

Healthy Lifestyle

Healthy aging

Wonder what's considered a natural part of the aging process? Here's what to expect as you get older — and what you can do about it.

By Mayo Clinic Staff

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

What's happening

It's common for arteries to become stiffer over time. This causes the heart to work harder to pump blood through these blood vessels. The heart muscles change to adjust to the greater workload. Your heart rate at rest likely will stay about the same. But it won't rise during activities as much as it used to. These changes raise the risk of high blood pressure and other conditions related to the heart and blood vessels.

What you can do

To boost heart health:

- **Move more.** It's ideal to get some exercise each day. In general, aim to get at least 150 minutes of physical activity a week. Try brisk walking, swimming, dancing or other activities you enjoy. Regular physical activity can help you stay at 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. Fruits and vegetables are especially good for you, so aim to eat five total servings of them a day. For example, you could have three servings of vegetables and two servings of fruit. And limit foods that are high in saturated fat, added sugar and salt.
- **Maintain a healthy weight.** Losing extra weight through diet and physical activity is good for the heart.
- **Don't smoke.** Smoking plays a part in the hardening of the arteries. It also raises the blood pressure and heart rate. If you smoke or use other tobacco products, ask your healthcare professional to help you quit.
- **Manage stress.** Stress can take a toll on your heart. Take steps to lower stress, such as meditating, exercising or getting talk therapy.
- **Get enough sleep.** Get enough sleep. Good sleep plays a key role in the healing and repair of the heart and blood vessels. Aim for 7 to 9 hours of sleep a night.
- **Take charge of other health conditions.** If you have diabetes, high blood pressure or high cholesterol, work with your healthcare team to manage them. Without treatment, these conditions can affect heart health over time.

What's happening

With age, bones tend to shrink in size and density. This weakens them. Age-related bone changes also might cause you to become a bit shorter. Muscles tend to lose strength, endurance and flexibility. That in turn can affect coordination, stability and balance. These changes raise the risk of falls. Falling with weaker bones makes it more likely that you could break a bone.

What you can do

To help bones, joints and muscles stay healthy:

- **Get enough calcium.** Adults should aim to get at least 1,000 milligrams (mg) of calcium a day. Women age 51 and older, and men 71 and older should aim to get 1,200 mg a day. You can get calcium from foods such as dairy products, broccoli, kale, salmon and tofu. If you find it hard to get enough calcium from your diet, ask your doctor about calcium supplements.
- **Get enough vitamin D.** Adults up to age 70 should aim to get 600 international units (IU) of vitamin D a day. Adults older than 70 should aim to get 800 IU a day. Sources of vitamin D include tuna, trout, salmon, eggs, vitamin D-fortified milk and vitamin D supplements. The body also makes vitamin D when exposed to direct sunlight.
- **Include physical activity in your daily routine.** Weight-bearing exercises can help you build strong bones and slow bone loss. These exercises include walking, jogging, tennis, climbing stairs and weight training.
- **Don't abuse substances.** Smoking tobacco and drinking too much alcohol can lessen bone mass and raise the risk of fractures. If you smoke, get help quitting. If you drink alcohol, you'll likely feel its effects more strongly as you get older. That can raise the risk of serious injuries from falls and car accidents. Ask your healthcare professional how much alcohol might be safe for your age, sex and general health.

What's happening

Age-related changes in the large intestine can lead to more constipation in older adults. Other factors that play roles in constipation include a lack of exercise, not drinking enough fluids and a low-fiber diet. Some medicines also can play a part, such as diuretics, certain antidepressants and iron supplements. So can certain health conditions, such as diabetes and pelvic floor disorders.

What you can do

To help prevent constipation:

- **Eat a healthy diet.** Eat high-fiber foods such as fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Limit high-fat meats, dairy products and sweets because they can 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.

What's happening

The bladder may become less elastic with age. That can result in the need to urinate more often. Weakening of bladder muscles and pelvic floor muscles may make it hard to fully empty the bladder or cause a loss of bladder control called urinary incontinence. An enlarged or inflamed prostate also can cause trouble emptying the bladder and incontinence.

Other factors that can play a part in incontinence include being overweight, nerve damage from diabetes, certain medicines, and use of caffeine or alcohol.

What you can do

To help keep the bladder and urinary tract healthy:

- **Go to the toilet regularly.** It can help to urinate on a regular schedule, such as every hour. Slowly extend the amount of time between your toilet trips.
- **Reach and stay at a healthy weight.** If you're overweight, eat healthy and get exercise to lose extra weight.
- **Don't smoke.** If you smoke or use other tobacco products, ask your healthcare professional to help you quit.
- **Do Kegel exercises.** Kegels are simple exercises for your pelvic floor muscles. To do them, squeeze the muscles you would use to stop passing gas. Hold the squeeze 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.
- **Limit foods and drinks that can irritate the bladder.** Caffeine, acidic foods, alcohol and carbonated drinks can make incontinence worse.
- **Prevent constipation.** Eat more fiber and take other steps to help prevent constipation, because it can make incontinence worse.

