

## A Guide to Managing Your Health

### Haitian American Older Adults



**A**s an older Haitian American person, this pamphlet 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. Haitian Americans are at increased risk for undetected medical problems such as hypertension, osteoarthritis, and cerebrovascular disease.

When you visit your healthcare provider, let them know about your health needs, cultural beliefs and practices, and questions you may have. Your healthcare providers 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 Haitian Americans, and tips to talk with your healthcare professional about your health care.

### Special Healthcare Concerns of Older Haitian/Haitian 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 vegetable and little meat and few sweets. 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 provider 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.

## Cancer

Haitian Americans are more likely to die from cancer than other racial and ethnic groups. The reasons include fewer cancer screenings and treatments, and discrimination in health care. Breast, lung, prostate, and colon cancers are the most common.

Discovering cancer early leads to better results. So:

- Discuss new symptoms with your healthcare provider. If you don't, the 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, 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.

Talk with your healthcare provider 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

Your healthcare provider 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 provider immediately. You need your eyes checked every 1 to 2 years.

## 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 provider 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 and Marijuana Use

Smoking causes health problems:

- Tobacco has chemicals that are bad for your health. They can cause cancer, lung disease, high blood pressure, and strokes.
- Marijuana can cause the heart to beat faster and increases blood pressure.

- 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.

Older adults who quit can improve their health. However, it can be hard to stop. Get help by:

- Talking with your healthcare provider 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.

### Breathing disorders

Smoking is the most common cause of asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), emphysema, chronic bronchitis, and sleep apnea in Haitian Americans.

If you smoke, please try to quit and stay away from people who are smoking. Air pollution also can make your breathing worse.

Medications and exercise can improve your breathing. Healthcare providers and pharmacists can show you how to use your inhalers correctly.

### Depression and mental illness

Getting older doesn't always lead to depression or severe 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, 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 provider as soon as you can. They can recommend counseling and medications. Family members and friends can support you when you are depressed.

Sometimes shame prevents Haitian Americans from getting mental health care. However, depression is a disease that needs treatment. Medications and behavior therapy can help.

### Dementia

Memory loss and dementia are not a normal part of aging. Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia are the most common types of dementia.

In the beginning of most dementias, people forget things that happened within the last week or month. This is called short-term memory loss. People with dementia also may ask the same questions over and over. However, their long-term memory can still be very good.

As a person's dementia gets worse, they have difficulty doing activities like driving, taking their medications, and paying bills. Their behavior can also change. Eventually, a person with dementia will need help with daily activities like eating, bathing, and dressing.

Some health conditions increase the risk of dementia. These include diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, high cholesterol, depression, smoking, and hearing loss. Doing little exercise also can increase your risk of getting dementia.

If you or a loved one has symptoms of dementia, talk to your healthcare provider. They can determine whether you have dementia or another health problem that is causing problems. The provider can also prescribe treatments that could slow dementia down. Your healthcare provider and social workers can connect you to these treatments and other resources.

## Preventive Health

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.

## 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.

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 Haiti. 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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The AGS Health in Aging Foundation is dedicated to improving the health, independence, and quality of life of all older people. We aim to empower older adults and caregivers to actively participate in their health care and decision-making.

*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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