

Aging: What to expect

Wonder what's considered a normal part of the aging process? Here's what to expect as you get older — and what to do about it.

By Mayo Clinic Staff

You know that aging will likely cause you to develop wrinkles and gray hair. But do you know how the aging process will affect your teeth, heart and sexuality? Find out what kind of changes you can expect in your body as you continue aging — and what you can do to promote good health at any age.

Your cardiovascular system

What's happening

As you age, your heart rate becomes slightly slower, and your heart might become bigger. Your blood vessels and your arteries also become stiffer, causing your heart to work harder to pump blood through them. This can lead to high blood pressure (hypertension) and other cardiovascular problems.

What you can do

To promote heart health:

- **Include physical activity in your daily routine.** Try walking, swimming or other activities you enjoy. Regular moderate physical activity can help you maintain a healthy weight, lower blood pressure and lessen the extent of arterial stiffening.
- **Eat a healthy diet.** Choose vegetables, fruits, whole grains, high-fiber foods and lean sources of protein, such as fish. Limit foods high in saturated fat and sodium. A healthy diet can help you keep your heart and arteries healthy.
- **Don't smoke.** Smoking contributes to the hardening of your arteries and increases your blood pressure and heart rate. If you smoke or use other tobacco products, ask your doctor to help you quit.
- **Manage stress.** Stress can take a toll on your heart. Take steps to reduce stress — or learn to deal with stress in healthy ways.
- **Get enough sleep.** Quality sleep plays an important role in healing and repair of your heart and blood vessels. People's needs vary, but generally aim for 7 to 8 hours a night.

Your bones, joints and muscles

What's happening

With age, bones tend to shrink in size and density — which weakens them and makes them more susceptible to fracture. You might even become a bit shorter. Muscles generally lose strength and flexibility, and you might become less coordinated or have trouble balancing.

What you can do

To promote bone, joint and muscle health:

- **Get adequate amounts of calcium.** For adults ages 19 to 50 and men ages 51 to 70, the Institute of Medicine recommends 1,000 milligrams (mg) of calcium a day. The recommendation increases to 1,200 mg a day for women age 51 and older and men age 71 and older. Dietary sources of calcium include dairy products,

almonds, broccoli, kale, canned salmon with bones, sardines and soy products, such as tofu. If you find it difficult to get enough calcium from your diet, ask your doctor about calcium supplements.

- **Get adequate amounts of vitamin D.** For adults ages 19 to 70, the Institute of Medicine recommends 600 international units (IU) of vitamin D a day. The recommendation increases to 800 IU a day for adults age 71 and older. Although many people get adequate amounts of vitamin D from sunlight, this might not be a good source for everyone. Other sources of vitamin D include oily fish, such as tuna and sardines, egg yolks, fortified milk, and vitamin D supplements.
- **Include physical activity in your daily routine.** Weight-bearing exercises, such as walking, jogging, tennis, climbing stairs and strength training can help you build strong bones and slow bone loss.
- **Avoid substance abuse.** Avoid smoking and don't drink more than one or two alcoholic drinks a day, depending on your sex and age.

Your digestive system

What's happening

Constipation is more common in older adults. Many factors can contribute to constipation, including a low-fiber diet, not drinking enough fluids and lack of exercise. Medications — such as diuretics and iron supplements — and certain medical conditions — such as diabetes and irritable bowel syndrome — also might contribute to constipation.

What you can do

To prevent constipation:

- **Eat a healthy diet.** Make sure your diet includes high-fiber foods, such as fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Limit meats that are high in fat, dairy products and sweets, which might cause constipation. Drink plenty of water and other fluids.
- **Include physical activity in your daily routine.** Regular physical activity can help prevent constipation, and is important for your overall health.
- **Don't ignore the urge to have a bowel movement.** Holding in a bowel movement for too long can cause constipation.

Your bladder and urinary tract

What's happening

Loss of bladder control (urinary incontinence) is common with aging. Certain medical conditions, such as diabetes, might contribute to incontinence — as can menopause, for women, and an enlarged prostate, for men.

What you can do

To promote bladder and urinary tract health:

- **Go to the toilet regularly.** Consider urinating on a regular schedule, such as every hour. Slowly, extend the amount of time between your toilet trips.
- **Maintain a healthy weight.** If you're overweight, lose excess pounds.
- **Don't smoke.** If you smoke or use other tobacco products, ask your doctor to help.
- **Do Kegel exercises.** Tighten your pelvic floor muscles, hold the contraction for five seconds, and then relax for five seconds. Try it four or five times in a row. Work

up to keeping the muscles contracted for 10 seconds at a time, relaxing for 10 seconds between contractions.

