, particularly if you are overweight or have had joint injuries. Muscles, particularly unused muscles, lose bulk and strength. A healthy weight and regular exercise can help keep your muscles strong and your joints flexible.

Changes in vision are a normal part of aging. Your vision may slowly get worse. Glasses, or possibly surgery, can often help you see better. You may also have

some hearing loss. It is important to have your vision and hearing checked every couple of years.

Dental care is very important to prevent gum disease and tooth decay. Older adults are also more likely to have dry mouth. There may be some loss of taste buds with aging, which may mean you enjoy food less. The digestive system may slow down, and nutrients may not be absorbed as easily. Constipation is more likely to be a problem. A change to a healthier diet may help.

Less interest in sex or a change in your ability to have sex can result from lower levels of hormones. These changes may also have psychological causes. Many older adults keep having active, enjoyable sexual lives. Other healthy older adults are happy to set worries about sexual performance aside. You may find that you are more interested in having companionship than sexual intercourse.

The brain and nervous system lose nerve cells, causing slower reactions. However, memory loss is not a normal part of aging. If you keep having problems with concentrating or remembering things, get checked by your healthcare provider.

Mental and emotional health changes

Retirement from work brings more leisure time, but it can also bring a sense of a loss of purpose in life. Your income may be lower. Family and friends die or move away. It may be time to move out of a house that has become too big and hard to maintain.

Poverty, severe health problems, or living alone can cause feelings of helplessness, anxiety, or depression. You may not eat properly or get enough exercise. It may not seem worth the effort to shop and prepare food for just yourself. Walking or exercising alone may not seem to be much fun either. It may become especially important for you to find people you can spend time with.

Older adults may be more likely to have side effects from medicines, including nervousness, confusion, or depression. Do not assume that these kinds of changes are a normal part of aging. Your healthcare provider can change the dose if medicine appears to be causing these problems.

Staying healthy as you get older

Smoking, poor diet, and lack of exercise can cause tiredness and health problems. Not staying involved in activities that interest you can be depressing and isolating. On the other hand, if you eat too much food, you can get overweight, and being too active can lead to strained muscles or more injuries.

Go for the happy medium. Here are some suggestions to help you stay healthy as you get older:

- Eat 3 or 4 small, healthy, low-fat, high-fiber meals a day.
- Limit the amount of alcohol you drink to no more than 1 drink a day. As you age, alcohol stays in your system longer.

- Get regular exercise. Adding even small amounts of exercise to your daily or weekly routine can be very helpful and fun.
- Get enough rest. Most people need at least 6 hours of sleep per night.
- Take medicines prescribed by your healthcare provider according to your provider's instructions.
- Have a health checkup every year. Also have your vision and hearing checked regularly.
- Take advantage of any special health screening tests offered in your community.
- Get a flu shot every year. Get a pneumonia shot when recommended by your healthcare provider.
- If you smoke, stop. If you cannot or will not stop, then cut down by at least half.
- Always report injuries, bleeding, pains, numbness, faintness, dizziness, confusion, digestive problems, urinary problems, lumps, skin problems, or any other symptoms to your healthcare provider right away. Don't wait for your next scheduled checkup.
- Try to expand your social network. Take on as much activity as you find comfortable. Volunteering and helping others can give new purpose and meaning to your life. Joining senior activities can be the start of new and lasting friendships.
- Consider living in a senior community where you can have the privacy of your own apartment but also the chance to eat and do things with others.

For information on services for older adults in your area call the Area Agency on Aging. To find your local Area Agency on Aging, call the national Eldercare Locator toll-free between 9 AM and 8 PM, ET, Monday through Friday, at 1-800-677-1116.

Getting older may offer challenges, but there are also a lot of positive aspects. When you are older it is often easier to take things in stride. You may find that you don't feel stressed, anxious, or angry as often as when you were younger. Many older adults are comfortable with who they are and satisfied with their lives. Aging may be inevitable, but disease, depression, and disability are not.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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