

# Healthy Aging

## What is healthy aging?

Getting older is a natural part of life. How you will feel as you get older depends on many things, including what health problems run in your family and the lifestyle choices you make. If you take good care of your body and learn positive ways to deal with stress now, you can slow down or even prevent problems that often come with getting older.

It's never too early or too late to change bad habits and start good ones. No matter when you start, a healthy lifestyle can make a difference in how you feel and what you can do.

## What determines how healthy you will be as you get older?

The changes you'll experience as you get older depend on a number of factors. One is your family history (genetics). If your family members have diseases or ongoing (chronic) health problems, like high blood pressure or diabetes, then you may have a greater chance of having those problems yourself. But just because your risk is higher, it doesn't mean you will definitely have the same problems. In fact, the lifestyle choices you make can help reduce your chances of developing conditions that run in your family. And even if you do develop a family condition, choosing to be physically active, to eat right, and to learn how to deal with stress can keep the condition from impacting your ability to enjoy your golden years.

## What kinds of changes should you expect as you age?

Changes as you get older are usually gradual. Certain physical changes are common. Your metabolism (how fast your body can burn calories) slows over time, which means your body needs fewer calories than when you were younger. Also, most people develop a need for reading glasses between ages 40 and 50, and many have some hearing loss later in life. Starting in your 50s, bone aging increases. Also starting around age 50, you may notice changes in sexual function—it's normal to have a slower sexual response.

Most vital organs gradually become less efficient with age. The kidneys are less efficient and the heart can start to show signs of wear and tear caused by years of eating the wrong foods and not exercising. As you get older, it's important to be physically active, drink plenty of water, and eat the right foods. Doing these things will help your body work well for a longer period of time.

For more information and resources on healthy aging, visit **HYPERLINK "**<http://nihseniorhealth.gov/alpha.html>**"** <http://nihseniorhealth.gov/alpha.html>.

## What do you need to do to feel your best as you age?

**Almost anyone, at any age, can do some type of physical activity.** Being physically active is one of the most important things you can do for your health at any age. Physical activity keeps your body strong and gives you a sense of well-being. People who stay active are less likely to get depressed. Physical activity can include anything from walking to

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gardening to working out at the gym. The important thing is to be active almost every day. No matter what your age or condition, there is a type of physical activity that's right for you. Always ask your health care provider whether it's safe for you to start a physical activity program, especially if you're over 50 and aren't used to energetic activity.

**Stay connected to protect your mental and emotional health.** Protect or improve your emotional health by staying in touch with friends, family, and the community. People who feel connected to others are more likely to thrive than those who do not. Find ways to be with people by joining a club, volunteering your time or joining an online social network. Get involved with a cause you believe in or something that interests you. And try to keep stress at a minimum. You can take charge of how stress affects you by taking 20 minutes a day to just relax.

**Protect or improve your memory and mental sharpness by keeping your brain active** through learning, doing crossword puzzles, playing cards or strategy games. Depression can be a serious problem for older adults, too. If you think you may be depressed, seek help—antidepressant medicine and counseling can help treat depression.

## **Other good health habits can help you stay at your best:**

**Get the medical care you need.** Medical prevention, regular checkups and prompt treatment play a key role in your quality of life as you age. Preventive health screenings for both men and women include: blood pressure checks, cholesterol screening, colorectal cancer screening, hearing and vision tests, and dental examinations. Men may also be advised to have an annual prostate check, which may include a digital rectal examination and/or a blood test. Women are advised to also have a regular breast examination and mammogram, as well as a pelvic exam and Pap test.

**Eat a healthy, balanced diet.** The Dietary Guidelines describe a **healthy diet** as one that emphasizes fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products; includes lean meats, poultry, fish, beans, eggs, and nuts; and is low in saturated fats, *trans* fats, cholesterol, salt (sodium), and added sugars. Visit [HYPERLINK "http://www.MyPyramid.gov"](http://www.MyPyramid.gov) [www.MyPyramid.gov](http://www.MyPyramid.gov) to learn how to make smart choices from every food group and find balance between food and physical activity.

**If you smoke, take advantage of free resources to help you quit.** Call Blues On Call<sup>SM</sup> at 1-888-BLUE-428, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to learn more about the options available to you through your health care company. And don't abuse alcohol or drugs.

**Be an informed health care consumer.** Keep a list of all of your medications, including vitamins and other supplements. Know the proper way to take medications, and be aware of any side effects. When concerned about a medical condition, read as much as you can about it and its possible treatments. Make a list of unanswered questions and talk to your health care provider about them. Be your own health care advocate.

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