

For Women: Tips for Good Health in Later Life

Older women are more likely than men to have chronic, or ongoing, health conditions—such as arthritis, high blood pressure, and osteoporosis. Women are also more likely to develop multiple health problems, according to a recent report from the Kaiser Family Foundation. Older women are also more likely to have memory or other “cognitive” problems, and difficulty carrying out daily activities such as dressing, walking, or bathing without help.

Fortunately, there’s a lot you can do to boost your chances of staying mentally and physically healthy as you age. Here’s what the experts with the American Geriatrics Society’s Health in Aging Foundation recommend.

Tips for Older Women

See your healthcare provider regularly

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

Eat a rainbow

In later life, you still need healthy foods, but fewer calories. Your healthcare provider and the USDA’s updated Choose My Plate for Older Adults (<https://www.choosemyplate.gov/older-adults>) can help you make good choices.

Experts recommend eating at least five servings of fruits and vegetables daily—but less than a third of older adults do this. Don’t miss out. Choose a variety of fruits and vegetables. Go for deep colors: dark green, bright yellow, and orange choices like spinach, collard greens, carrots, oranges, and cantaloupe are extra nutritious. Choose fiber-rich whole grain bread, rice, and pasta instead of the white stuff. Pick less fatty meat, like chicken, and low-fat milk, cheese, and yogurt.

Shoot for heart-healthy fish, like tuna or salmon, twice a week. To help keep your bones strong, include sources of calcium and Vitamin D—two daily servings of milk, yogurt, or cheese are a good bet—in your diet. And use healthier fats, such as olive and canola oils, instead of butter or lard.

Take medications, vitamins and supplements only as directed

When you visit your provider, bring all of the pills you take, including medicines, vitamins, herbs, and supplements, even those you buy without a prescription. Your provider should check all of your pills to make sure they are safe for you to take. Always check with your provider before taking any new pills. Take all medicines and other pills as directed, and tell your provider right away if a medication or other pill seems to be causing any problems or side effects.

Get vaccinated

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

- A flu shot: every year in late summer or early fall, before the flu season starts (find more information at www.flu.gov)
- Two pneumonia vaccinations: pneumococcal conjugate vaccine (PCV)13 and pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccine (PPSV)23. Ask your healthcare provider about when to take the two vaccines
- A tetanus shot: every 10 years
- The shingles (herpes zoster) vaccine: once after age 60 or older

Get screened

Certain screening tests can help diagnose health problems early. Ask your healthcare provider which tests are right for you:

- **Screenings for colorectal cancer:** Geriatrics experts now do not recommend screening for colorectal 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.
- **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.
- **Cholesterol test for high blood cholesterol levels:** Cholesterol screening should be done after consulting with your physician. Screening frequency depends on your age and general health.
- **Blood pressure check:** At least once a year.
- **Bone health evaluation:** Medicare pays for a screening test for osteoporosis every 2 years. Consult your healthcare provider to evaluate your risk for osteoporosis and their recommendations for screening and possible therapy.
- **Depression screening:** 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.
- **Hearing and vision screening:** Every year.
- **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, they should be checked to make sure they still fit properly. Your dentist should also check for signs of diseases of the mouth, including cancer.
- **Screening for diseases that you can get during sex:** If you are sexually active but not in a monogamous relationship, these screenings are important at any age. Talk with your healthcare provider about this and how to practice safe sex.

Reduce your risk of falls and fractures

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. Weightlifting 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.

Quit smoking

Tell your healthcare provider if you smoke—he or she can help you stop. For additional help, call **1 800-QUITNOW**. It's never too late to quit.

Drink in moderation

Older women should drink no more than 3 drinks on a given day or 7 drinks total in a week. (One drink = 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1½ ounces of hard liquor.) If you have a health problem or take certain medications, you may need to drink less or not at all.

Use sunscreen daily

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

Exercise your body

Regular exercise is important for good health, no matter how old you are. Along with a healthy diet, exercise helps you reach and maintain a healthy weight. It tones up your heart, circulation, and muscles; strengthens bones; increases brain function; lifts your mood; and can help prevent and ease depression. If you exercise with others you also get the fun and benefits of their company. The CDC offers great advice on exercising that's tailored to older adults (<https://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/basics/index.htm>) Your healthcare provider can help you come up with an exercise program that's right for you.

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 for 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. AARP provides free games of all kinds, to play alone or with others (<https://games.aarp.org>).