

Steps to Healthy Aging

It's no secret that Americans are living longer than ever before. Today, 46 million Americans are over 60 years old. Even with a large percentage of the nation's population reaching 60, a decline in health and quality of life with age is not inevitable. Still, many older adults may not realize what a difference they can make in their health by choosing a healthy lifestyle. There are some reasons to lead a healthy lifestyle that you may not have considered.

Scientific studies show that staying physically active, eating right, getting health screening, and getting flu and pneumonia shots can help prevent or delay many diseases and disabilities. For this reason, the President of the United States has started the Healthier US Initiative to encourage young and old to take steps to achieving a better and longer life.

In fact, by paying attention to such basics as eating better and regular physical activity, older adults can live longer, more independently, and with greater satisfaction than ever before. What's more, they needn't do it on their own. There is a wealth of information offered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Aging (AoA), as well as support for many local programs and services that can help make maintaining one's health easier.

Be Physically Active Every Day

Surveys show that inactivity usually increases with age. By age 75, about one-in-three men and one-in-two women are

not physically active. Moderate physical activity can help improve the health of most aging adults or those who have diseases that accompany aging. An inactive lifestyle can cause aging adults to lose ground in four areas that are important for staying healthy and independent: strength, balance, flexibility, and endurance. But research suggests that exercise and physical activity can help aging adults maintain or partly restore these four areas. Even frail older adults can prolong their independence and improve their quality of life by becoming more physically active.

You may have heard that becoming physically active is one of the most important things that older adults can do for themselves, but some seniors are reluctant to exercise. Some seniors are afraid that exercise will be too strenuous or that physical activity will harm them. Studies show that exercise gives these health benefits:

- Helps maintain the ability to live independently and reduces the risk of falling and fracturing bones
- Helps reduce the risk of dying from coronary heart disease and of developing diseases such as high blood pressure, colon cancer, and diabetes
- Helps reduce blood pressure in some aging adults with hypertension
- Helps aging adults with chronic, disabling conditions improve their stamina and muscle strength
- Helps maintain healthy bones, muscles, and joints

WHAT WE DO *makes a difference*

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Healthy Aging...cont'd.

But, did you know that being more physically active also can improve your mood, relieve stress, and reduce the symptoms of anxiety and depression? It can also improve one's ability to think.

Are you often tired? Many people say that they feel too tired to be more physically active. Yet many older people report feeling more energetic from being more physically active. It may take a little push to get out the door, but you're likely to come back feeling renewed and energized.

Some people say they don't have time to increase their physical activity. Think again. Take a look at how you can find the time to be more physically active. Did you know that older adults watch more television than other groups? So, pick up the remote, turn off the television, and take the next step to being more physically active.

An exercise program doesn't have to be strenuous to be effective. It can be fun if you pick an activity you enjoy. Just a total of 30 minutes or more of moderate daily physical activity is what is recommended. Choose among many activities such as walking, swimming, dancing, and bicycling.

The 30 minutes of moderate activity can be broken up into shorter periods. It could consist of spending 15 minutes gardening or doing light housework in the morning and 15 minutes walking in the afternoon. Or consider taking a fitness or physical activity class at a local gym, recreation, or senior center, designed especially for older adults. It all adds up!

AoA programs offer physical activity and group exercise programs in many communities. Call a local recreation center,

gym, or senior center to ask about free or affordable classes, sports, and dancing for older adults.

Take a Step to Eating Better

A majority of older Americans have one or more chronic conditions that can be improved by good nutrition, according to a 1997 report from the National Center for Health Statistics. These diseases include blood values that put them at risk for heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, or a combination of these diseases. Studies also reveal that 40 percent of older Americans 65+ eat poorly. They also show that good nutrition prolongs independence, promotes health, and prevents disease, and helps reduce bone fractures.

Eating better can help protect against diseases that affect older people, such as diabetes, obesity, osteoporosis, obesity, heart disease, high blood pressure, cancer, and more. AoA through its USA on the Move program recommends seven ways to eat better to prevent disease and promote health:

- Aim for a healthy weight.
- Eat a wide variety of foods.
- Eat more high fiber foods made from whole grains, beans, and nuts.
- Eat five or more servings of fruits and vegetables daily.
- Choose a diet that is low in saturated fat and cholesterol.
- Choose and prepare foods with less salt.
- Eat calcium-rich foods like low-fat milk and cheese for strong bones.
- Drink plenty of beverages and stay hydrated.

