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Aging: What to expect

Wonder what's considered a normal part of the aging process?

Here's what to expect as you get older — and what to do about it.

[By Mayo Clinic Staff](#)

You know that aging will likely cause wrinkles and gray hair. But do you know how aging will affect your teeth, heart and sexuality? Find out what changes to expect as you continue aging — and how to promote good health at any age.

Your cardiovascular system

What's happening

The most common change in the cardiovascular system is stiffening of the blood vessels and arteries, causing your heart to work harder to pump blood through them. The heart muscles change to adjust to the increased workload. Your heart rate at rest will stay about the same, but it won't increase during activities as much as it used to. These changes increase the risk of high blood pressure (hypertension) and other cardiovascular problems.

What you can do

To promote heart health:

- **Include physical activity in your daily routine.** Try walking, swimming or other activities you enjoy. Regular moderate physical activity can help you maintain a healthy weight and lower your heart disease risk.
- **Eat a healthy diet.** Choose vegetables, fruits, whole grains, high-fiber foods and lean sources of protein, such as fish. Limit foods high in saturated fat and salt.

- **Don't smoke.** Smoking contributes to the hardening of your arteries and increases your blood pressure and heart rate. If you smoke or use other tobacco products, ask your doctor to help you quit.
- **Manage stress.** Stress can take a toll on your heart. Take steps to reduce stress, such as meditation, exercise or talk therapy.
- **Get enough sleep.** Quality sleep plays an important role in the healing and repair of your heart and blood vessels. Aim for seven to nine hours a night.

Your bones, joints and muscles

What's happening

With age, bones tend to shrink in size and density, weakening them and making them more susceptible to fracture. You might even become a bit shorter. Muscles generally lose strength, endurance and flexibility — factors that can affect your coordination, stability and balance.

What you can do

To promote bone, joint and muscle health:

- **Get adequate amounts of calcium.** The National Academy of Science, Engineering, and Medicine recommends at least 1,000 milligrams (mg) of calcium daily for adults. The recommendation increases to 1,200 mg daily for women age 51 and older and men age 71 and older. Dietary sources of calcium include dairy products, broccoli, kale, salmon and tofu. If you find it difficult to get enough calcium from your diet, ask your doctor about calcium supplements.
- **Get adequate amounts of vitamin D.** The recommended daily intake of vitamin D is 600 international units for adults up to age 70 and 800 IU for adults over 70. Many people get adequate amounts of vitamin D from sunlight. Other sources include tuna, salmon, eggs, vitamin D-fortified milk and vitamin D supplements.
- **Include physical activity in your daily routine.** Weight-bearing exercises, such as walking, jogging, tennis, climbing stairs and weight training can help you build strong bones and slow bone loss.

- **Avoid substance abuse.** Avoid smoking and limit alcoholic drinks. Ask your doctor about how much alcohol might be safe for your age, sex and general health.

Your digestive system

What's happening

Age-related structural changes in the large intestine can result in more constipation in older adults. Other contributing factors include a lack of exercise, not drinking enough fluids and a low-fiber diet. Medications, such as diuretics and iron supplements, and certain medical conditions, such as diabetes, also might contribute to constipation.

What you can do

To prevent constipation:

- **Eat a healthy diet.** Make sure your diet includes high-fiber foods, such as fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Limit high-fat meats, dairy products and sweets, which might cause constipation. Drink plenty of water and other fluids.
- **Include physical activity in your daily routine.** Regular physical activity can help prevent constipation.
- **Don't ignore the urge to have a bowel movement.** Holding in a bowel movement for too long can cause constipation.

Your bladder and urinary tract

What's happening

Your bladder may become less elastic as you age, resulting in the need to urinate more often. Weakening of bladder muscles and pelvic floor muscles may make it difficult for you to empty your bladder completely or cause you to lose bladder control (urinary incontinence). In men, an enlarged or inflamed prostate also can cause difficult emptying the bladder and incontinence.

Other factors that contribute to incontinence include being overweight, nerve damage from diabetes, certain medications, and caffeine or alcohol consumption.

What you can do

To promote bladder and urinary tract health:

- **Go to the toilet regularly.** Consider urinating on a regular schedule, such as every hour. Slowly, extend the amount of time between your toilet trips.
- **Maintain a healthy weight.** If you're overweight, lose excess pounds.
- **Don't smoke.** If you smoke or use other tobacco products, ask your doctor to help you quit.
- **Do Kegel exercises.** To exercise your pelvic floor muscles (Kegel exercises), squeeze the muscles you would use to stop passing gas. Try it for three seconds at a time, and then relax for a count of three. Work up to doing the exercise 10 to 15 times in a row, at least three times a day.
- **Avoid bladder irritants.** Caffeine, acidic foods, alcohol and carbonated beverages can make incontinence worse.
- **Avoid constipation.** Eat more fiber and take other steps to avoid constipation, which can worsen incontinence.

