



# Hispanic/Latina/Latino/Latinx Older Adults: A Guide to Managing Your Health



As a Hispanic/Latina/Latino/Latinx (hereafter referred to as Hispanic/Latinx) person over the age of 65 years, this information might be helpful for you and your family. While many Hispanic/Latinx people trace their heritage or identity to the Caribbean and North, Central, and South America, some Hispanic people trace their origins back to Spain. As a member of these ethnicities or cultures, you might be at greater risk for some diseases. The top five causes of death for older Hispanic/Latina American women are cancer, heart

disease, stroke, diabetes, and Alzheimer's disease. For Hispanic/Latino men, the top five causes of death are cancer, heart disease, diabetes, stroke, and chronic lung diseases. These conditions can be related to lifestyle, nutrition, financial, social, and environmental factors.

Your healthcare team might not be fully familiar with your culture and community. **At your health visits, please let them know your health needs and ask questions. Your healthcare team wants to give you the best care possible and keep you healthy.**

## Special Healthcare Concerns of Older Hispanic/Latinx Americans

### Stroke and Heart Disease

High blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, smoking, and lack of exercise are common risk factors seen in Hispanic/Latinx adults. These conditions increase your risk for having a stroke or a heart attack. Strokes occur when blood supply to the brain is blocked or stopped. Brain damage can happen within minutes.

Adopting a healthy lifestyle can reduce the chances of you having a stroke and/or heart disease. Talk to your healthcare providers about eating healthy, exercising, quitting smoking, and taking medications.

Call 911 or the nearest emergency room immediately:

- if you notice trouble speaking, weakness on one side of your body, severe headache, loss of vision or balance
- if you have severe chest pain and/or shortness of breath, as you may be having a heart attack.

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### Diabetes

Diabetes is a serious disease that causes high blood sugar levels. Having diabetes for a long time, especially if not controlled, can lead to eye, kidney, and heart disease. Being overweight or obese, eating foods high in fats and sugars, and doing little or no exercise can cause or make diabetes worse.

Talk to your healthcare providers about a healthier diet, exercise, and medications. They will check your blood sugar, blood pressure, cholesterol, and kidney function often. If you have diabetes, check your feet daily and report any skin breakdown to your healthcare providers immediately. You should have your eyes checked every 1 to 2 years.

### Obesity

Eating more food than your body needs leads to fat deposits and increases the risk of becoming overweight or obese. Little or no exercise, sleep problems, and poor eating habits lead to weight gain. Being overweight or obese can lead to diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, stroke, heart disease, and even cancer. Obesity can make arthritis pain in your hips and knees worse, making it harder to walk.

What you eat or drink is very important. Some simple ways to lose weight are eat more fruits and vegetables and to eat brown bread and brown rice instead of white bread and white rice. Some other good ways to lose weight are to stop drinking soda/pop/juice, eat fewer fried foods, desserts, and cookies, and decrease your calorie intake by 500 calories a day. A dietitian, a person trained in healthy nutrition, can look at your food choices and work with you to create a healthier diet.

Talk to your healthcare providers about your weight and how to improve your fitness and quality of life. When you are working on losing weight, doing resistance exercises will help avoid muscle loss. Your healthcare providers will show you what exercises would be best. Your healthcare providers and/or a physical therapist or trainer can create a good exercise plan with you.

### Tobacco Use

Smoking is common in Hispanic/Latinx cultures. Cigarettes and tobacco contain chemicals that are bad for your health. Smoking can cause cancer, lung diseases, high blood pressure, and strokes. Your family and friends breathe in your smoke and can get health problems from second-hand smoke. Children who live with people who smoke can develop asthma. E-cigarettes (vaping) and smokeless tobacco (chewing gum, sniffing tobacco) also cause serious health problems. Stopping smoking is very important. Nicotine is addictive and it can be difficult to give up smoking. Talk to your healthcare providers, including pharmacists, to discuss treatments and support groups to help you stop smoking.

### Breathing Disorders

Asthma, chronic obstructive respiratory disease (COPD), emphysema, and chronic bronchitis are common in Hispanic/Latinx adults. Smoking is the most common cause of breathing disorders. If you smoke, the best thing you can do is to quit, and avoid people when they are smoking. Air pollutants 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.

### Cancer

Overall rates of cancer are lower in Hispanic/Latinx American people than non-Hispanic white people. However, cancer is still a leading cause of death in Hispanic/Latinx populations. Liver, thyroid, and uterine cancers are more common in your culture. The risk of cancers such as breast, prostate, and colon are also increased. Avoiding alcohol, stop smoking, and eating a diet low in salt and fat can decrease your risk of getting cancer.

### Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia

Alzheimer's disease and dementia (memory loss) are not a normal part of aging. Diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, high cholesterol, depression, smoking, and little or no exercise can increase your risk of developing Alzheimer's disease. In the beginning, people with dementia forget things that happened in the last week or month, which is called short-term memory loss. However, their long-term memory can still be very good. Older adults might forget about a doctor's appointment but be able to tell great stories about when they were growing up. As people's memory gets worse, they begin having difficulty doing certain chores such as driving, taking their medications, and paying bills. Forgetting recent events or conversations can be early signs of Alzheimer's disease. As this disease gets worse, older adults sometimes become more aggressive and violent. Later on, family members might need to help older adults with eating, bathing, and dressing.

If you notice that you or your loved ones show signs of decreased memory, talk to your healthcare providers. Learning about dementia and how to care for people with this condition will improve your understanding of this disease. Some treatments do slow memory loss and many resources are available for this disease. Your healthcare providers and social workers are here to connect you to these treatments and resources.

