

10 Tips for Aging Well

Simply living longer isn't enough. What we really want is to live longer well, staying healthy enough to continue doing the things we love. While having good genes certainly helps, a growing body of research suggests that how well you age depends largely on you and what you do. Fortunately, research also finds that it's never too late to make changes that can help you live a longer and healthier life.

Here, from the American Geriatrics Society's Health in Aging Foundation, are ten tips for living longer and better:

Eat a rainbow

You need fewer calories when you get older, so choose nutrient-rich foods like brightly colored fruits and vegetables. Eat a range of colors— the more varied, the wider the range of nutrients you're likely to get. Aim for two servings of salmon, sardines, brook trout, or other fish rich in heart healthy omega-3 fatty acids a week. Limit red meat and whole-fat dairy products. And choose whole grains over the refined stuff.

Sidestep falls

Walking as little as 30 minutes, three times a week can help you stay physically fit and mentally sharp, strengthen your bones, lift your spirits—and lower your risk of falls. That's important because falls are a leading cause of fractures, other serious injuries, and death among older adults. Bicycling, dancing, and jogging are also good weight-bearing exercises that can help strengthen your bones. In addition to exercising, get plenty of bone-healthy calcium and vitamin D daily.

Toast with a smaller glass

Drinking a moderate amount of alcohol may lower your risks of heart disease and some other illnesses. But what's "moderate" changes with age. It means just 1 drink per day for older men and ½ a drink daily for older women. (A "drink" is 1 oz of hard liquor, 6 oz of wine, or 12 oz of beer.) Since alcohol can interact with certain drugs, ask your healthcare professional whether any

Know the low-down on sleep in later life

Contrary to popular belief, older people don't need less sleep than younger adults. New recommendations from the National Sleep Foundation suggest 7 to 8 hours of shut-eye a night. If you're getting that much and are still sleepy during the day, see your healthcare professional. You may have a sleep disorder called sleep apnea. People with sleep apnea stop breathing briefly, but repeatedly, while sleeping. Among other things, untreated sleep apnea can increase your risk of developing heart disease.

Flatten your (virtual) opponent, sharpen your mind

Conquering your adversary in a complex computer game, joining a discussion club, learning a new language, and engaging in social give-and-take with other people can all help keep your brain sharp, studies suggest.

Enjoy safe sex

Older adults are having sex more often and enjoying it more, research finds. Unfortunately, more older people are also being diagnosed with sexually transmitted diseases. To protect yourself, use a condom and a lubricant every time you have sex until you're in a monogamous relationship with someone whose sexual history you know.

Get a medications check

When you visit your healthcare professional, bring either all of the prescription and over-the-counter medications, vitamins, herbs and supplements you take, or a complete list that notes the names of each, the doses you take, and how often you take them. Ask your healthcare provider to review everything you brought or put on your list. He or she should make sure they're safe for you to take, and that they don't interact in harmful ways. The older you are, and the more medicines you take, the more likely you are to experience medication side effects, even from drugs bought over-the-counter.

Speak up when you feel down or anxious

Roughly 1 in 5 older adults suffers from depression or anxiety. Lingering sadness, tiredness, loss of appetite or pleasure from things you once enjoyed, difficulty sleeping, worry, irritability, and wanting to be alone much of the time can all be signs that you need help. Tell your healthcare professional right away. There are many good treatments for these problems.

Get your shots

They're not just for kids! Must-have vaccines for seniors include those that protect against pneumonia, tetanus/diphtheria, shingles, and the flu, which kills thousands of older adults in the US every year.

Find the right healthcare professional and make the most of your visits

See your healthcare professional regularly, answer his or her questions frankly, ask any questions you have, and follow his or her advice. If you have multiple, chronic health problems, your best bet may be to see a geriatrics healthcare professional—someone with advanced training that prepares her to care for the most complex patients. The AGS' Health in Aging Foundation can help you find one; visit www.healthinaging.org.