Your memory and thinking skills

What's happening

Your brain undergoes changes as you age that may have minor effects on your memory or thinking skills. For example, healthy older adults might forget familiar names or words, or they may find it more difficult to multitask.

What you can do

You can promote cognitive health by taking the following steps:

- **Include physical activity in your daily routine.** Physical activity increases blood flow to your whole body, including your brain. Studies suggest regular exercise is associated with better brain function and reduces stress and depression — factors that affect memory.
- **Eat a healthy diet.** A heart-healthy diet may benefit your brain. Focus on fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Choose low-fat

- protein sources, such as fish, lean meat and skinless poultry. Too much alcohol can lead to confusion and memory loss.
- **Stay mentally active.** Staying mentally active may help sustain your memory and thinking skills. You can read, play word games, take up a new hobby, take classes, or learn to play an instrument.
 - **Be social.** Social interaction helps ward off depression and stress, which can contribute to memory loss. You might volunteer at a local school or nonprofit, spend time with family and friends, or attend social events.
 - **Treat cardiovascular disease.** Follow your doctor's recommendations to manage cardiovascular risk factors — high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes — that may increase the risk of cognitive decline.
 - **Quit smoking.** If you smoke, quitting smoking may help your cognitive health.

If you're concerned about memory loss or other changes in your thinking skills, talk to your doctor.

Your eyes and ears

What's happening

With age, you might have difficulty focusing on objects that are close up. You might become more sensitive to glare and have trouble adapting to different levels of light. Aging also can affect your eye's lens, causing clouded vision (cataracts).

Your hearing also might diminish. You might have difficulty hearing high frequencies or following a conversation in a crowded room.

What you can do

To promote eye and ear health:

- **Schedule regular checkups.** Follow your doctor's advice about glasses, contact lenses, hearing aids and other corrective devices.
- **Take precautions.** Wear sunglasses or a wide-brimmed hat when you're outdoors, and use earplugs when you're around loud machinery or other loud noises.

Your teeth

What's happening

Your gums might pull back from your teeth. Certain medications, such as those that treat allergies, asthma, high blood pressure and high cholesterol, also can cause dry mouth. As a result, your teeth and gums might become slightly more vulnerable to decay and infection.

What you can do

To promote oral health:

- **Brush and floss.** Brush your teeth twice a day, and clean between your teeth — using regular dental floss or an interdental cleaner — once a day.
- **Schedule regular checkups.** Visit your dentist or dental hygienist for regular dental checkups.

Your skin

What's happening

With age, your skin thins and becomes less elastic and more fragile, and fatty tissue just below the skin decreases. You might notice that you bruise more easily. Decreased production of natural oils might make your skin drier. Wrinkles, age spots and small growths called skin tags are more common.

What you can do

To promote healthy skin:

- **Be gentle.** Bathe or shower in warm — not hot — water. Use mild soap and moisturizer.
- **Take precautions.** When you're outdoors, use sunscreen and wear protective clothing. Check your skin regularly and report changes to your doctor.
- **Don't smoke.** If you smoke or use other tobacco products, ask your doctor to help you quit. Smoking contributes to skin damage, such as wrinkling.

Your weight

What's happening

How your body burns calories (metabolism) slows down as you age. If you decrease activities as you age, but continue to eat the same as usual, you'll gain weight. To maintain a healthy weight, stay active and eat healthy.

What you can do

To maintain a healthy weight:

- **Include physical activity in your daily routine.** Regular moderate physical activity can help you maintain a healthy weight.
- **Eat a healthy diet.** Choose vegetables, fruits, whole grains, high-fiber foods and lean sources of protein, such as fish. Limit sugar and foods high in saturated fat.
- **Watch your portion sizes.** To cut calories, keep an eye on your portion sizes.

Your sexuality

What's happening

With age, sexual needs and performance might change. Illness or medication might affect your ability to enjoy sex. For women, vaginal dryness can make sex uncomfortable. For men, impotence might become a concern. It might take longer to get an erection, and erections might not be as firm as they used to be.

What you can do

To promote your sexual health:

- **Share your needs and concerns with your partner.** You might find the physical intimacy without intercourse is right for you, or you may experiment with different sexual activities.
- **Get regular exercise.** Exercise improves the release of sexual hormones, cardiovascular health, flexibility, mood and self-image — all factors that contribute to good sexual health.

- **Talk to your doctor.** Your doctor might offer specific treatment suggestions — such as estrogen cream for vaginal dryness or oral medication for erectile dysfunction in men.

You can't stop the aging process, but you can make choices that improve your ability to maintain an active life, to do the things you enjoy, and to spend time with loved ones.

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