

A Guide to Healthy Aging

Today 12 out of every 100 people in the U.S. are age 65 or older, and older adults make up the fastest growing part of our population. As we get older, we gain experiences and insights that move us forward and power our communities. Now more than ever, we need to ensure that our country is making the most of this new reality. Americans are leading longer, healthier lives and it is up to us all to figure out how to seize on this opportunity by adjusting our systems and policies. There are also things you can do as an individual to help you stay healthier as you age. The following guide can help you enjoy better health and greater independence in later life.

Find healthcare that meets your needs

For help finding a physician with special training in the care of older adults, call the AGS Health in Aging Foundation's free referral service at (212) 308-1414, or visit <http://www.healthinaging.org/find-a-geriatrics-healthcare-professional/>.

Find out about the healthcare benefits available to older Americans through Medicare by visiting the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services website, at <http://www.medicare.gov/>.

There may be special health and other programs in your community that are just for older adults. The federal Administration on Aging (AoA) offers a wide range of services for older adults in every state. These include mental health services, transportation, nutritional programs, senior health programs, benefits counseling, services for family caregivers, and elder abuse prevention programs. To find AoA services in your neighborhood call 800-677-1116 or visit www.eldercare.gov.

Remember, even if you feel perfectly healthy, you should still see your healthcare provider at least once a year for a checkup.

Make sure you're not making medication mistakes

■ **MANY OLDER ADULTS** take prescription medications, over-the-counter drugs, vitamins and other supplements, such as herbs or home remedies, every day. Taking lots of different pills can cause side effects and problems. It is very important that your healthcare provider, pharmacist, and others who care for you know every medication or pill you are taking.

■ **BRING A LIST** of each and every pill, vitamin, or medicine you take with you every time you see your healthcare provider—even if you buy the pills without a prescription. Make sure you write down the dose of the pill and how many times a day you take it. Your healthcare provider should check all of your pills to make sure they are safe for you to take.

■ **ALWAYS CHECK** with your healthcare provider or your pharmacist before taking any new medicines of any kind. Take all medicines as directed, and tell your healthcare provider right away if a medication or pill seems to be causing any problems or side effects. Ask if there is any way to take care of your health problems without having to take pills or medicine. Never borrow or take any pills or medications that were meant for someone else.

Stay on top of health problems

■ **GET YOUR BLOOD PRESSURE CHECKED** at least once a year. High blood pressure can cause heart disease, kidney problems, blindness, and other health problems.

■ **GET A CHOLESTEROL TEST** at least every five years. Cholesterol is a fat in our bodies. When cholesterol levels are high, this fat can cause heart disease, strokes, and other health problems. If heart disease or diabetes runs in your family, you should have your cholesterol checked more often.

■ **GET CHECKED FOR DIABETES**, especially if you are hungry or thirsty all the time, are overweight, or find that you have to urinate often. These problems could all be signs of diabetes.

Lower your risk of falling

■ **HELP KEEP YOUR BONES STRONG** by taking calcium and vitamin D every day. Most older adults absorb calcium citrate better than calcium carbonate, so read the labels on the calcium bottles carefully. Ask your healthcare provider how much calcium and vitamin D you should take.

■ **IF YOU DON'T EXERCISE REGULARLY, START.** You don't have to check with your provider before starting moderate level exercise unless you have health problems

you want to discuss first. Walking is an ideal aerobic ("heart healthy") exercise; gradually increase the amount of time you spend walking, aiming for at least 20–30 minutes a day. In addition to walking, or doing other aerobic exercises like cycling, lift weights to help strengthen your muscles—and help protect your bones. Learn to do yoga or tai chi, which can improve your balance and make you less likely to fall. Many local senior centers and Y's offer exercise, yoga, and tai chi classes.

■ **IF YOU'VE ALREADY HAD A FALL**, be sure to ask your healthcare provider about exercise programs in your community that include not only strength training and balance exercises but also flexibility and stretching exercises. These can also help lower your risk of falls.

■ **GET AN EYE CHECK-UP.** Make sure your vision is good and your eyeglasses are right for you. Many falls happen when you do not see well.