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Healthy Aging: Every Day Counts

ur minds and bodies evolve throughout our lifetime, but knowing what is normal and what is not can be important for preventing negative changes and embracing the positive ones. As you get older, you may experience drops in energy, strength, memory, oral health, and libido, and you will likely get wrinkles, gray hair, and gain weight.

You are not alone. Today, older adults (people aged 65 years and older) comprise about 13% of the U.S. population. This number will more than double to about 71.5 million people by 2030. People are living longer now than ever, but aging can be a challenge.

What can I expect?

There are several measures to determine the quality of your health. Your general health is at risk if you have little physical activity, use tobacco, drink excessive amounts of alcohol, are obese, have high blood pressure, or experience depressive symptoms.

Knowing what to expect can help you be proactive in living a long and healthy life. Some common developments experienced in aging include:

- Arthritis
- Cancer
- Chronic disease
- Constipation
- Decreased bone density
- Depression
- Diabetes, type 2
- Hearing loss
- Heart disease
- Influenza
- Memory loss
- Sexual health problems
- Skin damage
- Tooth decay and recessed gums
- Urinary incontinence
- Vision changes
- Weight gain

How can I avoid problems?

Many health issues, such as obesity and type 2 diabetes, are avoidable by eating well and remaining active. You can avoid many more health problems by doing the following:

- Schedule regular checkups. You should see your primary care doctor at least once a year. He or she will check your general health and make diet and lifestyle recommendations or may prescribe necessary medications. If you are already taking medication prescribed by a specialist or take medication that requires frequent blood work, schedule appointments in advance to keep your health records up-to-date.
- **Get screened.** Screenings, such as colonoscopies, mammograms, and cholesterol tests, can greatly reduce a person's risk of developing chronic diseases and associated disabilities.
- Get vaccinated. Even if you received vaccines as a child or as a young adult, you may need one or more vaccines to prevent influenza (flu), shingles, tetanus, whooping cough, and pneumonia. If you are traveling, you may need additional vaccines.
- Eat a healthful diet. Diets rich in fruits and vegetables may reduce the risk of some cancers and chronic diseases, such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Fruits and vegetables provide essential vitamins and minerals, fiber, and other substances that are important for good health.
- **Don't smoke.** Tobacco use remains the single largest preventable cause of disease, disability, and death in the U.S. In addition, smoking increases your blood pressure and contributes to skin damage, including wrinkling.
- Manage stress. Stress can take a toll on your heart. Learning how to deal with stress can keep your heart and your mind healthy.
- Include physical activity in your daily routine. Strong evidence shows that regular physical activity, including aerobic and muscle strengthening, is safe and reduces the risk of falls among older

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adults. Older adults at risk of falling should do exercises that maintain or improve their balance. Physical activity increases blood flow and might help keep the memory sharp, and weight-bearing exercises can help build strong bones and slow bone loss.

- Limit alcohol consumption. Excessive alcohol use, including binge drinking, accounts for more than 21,000 deaths among U.S. adults aged 65 years or older each year. Excessive drinking increases a person's risk of developing high blood pressure, liver disease, certain cancers, heart disease, stroke, and many other chronic health problems. It also increases the risk of car crashes, falls, and violence. Excessive alcohol use can also interact with prescription and over-the-counter medications.
- Go to the bathroom regularly. Constipation and loss of bladder control are common with aging. Holding in a bowel movement for too long can lead to constipation. Consider urinating on a regular schedule and doing Kegel exercises (tighten your pelvic floor muscles, hold the contraction for 5 seconds, relax for 5 seconds, and repeat 4 or 5 times in a row).
- Maintain a healthy weight. As you get older, muscle mass decreases and body fat takes its place, which means you may need fewer calories to maintain your current weight. Obesity is a risk factor for many chronic conditions, including stroke, heart disease, cancer, and arthritis.
- Remain socially and mentally active. Social interaction helps ward off depression and stress, and mentally stimulating activities help keep your brain in shape.
- Protect your eyes, ears, and skin. Your eyes might become more sensitive to glare, or you may develop cataracts (clouded vision). Your hearing might dim, making it difficult to follow a conversation in a crowded room. Follow your doctor's advice about glasses, contact lenses, hearing aids, and other corrective devices. Wear ear protection around loud machinery, and when you are

outside, wear sunglasses or a wide-brimmed hat. Sun protection—sunscreen and protective clothing—should also be used when you go outdoors.

- **Brush and floss.** Over time, your teeth and gums might become more vulnerable to decay and infection. Brush your teeth twice a day, clean between your teeth once a day, and visit your dentist regularly.
- **Promote your sexual health.** Vaginal dryness, erectile dysfunction, and factors such as illness, disability, or medication can affect the ability or desire for sex. It is important to communicate these concerns with your partner, and you may decide together to try different sexual positions or activities. Your doctor might also be able to help by offering treatment suggestions, such as creams or medications.

Every day counts toward a healthy future, and it is never too late to start living the healthful lifestyle that will get you there. If you are experiencing major health concerns, schedule an appointment with your doctor. For more information on expanded health topics, visit http://www.cdc.gov/aging/aginginfo.

