

## A Guide to Managing Your Health

### Arab American Older Adults



**A**s an older Arab American person, this resource is for you, whether you were born here or came from another country. Arab-Americans are residents of the United States who trace their heritage or identity back to one of 22 Arab countries.

You may have higher risks for some diseases because of your genetics, health habits, immigration status and cultural adaptation, how the healthcare system treats you, or your environment. Special concerns for Arab Americans are diabetes, obesity, tobacco use, cancer, and depression.

When you visit your healthcare professional, let them know about your health needs, cultural beliefs and practices, and questions you may have. Your healthcare professionals need to know because they want to give you good care and keep you as healthy as possible.

We will discuss some high-risk diseases among Arab Americans, and tips to talk with your healthcare professional about your health care.

### Special Healthcare Concerns of Older Arab Americans

#### Heart Disease and Stroke

Your risk of having a heart attack or stroke is higher if you have high blood pressure, heart failure, diabetes, obesity, smoking, and do little physical activity.

Eating foods low in fat and salt is important. So is eating lots of fruits and vegetables and little meat and few sweets. Avoid foods high in fat and/or salt (such as breads, heavy oils, adding additional salt to foods like olives and vegetables). Limit the alcohol you drink to one drink per day for women and two for men.

Other things can reduce your risks. These include getting daily exercise, quitting smoking,

controlling blood pressure, and taking recommended medications. Talk to your healthcare professional about how to reduce your risks and follow their advice.

**Be aware of immediate risks to your health.** If you have chest pain and/or shortness of breath, you might be having a heart attack. If so, you need to call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room right away.

Strokes happen when the brain's blood supply is blocked or stopped. Brain cells can die within minutes. If you have trouble speaking, weakness

on one side of your body, severe headache, or loss of vision or balance you need to call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room right away.

## Obesity

Eating more food than your body needs can make you overweight or obese. If you eat foods that are high in fat and sugar or drink sugary drinks you can gain weight. Getting little exercise and having sleep problems can also cause you to gain weight.

Being overweight or obese can lead to diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, stroke, heart disease, sleep apnea (problems with breathing during sleep), and even cancer. Obesity can also make breathing worse and cause more arthritis pain and problems with walking.

Talk to your healthcare professional about ways to lose weight and improve your fitness and quality of life. Some ways to lose weight include:

- Stop eating unhealthy food and eat more fruits and vegetables. Decrease how much you eat by 500 calories each day. A dietitian (a person trained in healthy nutrition) can evaluate what you usually eat and help you create a healthier diet.
- Walk or do a similar type of exercise for 30 minutes a day most days. Resistance exercises such as lifting weights are important to avoid losing muscle as you age.
- Get help by joining a Silver Sneakers exercise program. Some insurance programs will pay for it. Or, see a physical therapist who can create a good exercise plan with you. Free exercise videos can be found on the internet. They can help you create an exercise program at home.

## Tobacco Use

Tobacco use in some Arab countries can be very high. So recent immigrants from Arab countries may be more at risk of using tobacco.

Smoking and tobacco use causes health problems:

- Tobacco has chemicals that are bad for your health. They can cause cancer, lung disease, high blood pressure, and strokes.

■ E-cigarettes (vaping) and smokeless tobacco (chewing gum, snuff tobacco) also cause serious health problems.

■ Your family and friends breathe in your smoke and can get health problems from second-hand smoke. For example, children who live with people who smoke can develop asthma.

Even if you have used tobacco for many years, stopping now is still very helpful. Talk to your healthcare professional about ways and medications to help you quit using tobacco. Older adults who quit can improve their health. However, it can be hard to stop. Get help by:

- Talking with your healthcare professional about ways to quit smoking.
- Calling 1-800-QUIT-NOW. It is a toll-free number operated by the National Cancer Institute that will connect you directly to your state's tobacco quit line support system.
- Taking medications that can help you stop smoking.

## Cancer

Cancers of the liver, thyroid, brain, kidney and bladder, as well as leukemia, are more common among Arab Americans in the US. Risks for these cancers are related to:

- An unhealthy diet
- Smoking and use of other tobacco products

Discovering cancer early leads to better results. So:

- Discuss new symptoms with your healthcare provider. If you don't, cancer can be harder to find and treat.
- Make an appointment with your healthcare provider quickly if you experience any of the following: feeling a lump in your breast; developing new shortness of breath, a long-lasting cough, or coughing up blood; or finding blood in your urine or feces.
- Ask your healthcare provider to screen for cancer so it can be found earlier.

Avoiding alcohol, stopping smoking, and eating a diet

low in salt and fat can decrease your risk of getting cancer. So can exercise and having a healthy diet full of fruits and vegetables.

### Diabetes

Diabetes causes high blood sugar levels and leads to other health problems. These may include damage to your eyes, kidneys, heart, and feet.

Your healthcare professional will check your blood sugar, blood pressure, cholesterol, and kidney function. You need to check your feet daily and report any skin problems to your healthcare professional immediately.