What's happening

The brain goes through changes as you age. These changes may have minor effects on memory or thinking skills. For example, healthy older adults may misplace items, have a harder time remembering information, take longer to learn new things or have a shorter attention span than they used to.

What you can do

You can help take care of your memory and thinking skills with the following steps:

- **Move more during your day.** Physical activity boosts blood flow to the whole body, including the brain. Studies suggest that regular exercise is linked with better brain function. Exercise also can ease stress and depression — factors that affect memory.
- **Eat a healthy diet.** A heart-healthy diet may be good for the 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.** You can read, play word games, take up a new hobby, take classes or learn to play an instrument. Activities such as these may be good for the brain.
- **Be social.** Stay connected to your family and community. Spending time with people can help ward off depression and stress. Both depression and stress can play roles in memory loss. You could volunteer at a local school or nonprofit, get together with family and friends, or go to social events.
- **Take care of heart health.** Some conditions that raise the risk of heart disease also can raise the risk of declines in thinking-related skills. Work with your healthcare professional to manage conditions that can affect the heart and blood vessels, such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes.
- **Quit smoking.** If you smoke, quitting smoking may help your memory and thinking skills.

If you're concerned about memory loss or other changes in your thinking skills, talk with your healthcare professional.

What's happening

With age, you might have trouble focusing on objects that are close up. You might become more sensitive to glare and have trouble adjusting to different levels of light. Aging also can affect the eye's lens and lead to a clouding of the lens called a cataract.

What you can do

To help maintain eye health:

- **Schedule regular checkups.** Follow your healthcare professional's advice about glasses, contact lenses and other corrective devices.
- **Take safety measures.** Wear sunglasses or a wide-brimmed hat when you're outdoors.

Aging: What to expect

What's happening

You might slowly lose some hearing in both ears. For example, you may have trouble hearing high-pitched sounds or following a conversation in a crowded room.

What you can do

To help keep your ears healthy:

- **Get regular checkups.** Follow your healthcare professional's advice about hearing aids and other corrective devices.
- **Take precautions.** Turn down the sound on your devices. And use earplugs when you're around loud machinery or other loud noises.

What's happening

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

What you can do

To help keep your teeth and gums healthy:

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

What's happening

With age, the skin thins and becomes less elastic and more fragile. Fatty tissue just below the skin decreases as well. Bruising may happen more easily. As the body makes less natural oils, the skin may become drier. Wrinkles, age spots and small growths called skin tags also become more common with age.

What you can do

Some habits for healthy skin include:

- **Be gentle.** Bathe or shower in warm water rather than hot. Use mild soap and moisturizer.
- **Take safety measures.** When you're outdoors, use sunscreen and wear protective clothing. Check your skin regularly and report changes to your healthcare professional.
- **Don't smoke.** If you smoke or use other tobacco products, ask your healthcare professional to help you quit. Smoking plays a part in skin damage such as wrinkling. And get a healthcare checkup if you notice skin changes such as spots that are dark or grow larger, sores that don't heal, or bleeding moles.

What's happening

How the body burns calories is a process called metabolism. Metabolism slows down as you age. If you become less active as you age but keeping eating the same way as usual, you'll gain weight. To stay at a healthy weight, stay active and eat healthy.

What you can do

To stay at a healthy weight:

- **Include physical activity in your daily routine.** Regular physical activity can help you stay at 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 take in fewer calories, keep an eye on your portion sizes. Don't eat until you feel stuffed.

What's happening

With age, sexual needs and performance might change. Illness or medicines might affect your ability to enjoy sex. And vaginal dryness could make sex painful. It might take longer to get an erection, and erections may not be as firm as they used to be.

What you can do

To help take care of your sexual health:

- **Share your needs and concerns with your partner.** You might find that physical intimacy without sex is right for you. Or you may experiment with different sexual activities.
- **Get regular exercise.** Exercise improves the release of sexual hormones, heart and blood vessel health, flexibility, mood and self-image. It also helps you lose extra weight. All of these factors play roles in good sexual health.
- **Talk with your healthcare team.** Your healthcare professional might offer specific treatment suggestions. Examples include estrogen cream for vaginal dryness or medicines for erectile dysfunction.

You can't stop the aging process. But you can make choices that help you stay active, do the things you enjoy and spend time with loved ones.

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