- **Avoid bladder irritants.** Caffeine, acidic foods, alcohol and carbonated beverages can make incontinence worse.
- **Avoid constipation.** Eat more fiber and take necessary steps to avoid constipation, which can worsen incontinence.

Your memory

What's happening

Memory might naturally become less efficient with age. It might take longer to learn new things or remember familiar words or names.

What you can do

To keep your memory sharp:

- **Include physical activity in your daily routine.** Physical activity increases blood flow to your whole body, including your brain. This might help keep your memory sharp.
- **Eat a healthy diet.** A heart-healthy diet might benefit your brain. Focus on fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Choose low-fat protein sources, such as fish, lean meat and skinless poultry. What you drink counts, too. Too much alcohol can lead to confusion and memory loss.
- **Stay mentally active.** Mentally stimulating activities help keep your brain in shape — and might keep memory loss at bay. Do crossword puzzles. Take alternate routes when driving. Learn to play a musical instrument.
- **Be social.** Social interaction helps ward off depression and stress, which can contribute to memory loss. Look for opportunities to get together with loved ones, friends and others.
- **Lower your blood pressure.** Reducing high blood pressure might reduce vascular disease that might in turn reduce the risk for dementia. More research is needed to determine whether treating high blood pressure reduces the risk of dementia.
- **Quit smoking.** Some studies have shown smoking in middle age and older might increase your risk of dementia. Quitting smoking might reduce your risk.

If you're concerned about memory loss, consult your doctor.

Your eyes and ears

What's happening

With age, you might have difficulty focusing on objects that are close up. You might become more sensitive to glare and have trouble adapting to different levels of light. Aging also can affect your eye's lens, causing clouded vision (cataracts).

Your hearing also might diminish. You might have difficulty hearing high frequencies or following a conversation in a crowded room.

What you can do

To promote eye and ear health:

- **Schedule regular checkups.** Follow your doctor's advice about glasses, contact lenses, hearing aids and other corrective devices.
- **Take precautions.** Wear sunglasses or a wide-brimmed hat when you're outdoors,

and use earplugs when you're around loud machinery or other loud noises.

Your teeth

What's happening

Your gums might pull back (recede) from your teeth. Certain medications, such as those that treat allergies, asthma, high blood pressure and high cholesterol, can also cause dry mouth. As a result, your teeth and gums might become slightly more vulnerable to decay and infection.

What you can do

To promote oral health:

- **Brush and floss.** Brush your teeth twice a day and clean between your teeth — using regular dental floss or an interdental cleaner — once a day.
- **Schedule regular checkups.** Visit your dentist or dental hygienist for regular dental checkups.

Your skin

What's happening

With age, your skin thins and becomes less elastic and more fragile with a simultaneous decrease of fatty tissue just below the skin. You might notice that you bruise more easily. Decreased production of natural oils might make your skin drier. Wrinkles, age spots and small growths called skin tags are more common.

What you can do

To promote healthy skin:

- **Be gentle.** Bathe in warm — not hot — water. Use mild soap and moisturizer.
- **Take precautions.** When you're outdoors, use sunscreen and wear protective clothing. Check your skin regularly and report changes to your doctor.
- **Don't smoke.** If you smoke or use other tobacco products, ask your doctor to help you quit. Smoking contributes to skin damage, such as wrinkling.

Your weight

What's happening

Maintaining a healthy weight is more difficult as you get older. As you age, your muscle mass decreases and body fat takes its place. Since fat tissue burns fewer calories than does muscle, you need fewer calories to maintain your current weight.

What you can do

To maintain a healthy weight:

- **Include physical activity in your daily routine.** Regular moderate physical activity can help you maintain a healthy weight.
- **Eat a healthy diet.** Choose vegetables, fruits, whole grains, high-fiber foods and lean sources of protein, such as fish. Limit sugar and foods high in saturated fat.
- **Watch your portion sizes.** You might not need as many calories as you used to.
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Your sexuality

What's happening

With age, sexual needs and performance might change. Illness or medication might affect your ability to enjoy sex. For women, vaginal dryness can make sex uncomfortable. For men, impotence might become a concern. It might take longer to get an erection, and erections might not be as firm as they used to be.

What you can do

To promote your sexual health:

- **Share your needs and concerns with your partner.** You might experiment with different positions or sexual activities.
- **Talk to your doctor.** He or she might offer specific treatment suggestions — such as estrogen cream for vaginal dryness or perhaps oral medication to increase libido in women or oral medication for erectile dysfunction in men.

Remember, it's never too late to adopt a healthy lifestyle. You can't stop the aging process, but you might be able to minimize its impact by making healthy choices.

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