Arab American people have a higher risk of having serious health problems resulting from diabetes. These problems can include:

- **Chronic kidney disease.** This may develop slowly, with few signs of the disease. So, you need to get your kidneys checked regularly with simple blood and urine tests. You can help maintain your kidneys' health by keeping your blood sugar controlled, checking your blood pressure regularly, and having your A1C levels tested at least twice per year.

- **Eye Disease.** Diabetes can cause you to lose your sight. You need to have a healthcare professional check your eyes at least once a year. If they find problems early, they can help you protect your eyesight.

Also, see your healthcare professional if you notice changes in your eyesight, like blurring, spots, or flashes.

- **Foot problems.** Diabetes can also cause problems with your feet, like numbness, wounds, pain, and swelling. You need to check your feet every day and see your healthcare professional if you notice any changes. If you don't receive treatment for these problems, you may need an amputation (removal of your foot or part of your leg).

Diabetes can get worse if you eat unhealthy food, do little exercise, or are overweight or obese. Talk with your healthcare professional about how to eat healthily, exercise, and take the medications you may need. Some tips include:

- Decrease carbohydrates in your diet, such as white bread and pasta
- Eat more vegetables and low calorie foods
- Drink water (preferred) or sugar-free beverages instead of sugary beverages
- Increase your exercise to 30 minutes per day, five days a week

### Coronary Artery Disease

Coronary artery disease is one form of heart disease. It happens when plaque (a waxy substance made up of cholesterol) builds up in the walls of the arteries that take blood to the heart. This buildup causes the inside of the arteries to become narrow. Eventually the plaque can block the blood flow. This process is called atherosclerosis.

Your risk of having a heart attack or stroke is higher if you have high blood pressure, heart failure, diabetes, obesity, smoking, and do little physical activity.

Eating foods low in fat and salt and getting daily exercise can reduce your chances of having heart disease and strokes. Quitting smoking, controlling blood pressure, and taking recommended medications also helps you avoid these health problems. Talk to your healthcare professional about how to reduce your risks and follow their advice.

Be aware of immediate risks to your health. If you have chest pain and/or shortness of breath, you might be having a heart attack. If so, you need to call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room right away.

Strokes happen when the brain's blood supply is blocked or stopped. Brain cells can die within minutes. If you have trouble speaking, weakness on one side of your body, severe headache, or loss of vision or balance you need to call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room right away.

### Depression

Getting older doesn't always lead to depression or severe sadness. These conditions can be caused by chemical imbalances in your brain. Some Arab Americans may not be satisfied with their lives and have depression. Feelings of being left out and not

being part of the American culture can be linked to depression.

Depression is a serious health condition and can lead to other health problems. Symptoms of depression can include:

- Feeling sad, tired or irritable
- Lacking interest in hobbies and activities you used to enjoy
- Having trouble sleeping or sleeping too long
- Having a poor appetite
- Being confused or having problems with thinking.

These symptoms can appear to be dementia.

If you have symptoms of depression or have thoughts of hurting yourself or others, talk to your healthcare professional as soon as you can. They can recommend counseling and medications. Family members and friends can support you when you are depressed.

Sometimes cultural traditions prevent Arab Americans from getting mental health care. However, depression is a disease that needs treatment. Medications and behavior therapy can help.

### Preventive Health

For cultural reasons, you may think preventive care (vaccines, cancer screening, and medications) is less important. Primary care is less common in Arab

countries so you may be less familiar with trying to prevent health problems.

However, preventing or discovering disease early can limit damage to your body. Seeing your healthcare provider at least once a year will help you find out about diseases early so that they are easier to treat and you have better results.

Your healthcare provider will discuss preventive healthcare with you. For example:

- Cancer screenings are important. Some common screening tests are mammograms, prostate exams, and colonoscopies.
- Vaccinations including flu, pneumonia, shingles, and COVID-19 shots can prevent serious infections. If you are concerned about getting vaccinations, ask your healthcare provider for more information.
- Let your healthcare provider and pharmacists know if you take home remedies, herbs, vitamins, or supplements. These professionals can help make sure these remedies are safe to take with your other medications and treatments.

### End of Life Care

During end of life, your healthcare professionals need to know your cultural practices. Consider telling them about your beliefs about God's will and practices related to burial.

## Communicating with your Healthcare Team

Your healthcare team can include physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, nurses, nursing assistants, social workers, pharmacists, therapists, and others. Each team member has special training to help you in different ways.

Your healthcare team will want to know about you, your culture, and what is important to you! You will receive the best care by sharing your cultural beliefs and health care practices. These beliefs and practices can affect your health and healthcare treatments. See the Tip Sheet on Cultural Considerations when Communicating with Your Healthcare Team for helpful suggestions.

Note that if you have immigrated to the United States, your immigration history may be an important part of your personal story. Knowing your history will help your healthcare professional to know about increased risk of diseases for people who have come from Arab countries. So will knowing how much access you had to health care before coming to the United States. This information can be sensitive, but we encourage you to share this with your healthcare professional.

**We hope this information has been helpful to you.  
Be sure to let your healthcare providers know if you  
or your family members have any questions.**



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