### Liver Disease

Liver disease is also more common among Hispanic/Latinx adults and can cause serious illness. Some liver disease is due to heavy drinking, obesity, and/or exposure to certain infections like hepatitis B and C viruses. Let your healthcare providers know about the amount of alcohol you drink, recent travel, and exposure to other people with hepatitis. Your healthcare providers can discuss treatments and counseling to stop drinking alcohol and treat some liver diseases.

### Depression

Depression and severe sadness are not due to getting older. They are due to chemical imbalances in your brain. Depression is a serious health condition and can lead to other health problems. For some older adults, sadness is not the main symptom. Symptoms can include feeling tired or irritable, lacking interest in hobbies and activities you used to enjoy, and having trouble sleeping. Confusion and memory problems can be due to depression and can look like dementia. If you feel depressed or have thoughts of hurting yourself, talk to your healthcare providers. They can recommend counseling and medications. The support of family members and friends is important if you are depressed.

### Preventive Health

Preventing or discovering disease early rather than waiting until the disease has caused damage is best. At first, some diseases have no symptoms, meaning you might not know you have the disease. Seeing your healthcare provider at least once a year will help identify diseases early, so they might require fewer treatments. Diseases identified early, especially cancers, can have better results. Your healthcare providers can recommend cancer screenings. Some common screening tests are mammograms, prostate evaluation, and colonoscopies. Flu, pneumonia, and shingles vaccinations can prevent serious infections. Your healthcare providers can help you have a healthy lifestyle including improving diet and exercise, losing weight, and helping you quit smoking.

## 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 your culture and what is important to you! You will receive the best care by being open and honest about your cultural beliefs, since they might have a major impact on your health.

## Ways to Improve your Health Care

### Timing

- Go to appointments 20 minutes before the scheduled time.
- If you cannot go to your appointment, call the provider's office as soon as possible. This helps all patients get good care.

### Language Barriers

- Tell healthcare providers if you do not speak, understand, or read English well.
- Tell healthcare providers before your appointment if you need a medical interpreter (a trained person who speaks your language). Using an interpreter is better than your family member or friend.
- Bring a family member or friend with you for support and to help with remembering health discussions.
- Bring a note in English written by a family member or friend to your visit about your concerns, which can also help communication.
- Ask for written or visual information in Spanish.
- Ask healthcare providers to explain things you do not understand.

### Traditional Medicines, Supplements, and Complementary Therapies

- Tell your healthcare providers if:
- You take traditional treatments such as herbs and supplements, as they can affect other medications you are taking.
  - You take medications from other countries, such as antibiotics.
  - You believe in *Curanderismo*, *santería*, or *espiritismo*.
  - You believe spirits affect you in a good or bad way.
  - You do certain rituals to improve your health.

## Customs

Share your cultural beliefs with your healthcare providers; such as if:

- You fast on holy days. Your medications might need to be changed during those days.
- You prefer direct eye contact, like to shake hands, or any other customs that would make you feel more comfortable.
- You wish a close relationship with one healthcare provider (*personalismo*) instead of many providers in a health system.
- You are concerned your health problems are related to an imbalance between hot and cold or wet and dry.
- You prefer treatments specific for hot and cold problems.
- You are concerned your health problems are a punishment from God (*fatalismo*).
- You believe it is the family's duty to care for older adults (*familismo*).
- You place your family's needs ahead of your own health.
- You want another person (family member or friend) to make healthcare decisions for you.
- You wish to discuss your medical conditions with a religious leader.
- You have some fears about the health care system and its costs.
- You are concerned that the healthcare system is performing experiments on you without your consent.
- You would like certain family members not to know about your medical conditions.
- You are hesitant about discussing topics related to planning for death or disability.

## Medications and Side Effects

- Bring all your medications to every appointment so your healthcare providers know exactly what you are taking.
- Tell your healthcare providers about all your medications:
  - Why you take them.
  - How you take them.
  - If they help or not.
  - If they make you feel bad.
  - If you have stopped or forget to take them.
  - If you cannot afford them.
- Describe any allergies you have.

## Sensitive Medical Information

- Problems with memory, bowel movements, urination, sleep, and sexual function are common in older adults. Talk to your healthcare providers so they can help you resolve these problems. These health problems often improve with treatment.

## Health Care Decisions and Planning for End-of-life Care

- An advance directive is a legal document that lets healthcare providers know your wishes. It will tell them how you want to be treated if you become very ill.
- You can name a family member or close friend to make decisions for you during these times.
- Discussions about these topics can be difficult. Discussing your wishes with your family while you are feeling good can make the decision-making easier. When you do become seriously ill or are dying, you will have made important decisions already. All these early decisions can be changed at any time.

## Other Concerns to Discuss

Tell your healthcare providers if:

- You feel lonely or isolated.
- Someone is causing you physical or verbal harm and/or abuse, even by people close to you. No one has the right to harm you!
- People are misusing your money, property, and/or medications.
- You cannot afford your health care or medications.
- You would like healthcare providers and/or a social worker to help you solve some of these problems. They can find resources for you in your neighborhood.

## Before you Leave your Appointment

- The more information you know about your medical conditions and treatments, the better your health and health care can be.
- Before you leave your visit, ask your healthcare providers:
  1. What is my main problem?
  2. What do I need to do?
  3. Why is it important for me to do this?
  4. Are there other options or choices I can make?
  5. How can my family help me?

**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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