New living and social situations sometimes lead to unhealthy patterns among older people. Eating alone is one of the most common factors behind poor eating patterns. Poor nutrition can result from eating alone, taking multiple medications, smoking, and poor dental health. Many who live alone do not eat as well as those who have someone to eat with at home. To avoid eating alone, invite a friend to share a meal with you, or make a standing date with someone to eat out together every week. Buy smaller packages of food to avoid boring leftovers, and freeze leftovers to eat a few weeks later when you don't feel like cooking. Or join a lunch program at a community or senior center and enjoy someone else's cooking while making new friends.

AoA offers nutrition services to older people aged 60+ nationwide through the Older Americans Act (OAA) Nutrition Program. The program improves the dietary intakes of participants and offers them opportunities to form new friendships and to create informal support networks. The OAA Nutrition Program also provides a range of related services, including nutrition screening, assessment, education, and counseling. These services help older participants to identify their general and special nutrition needs, as they may relate to health concerns.

Health Screenings and Flu Shots

Older Americans may be surprised to learn about simple tests that can help them prevent serious health problems and identify the need to adjust their diet or behavior. Ask your doctor about screening tests that may benefit you, including

checking your blood pressure, testing for heart disease risk factors, and diabetes.

Each winter, millions of Americans suffer from the flu, a highly contagious infection. It spreads very easily from person to person—usually when an infected person coughs or sneezes. The flu can be life threatening in aging adults and especially those who have chronic illnesses such as diabetes or heart, lung, or kidney diseases. Studies have shown that a flu shot reduces hospitalization by about 70 percent and death by about 85 percent among aging adults who are not in nursing homes. Among nursing home residents, the flu shot reduces the risk of hospitalization by about 50 percent, the risk of pneumonia by about 60 percent, and the risk of death by 80 percent.

According to the federal government's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations made in 2002, the following older persons, caregivers, and health care workers are at risk for serious illness from the flu and should get a flu shot every year in the fall:

- People 50 years of age and older
- Older residents of nursing homes and other long-term care facilities
- Older adults who have chronic heart or lung conditions including asthma
- Older adults with diabetes, kidney disease, or weakened immune systems
- Health care or home care workers in contact with people in high-risk groups and
- Caregivers or people who live with someone in a high-risk group

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Flu shots should not be given to persons known to have hypersensitivity to eggs or other components of the flu shot without first consulting a physician.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that people 65 and older get a vaccine to protect against pneumococcal pneumonia, a serious infection that affects the lungs. This shot is safe and can be given at the same time as a flu shot. Most people need only one pneumonia shot, and no one should receive more than two of the vaccines currently available.

AoA programs offer a number of routine health screening services for older Americans, such as screenings for high blood pressure, cholesterol, bone density, and vision and hearing loss.

Collaborative Partnership

AoA is partnering with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to co-manage the Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) initiative or Project REACH. The four projects funded under Project REACH are targeting African Americans, Hispanics, Asian/Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans. Project REACH health promotion and disease prevention strategies are focused in: managing diabetes, preventing stroke and cardiovascular disease, preventing cancer

and promoting immunizations. This multi-phased project is developing health promotion information that can be tailored and used by various populations. AoA and CDC believe that collaborating on this project that will structure a mechanism for local communities to build upon for future efforts.

The National Aging Services Network

Under the authority of the Older Americans Act, AoA works closely with the National Aging Services Network to plan, coordinate, and provide home- and community-based services to meet the unique needs of older persons and their caregivers. These services include health promotion and disease prevention services including health risk assessments, routine health screening, nutrition counseling and education, physical activity programs, and many other services.

The Eldercare Locator

AoA supports a nationwide, toll-free information and assistance directory and website called the Eldercare Locator, which can locate the appropriate resource to help an individual needing assistance for an older person. Older persons and caregivers can call the Eldercare Locator toll-free at 1-800-677-1116 or visit www.eldercare.gov.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Aging (AoA), works with a nationwide network of organizations and service providers to make support services and resources available to older persons and their caregivers. For more information about the AoA, please contact: **the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Aging**, Washington, DC 20201, Phone 202-619-0724, e-mail aoainfo@aoa.gov, Web site: www.aoa.gov

