

For Men: Tips for Good Health in Later Life

Americans are living longer than ever, but American men still aren't living as long as American women.

The average life expectancy for men in the US is now roughly 75 years. For women, it's more than 80.

Exactly why men are shorter-lived than women isn't entirely clear. Even in infancy boys run a higher risk of dying than girls, and researchers aren't sure why. Research, however, does suggest that a leading reason for the "longevity gap" between men and women is that men don't take care of themselves as well as women do. Surveys have found, for example, that women are much more likely to have a regular healthcare provider, and to see him or her within the course of the year, than men are. Men are also more likely to engage in "risky" behaviors – like smoking and drinking heavily – than women. By taking better care of themselves, experts agree, men can boost their odds of living healthier, longer lives.

Tips for Older Men

See your healthcare provider regularly

Even if you feel perfectly healthy, you should see your provider at least once a year for a checkup.

Call or see your healthcare provider when you're feeling sick

Surveys find that men are less likely than women to see a healthcare provider when they're not feeling well. In one survey, 40% of men said that, if sick, they would delay seeking medical care for a few days. Seventeen percent said they would wait "at least a week." Prompt medical care can make a big difference – sometimes, the difference between life and death. Don't wait.

Take medications, vitamins and supplements only as directed

When you visit your provider, bring either all of the pills you take, or a complete list of these that notes the doses you take, and how often you take them. Include medicines, vitamins, herbs and supplements (even those you buy in the store without a prescription). Why? Because the longer you live, and the more medicines you take, the more likely you are to experience some side effects, even from medicines bought over-the-counter at the pharmacy. Your provider should check all of your pills to make sure they're safe for you to take, and that they don't interact in harmful ways. Always check with your provider, or your pharmacist, before taking any new medicines of any kind. Take all medicines as directed, and tell your provider right away if a medication or other pill seems to be causing any problems or side effects.

Get your shots!

Check with your healthcare provider to make sure you're getting:

■ **A flu shot**—every year in September or October before the flu season starts

■ **The shingles (herpes zoster) vaccine**—once when 60 or older

■ **Pneumonia vaccination**—once after age 65 (your healthcare provider may suggest that you also get “booster” pneumonia shots every 6 or 7 years)

■ **A combination tetanus/diphtheria booster shot**—every 10 years

Use sunscreen

Aging skin is more susceptible to sun damage, which boosts risks of skin cancer. Use sunscreen year round and, for added protection, wear a wide-brimmed hat.

Lower your risk of falls and fractures

Be sure to get plenty of bone-healthy calcium and vitamin D daily. Aim for 1500 mg of calcium daily. Talk to your healthcare provider about how much vitamin D you need. Research suggests that many older adults aren't getting enough of this nutrient, which plays many key roles in keeping you healthy. Do weight-bearing, bone-building exercises such as walking and jogging. Weight-lifting and other strength training exercises are also good for your bones. If you've fallen in the past, ask your healthcare provider about local exercise programs that include strength training as well as balance, flexibility, and stretching exercises.

Don't smoke; quit if you do

Tell your healthcare provider if you smoke; he or she can help you stop. For additional help, call 1 800-QUIT NOW or visit www.healthfinder.gov and click on “smoking.” It's never too late to quit.

Eat right

In later life, you still need to eat healthy foods, though you need fewer calories. The USDA's updated MyPyramid for Older Adults, at <http://mypyramid.gov/>, and your healthcare provider can help you choose a healthier diet. You can also get a personal nutrition plan at the USDA website.

Exercise your brain

Join a book or discussion club. Sign up for a class at the local library, senior center, or community college (some offer free classes or older adults). Do word puzzles, number puzzles, jigsaw puzzles – whatever interests you. Make sure you challenge your brain by trying new things, and playing against the clock rather than just repeating the same exercises over and over again. Go to <http://games.aarp.org/> for free games of all kinds, to play alone or with others.

Drink only in moderation

Check with your healthcare provider to make sure that drinking alcohol—in light to moderate amounts—is alright for you. For men, moderate drinking means no more than two alcoholic drinks daily. One drink = 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1½ ounces of hard liquor.

Spend time with others

Spending time and doing things with other people, of all ages, can help keep you mentally, physically and emotionally fit. It can also give your brain a boost and lift your mood. So volunteer, or join community or other groups and get involved in activities you enjoy.

Get Checked Out!

Screening, or checking, for early signs of certain health problems can help diagnose them early. The following approaches are generally recommended for older men. Ask your healthcare provider if they're right for you.

■ **Abdominal aortic aneurysm screening**—once between the ages of 65 and 75 if you've ever smoked. An abdominal aortic aneurysm is an enlarged or swollen blood vessel in your abdomen that can be dangerous. If your healthcare provider finds you have an abdominal aortic aneurysm, it can be treated.

■ **Bone health evaluation**—periodically. Your healthcare provider should evaluate your risk of osteoporosis, or "thinning of the bones." (It's not just a "woman's disease.")

Depending on what the evaluation finds, he or she may recommend that you get a bone scan and, if necessary, take medication to strengthen your bones and lower your risk of fractures.

Remember: exercise strengthens the bones at any age.

■ **Blood pressure check**—at least once a year

■ **Cholesterol test for high blood cholesterol levels**—at least once every five years (more often if heart disease or diabetes runs in your family)

■ **Diabetes check**—at least once; if you have high blood pressure or high blood cholesterol levels, or diabetes runs in your family, get checked every three years

■ **Screenings for Prostate Cancer and Colorectal Cancer**—Geriatrics experts now do not recommend screening for either colorectal or prostate cancer without first considering life expectancy. Studies have shown that the short-term risks may not be worth the benefits if life expectancy is under 10 years. You should talk to your healthcare provider if you have any concerns about these screenings.

■ **Hearing and vision screening**—every year.

■ **Depression screening**—every year. If you feel down, sad, or hopeless for two or more weeks, or have little interest in or get little pleasure from things you once enjoyed, you may be depressed. Don't try to "tough it out." Untreated depression is bad for your mental and physical health. Talk to your healthcare provider and get the treatment you need.

■ **Dental check-up**—as often as your dentist recommends, and at least once a year. Your dentist should clean your teeth and check for cavities. If you wear dentures, he or she should check to make sure they still fit properly. Your dentist should also check for signs of diseases of the mouth, including cancer.

■ **Sexually transmitted disease screening**—This is important at any age if you are sexually active. Talk with your healthcare provider about this and how to practice safe sex.

■ **Discussion about sexual concerns**—Erectile dysfunction (ED), or difficulty getting or maintaining an erection, is relatively common among older men. You should let your healthcare provider know if you have ED both because it can be treated and because it can be an early warning sign of heart and artery disease.

■ **Other screening tests**—as recommended by your healthcare provider.