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Growing older, staying healthy

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Abstract

Staying healthy and feeling your best is important at any age and that doesn't change just because you have a few more grey hairs. As we grow older, one experiences an increasing number of major life changes, including career changes and retirement, children leaving home, the loss of loved ones, and physical changes. How we handle and grow from these changes is the key to staying healthy. These tips can help you maintain your physical and emotional health and live life to the fullest, whatever your age. If you take good care of your body and learn positive ways to deal with stress now, you can slow down or even prevent problems that often come with getting older. It's never too early or too late to change bad habits and start good ones. No matter when you start, a healthy lifestyle can make a difference in how you feel and what you can do.

Keywords: Health, age, fitness, diet, exercise.

Introduction

As we move through the stages of life what we eat and how active we are becomes more important to the quality of life we live and can expect to live in the future. People age differently, so chronological age may not be useful in predicting health or physical status. The world best performance in the marathon for a 74 year old is 2 hours 58 minutes: this is pretty good at any age, let alone for someone who has been drawing a pension for 10 years.

Loss of muscle mass and the resulting weakness often restrict physical activity in older adults and this further affects the energy intake and nutrient density of the diet. An increasing number of studies highlight how regular exercise improves our functional capacity as we age, leading to improvements in muscle function, mobility, and metabolism. Even beyond the age of 100 years, muscle and other tissues can still adapt if a training stimulus is applied. Mental function is also enhanced by regular exercise and this aspect should not be neglected.

Good nutrition supports all these improvements and the right timing and intake of certain nutrients (carbohydrate, protein, and fluids) can have important benefits to health and to the enjoyment of exercise. This section is for those older adults. Who are relatively healthy without major chronic diseases or limiting conditions (and also perhaps for those who plan on being older one day!

Stages of growing old

Young adults:

Lifestyle changes; new family; time pressures

Middle years 35 – 50 years:

Changing demands of family and work; early health concerns

Young older years 50 – 75:

Weight changes; loss of lean mass; health concerns

Old old over 75 years:

Possibly several health issues (cancer, heart disease, diabetes); more time for recreation; loss of strength, flexibility and mobility lower energy requirements

We are all getting older and living longer with the over 85's the fastest growing segment of the population in many developed countries. The longest documented life span is 118 years. As we age through adulthood we may need to learn to live with a range of health conditions which also may affect our ability to exercise and limit mobility (arthritis and some forms of cancer, for example).

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Need to take drugs and medications become increasingly common. Exercise is highly protective from the aging process and when combined with the right food choice can greatly influence the equality of life as we get older.

As we age, changes in body functions include changes in hormone status in both men and women. Absorption of some vitamins and minerals decreases (especially iron, calcium and vitamin B12) altering the ability to provide the nutrients we need to maintain health. Slightly higher intakes of iron – rich foods are encouraged especially for the active elderly as iron is a key nutrient in energy production and the transport of oxygen to the muscles (although older women may actually require less iron as menstruation ceases after the menopause). Colon function delves and the abdominal and pelvic muscles weaken, increasing the problem of constipation. Being active, staying well hydrated, and ensuring a higher fiber intake can relieve constipation and reduce the need for some medications. Calcium-rich foods are critical for older individuals, as bone loss occurs naturally with aging, but varying levels of lactose intolerance (resulting in bloating and discomfort, requiring smaller serving of lactose-containing dairy foods such as milk and yoghurt) become more common. Physical activity and a diet rich in nutrients for bone health (calcium, protein, vitamin D) are important considerations to help older adults delay these losses. The elderly may be at greater risk of having low levels of vitamin D, especially the less mobile and those who seldom venture out of doors. Care in the choice of activity may be required for those people at risk of falls. The primary aim should be to minimize the time spent sitting, in bed or resting for long periods of time: any exercise is better than no exercise at all.

Energy needs decline with age; both overweight and underweight can be areas of concern for the elderly. Between 20 and 60 years of age, body fat is typically reported to increase by 10% in males and 14-15% in females (due to decreases in activity and declines in hormones such as testosterone and growth hormone affecting energy metabolism and lean tissue). This increase, especially in abdominal body fatness, is associated with an increased risk of several chronic diseases (cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and others). The need for protein does not decline as it does for fat, carbohydrate and total energy intake as we age, and more protein may be needed for those who are increasingly active. Body protein levels are 30-40% less in healthy older adults than in young adults, with lean mass declining at 2-3% per decade after adulthood is reached. Sarcopenia is the age-related muscle loss in skeletal muscle and is seen as a reduction in muscle strength. Loss of strength can threaten independence and increase the risk of falls. Being physically active is protective of both energy needs (improving nutrient intake) and lean muscle mass. Protein intake and timing may

be particularly important for older individuals to help maintain muscle function and to delay the age-related loss of strength.

Changes in blood flow and kidney function also occur in later life (greater water losses as the kidney is less effective in conserving water). Thirst also alters with age, with the elderly often losing their sense of thirst, and they may need to be encouraged to consume additional fluids or to develop especially when exercising or in hot environments. Pleasant tasting and cool fluids are easier to drink and more likely to be consumed. Water may be the preferred beverage for mild exercise sessions, but variety is important too.

Our health is in our hands. With increase in age, increases our responsibility to take good care of our health and body. A healthy diet and proper exercises can make this journey of our life much more comfortable. A balanced diet and appropriate workout does not only make one physically but psychologically fit as well. And as stated before it is never too late or never too early to step towards a healthy lifestyle.

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