

A Guide to Managing Your Health

Chinese American Older Adults



As an older Chinese American person, this resource is for you, whether you were born here or came from another country.

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. Health concerns include heart disease and stroke, diabetes, osteoporosis, cancer, tuberculosis, and hepatitis B.

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 Chinese Americans, and tips to talk with your healthcare professional about your health care.

Special Healthcare Concerns of Chinese American Older Adults

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. If you drink alcohol, drink in moderation. For women, limit your drink to one or less per day. For men, limit your drinks to two or less in a day.

Other things can reduce your risks. These include getting daily exercise, quitting smoking, controlling blood pressure, and taking medications as prescribed. Talk to your healthcare professional about how to reduce your risks and follow their advice. Do not

be afraid to ask questions. Do not feel like you are bothering your health care professionals, they are here to help you. Your safety and wellbeing is our top priority.

To lower your chances of getting cancer, don't drink alcohol, stop smoking, eat less salt and fat, and eat more fruits and vegetables.

Be aware of immediate risks to your health.

Heart Attacks: 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: Strokes happen when the brain's blood supply is blocked or stopped. Brain cells can die within minutes. If you have facial drooping, 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. There is a easy reminder for stroke symptoms: FAST: Facial drooping, Arm weakness, Speech trouble, Time. Time means you need to get evaluated and treated immediately by going to the Emergency Room.

Diabetes

Diabetes causes high blood sugar levels and leads to other health problems, including damage to your eyes, kidneys, and heart. Diabetes can get worse if you eat unhealthy food, do little exercise, or are overweight or obese. It's important to know that for Chinese people, even if you are not obese or overweight, you can still get diabetes. There is a BMI calculator that was created for the Asian American population based on research studies.

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, noodles, and white rice
- Eat more vegetables and whole grains (such as brown rice, barley, wild rice, whole buckwheat)
- Stay hydrated by drinking water (preferred). You can drink tea and/or coffee in moderate amounts. Limit intake of artificially sweetened and sugary beverages.
- Increase your exercise. It is recommended to exercise for 30 minutes per day, five days a week, but any amount of physical activity is good for your health.

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. You need to have your eyes checked every 1 to 2 years.

Depression

Getting older doesn't always lead to depression or sadness. These conditions can be caused by chemical imbalances in your brain.

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

- Feeling sad, tired, irritable, or excessive crying
 - Feeling hopeless, thoughts of suicide
 - Anxiety
 - Lacking interest in hobbies and activities you used to enjoy
 - Social isolation, staying in the home and not going out
 - Having trouble sleeping or sleeping too long
 - Having a poor appetite.
 - Being confused or having problems with thinking.
- These symptoms can be confused with 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.

Falls

Falls can lead to serious effects in older people. Many older people have a hard time recovering after a fall. Doing things to prevent falling can help you to protect your health and independence.

If you have had falls in the past, you are at risk of having another fall. It is important to tell your healthcare professional about any times you have fallen or almost fallen. They can then suggest ways to prevent another fall. Some tips for preventing falls include:

- Learning to do tai chi
- Do exercises to strengthen your thigh and leg muscles
- Move slowly and do not rush
- Ask your doctor for a referral to physical therapy
- Go on short walks daily
- Water workouts

- If you are unsteady, use a cane or walker

For more information on preventing falls, see the tip sheet on Preventing Serious Falls.

Cancer

Discovering cancer early leads to better results.

- Don't be afraid to bring up new symptoms with your healthcare professional. If you don't, cancer can be harder to find and treat.
- Make an appointment with your healthcare professional quickly if you experience any of the following: unexpected weight loss, feeling a lump in your breast; developing new shortness of breath, a long-lasting cough, coughing up blood, or finding blood in your urine or feces.
- Ask your healthcare professional 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.

Osteoporosis and Fractures

Many Chinese Americans don't eat a lot of dairy foods such as milk, yogurt, and cheese. This may be due to lactose intolerance and cultural dietary preferences. This may increase the risk of having lower bone density. People with Asian background may be more likely to develop osteoporosis and have bone fractures, partly because they tend to have lower bone density.

Women older than 65 years and older adults with a history of broken bones need a bone density test to test for osteoporosis, a disease that weakens your bones and can break them.

There are steps you can take to keep your bones as healthy as possible:

- Eat foods high in calcium and vitamin D, such as milk that has vitamin D added, yogurt, green leafy vegetables, soy products (like tofu and soy milk), and fish (like canned salmon and sardines thanks to their edible bones). You can request more information from your dietician.
- Take calcium and vitamin D pills if you do not get enough from the food that you eat

- Get physical activity for at least 30 minutes a day, most days of the week

- Avoid smoking

- Limit the amount of alcohol you drink to no more than 1 to 2 drinks a day

- There are a few medicines to treat osteoporosis which your doctor can prescribe. These medicines can reduce the chances that you will break a bone.

Tuberculosis (TB)

Tuberculosis is an infection that spreads easily through the air. Serious symptoms include coughing blood, losing weight without trying, or sweating so much at night that you need to change your clothes or sheets. Report symptoms like these to your healthcare professional right away.

Some parts of China and certain parts of the United States have high rates of tuberculosis. Many people from these areas have latent tuberculosis. This means they do not have symptoms and can't infect others. However, they have had prior exposure to the disease and are at risk of a future infection.

Let your professional know if you have ever been diagnosed, treated, or been vaccinated for tuberculosis. They may need to offer you treatment.

Preventive Health

Preventing or discovering disease early can limit damage to your body. Seeing your healthcare professional at least once a year will help you find diseases early so that they are easier to treat and you may have better results.

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

- Tuberculosis and hepatitis B testing.
- Cancer screenings are important. Some common screening tests are mammograms, prostate exams, and colonoscopies.
- Vaccinations, including flu, pneumonia, shingles, tuberculosis, Hepatitis B, and COVID-19 shots, can prevent serious infections. If you are concerned about getting vaccinations, ask your healthcare professional for more information.

Special Healthcare Concerns of Chinese American Older Adults

- Let your healthcare professional 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.
- Chinese Americans' bodies may process some medications differently than other racial or ethnic groups. This can result in problems with drug levels in their bodies. If you are experiencing any adverse side effects, speak to your health care professional.

Advance Directives and End-of-Life Care

You should discuss advance directives and your preferences and wishes for end-of-life care with your health care professionals. If you want recommendations from your healthcare providers, let them know. We suggest choosing a healthcare proxy—someone you trust to make medical decisions for you if you are unable to make decisions yourself. Be sure to share your wishes and preferences with them in advance.

For more information, here are helpful resources.

- [Chinese Coalition for Compassionate Care](#)
- [PREPARE: Helping People Have a voice in Their health Care](#)

Communicating with your Healthcare Team

Your healthcare team can include physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, nurses, nursing assistants, social workers, pharmacists, therapists, chaplains 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! Don't be afraid to ask for a Chinese interpreter. 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.

Note that if you have immigrated to the United States, your immigration history may be an important part of your personal story. If your healthcare professional knows your history, that will let them know if you have an increased risk of diseases that are common in other countries. It will also help your healthcare professional to know 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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DISCLAIMER: This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other healthcare provider. Always consult your healthcare provider about your medications, symptoms, and health problems. June 2025
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