

A Guide to Managing Your Health

Korean American Older Adults



As an older Korean American person, this resource is for you, whether you were born in the United States (U.S.) or came from another country. You may have higher risks for some diseases because of your genetics, health habits, how the healthcare system treats you, your environment, or immigration status. Health concerns include osteoporosis, heart disease and stroke, cancer, diabetes, 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 this information because they want to give you good care and keep you as healthy as possible.

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

Special Healthcare Concerns of Older Korean Americans

Cancer

Korean Americans are at high risk of cancer, especially of the liver and stomach. Discovering cancer early leads to better results.

- Talk with your healthcare professional about any new symptoms. Cancer can be hard to find and treat if you ignore things happening in your body.
- See your healthcare professional quickly if you experience any of the following: feeling a lump in your breast; developing new breathing problems, a long-lasting cough, or 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.

Avoid alcohol, stop smoking, and eat a healthy diet low in salt and fat to decrease your risk of getting cancer.

Diabetes

Diabetes causes high blood sugar levels and leads to other health problems, including damage to your eyes, teeth, heart, kidneys, and feet. Diabetes can get worse if you eat unhealthy foods, do little exercise, or are overweight or obese.

Special Healthcare Concerns of Older Japanese Americans

Talk with your healthcare professional about how to eat a diabetes-friendly diet, exercise, and take the medications you may need. Some tips include:

- Decrease carbohydrates in your diet, such as white bread, rice, and pasta
- Eat more vegetables and low calorie foods
- Drink water (preferred) and avoid 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. Check your feet daily and report any skin problems (cuts, wounds) to your healthcare professional immediately. Have your eyes checked every year and see a dentist every 6 months.

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/or are not physically active.

Eating foods low in fat and salt is important. Eating lots of vegetables and fruits with little meat and few sweets can lower your risk also. Limit the alcohol you drink to no more than one drink per day for women and two drinks per day for men.

Other things can reduce your risks including getting daily exercise, stopping smoking, controlling blood pressure, and taking medications you and your providers agreed on. Talk to your healthcare professional about how to reduce your risks and follow their advice.

Be aware of immediate risks to your health. Heart attacks happen when a part of the heart does not get enough blood. If you have chest pain and/or shortness of breath, you might be having a heart attack. 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, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room right away.

Hepatitis B

There are higher rates of untreated Hepatitis B infections in Asian immigrant populations. Hepatitis B

is an infection that can spread through body fluids. It is important to test for Hepatitis B and receive vaccination.

If a person with Hepatitis B doesn't get treatment, they can have serious liver disease later in life.

Tell your healthcare professional if you have never been tested for or vaccinated against Hepatitis B.

Osteoporosis

Korean Americans are at high risk of having osteoporosis. Decreased dairy intake, from lactose intolerance or cultural dietary preferences, can increase the risk of having 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 more easily break them. Getting regular exercise and eating foods high in calcium and vitamin D can help your bone strength. There are a few medicines to treat osteoporosis which your provider can prescribe. These medicines can reduce the chances that you will break a bone.

Here are steps you can take to keep your bones healthy:

- Eat foods high in calcium and vitamin D, such as milk (with vitamin D added), yogurt, green leafy vegetables, and fish
- Take calcium and vitamin D supplements (pills/gummies) if you do not get enough from the foods 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

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 out about diseases early so that they are easier to treat and you have better results.

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

- Tuberculosis and hepatitis B testing.
- Cancer screenings using common screening tests such as mammograms, prostate exams, and

colonoscopies.

■ Vaccinations including flu, pneumonia, shingles, RSV and COVID-19 shots can prevent serious infections. If you are concerned about getting vaccines, ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist for more information.

■ Let your healthcare professional and pharmacists know if you take home remedies, herbs, vitamins, or supplements. They can help make sure these products are safe to take with your prescription medications and other treatments.

Tuberculosis (TB)

Tuberculosis is an infection that spreads easily through the air. Serious symptoms include coughing up 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.

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

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 practices. These beliefs and practices can affect your healthcare and 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 U.S., 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 for better care and prevention.

**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. May 2024

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