

*Information for People Who Provide Care for Elders*

# Caregiver

**FACT SHEET**

Bulletin #4208

## Elders: Staying Involved

**E**lderly people are among the fastest growing segment of our population. Almost 35 million Americans (13 percent) are over the age of 65. Currently, about 4 million of our citizens (two percent) are 85 or older. This number is projected to increase to 19 million (five percent) by 2050. Thinking of this in manageable numbers, by 2011 one person in five will be aged 65 or older.

People often think of elders as being institutionalized. As people age, the chance they will be placed in a nursing home increases. One percent of people between the ages of 65 and 74 are in long-term care facilities. Four and a half percent of people between the ages of 75 and 84 are in nursing homes. Nineteen percent of people who live beyond the age of 85 can expect to enter a nursing home. That's almost one in five.

In contrast, we all know elders who are vital, active and a part of their community. Elders are involved in community activities, volunteer programs and family life. People do stay involved, despite the fact that over 85 percent of elderly have one or more chronic conditions.

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### Why Stay Involved

Older people have a reason to live and are a joy to know. They are seldom bored, and their enjoyment and satisfaction with life are shared with others. They “work” at maintaining their friendships and interests and are constantly learning and trying new things.

Here are some reasons that elders say they stay involved:

- To offset monotony and boredom
- For social interaction and a sense of belonging

- For physical activity
- For personal enjoyment and satisfaction
- To be creative, express feelings and talents
- To have a reason to live

### Leisure Activities

Our leisure time may be filled with activities that are primarily physical, social or mental in nature. Some activities meet more than one of these needs. For example, going for a walk can be good physical exercise. When a friend joins us, our social needs are met. We may even discuss and debate the latest news broadcast, which stimulates our mind, expands our knowledge and challenges our value system.

Walking, dancing or joining an exercise class are some examples of activities that can keep us physically fit and active. Aerobic exercise will help to lower blood pressure and cholesterol. People who engage in regular exercise three or four times a week may not need medication to control medical conditions, or they may be able to reduce the dosage. If exercise has not

been a part of an elder's daily routine, remind him or her to check with a physician before starting.

People who are active socially are a part of the world around them. Their self-esteem is enhanced and because they feel good about themselves, they project those feelings onto others. How often have you heard an older person lament that all of his friends have died or moved away? People who cultivate new friendships while maintaining old friendships seldom feel this way. This is especially true if they have people of all ages in their lives.

People can stay in contact in a wide variety of ways. Organizing a daily telephone tree among several friends can help people who have physical restrictions or can't get out. For over 25 years, a woman who was confined to her home and then to bed maintained her contact with people via the telephone. Writing letters and cards is another satisfying activity for elders. The written conversation they receive can be savored over and over.

Many enjoy visiting or entertaining. Pot-luck meals are popular because they're easy and not costly. "Early-bird" specials or going out for lunch save money and allow people to eat earlier in the day, which many elderly enjoy.

For some, belonging to an organized club provides

satisfaction and meaning. Simply attending the regular meetings may be enough; others want and need to be a part of special committees or hold an office. These activities keep elders in touch with people who have similar interests and may provide an opportunity to give to others.

Many retirees find great satisfaction in being a volunteer for their favorite cause. Most of us are well aware of former President Jimmy Carter's very active role in Habitat for Humanity. He is able to contribute in a meaningful and tangible way and, in return, receives a sense of well-being and satisfaction. As a volunteer, you can try something you have never done before and learn a new skill. Or you may share what you have done for a lifetime.

Elders and children have a great deal in common. Both have time to spare and, in a sense, may feel that they are

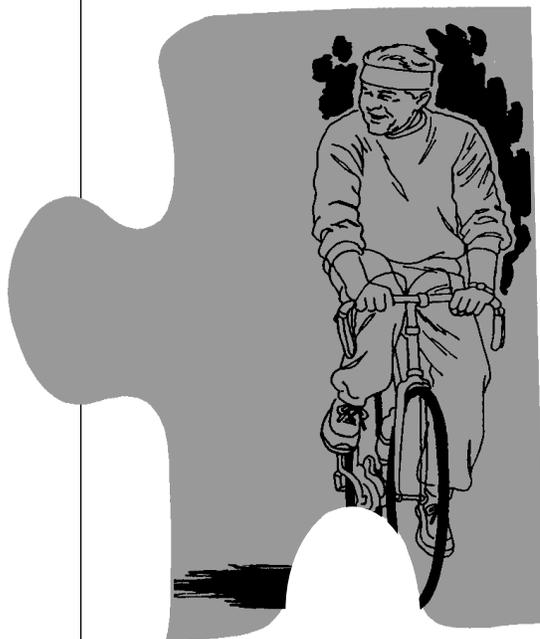
not a part of the mainstream of society. Yet both can learn and have fun spending time together. Children can learn about life before television and elders will be up-to-date on the latest fads and language.

Some activities we do alone and others we share with friends and family. Reading is popular among the elderly. You may be someone who secretly reads the cereal box when nothing else is available. Or perhaps you have books and magazines in various stages of completion scattered all over the house. You can share these materials with elders you know. They may also derive satisfaction from reading to others.

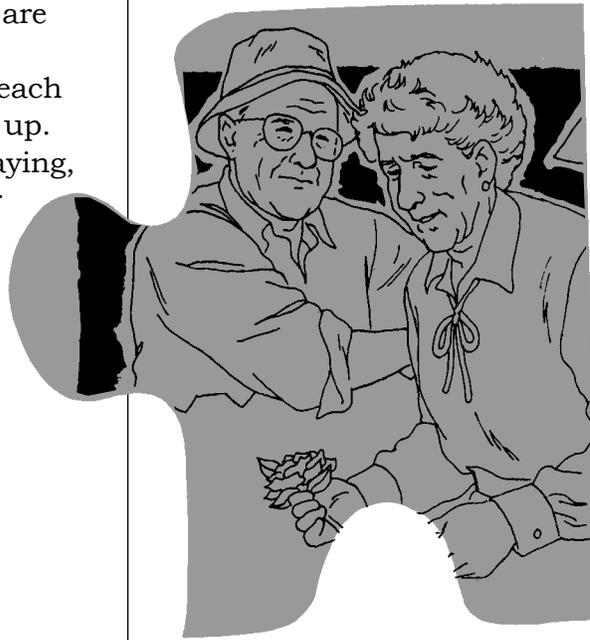
Listening to compact discs or tapes, attending concerts, the movies or theater touches another part of us. We can simply listen, observe and enjoy, or explore something that arouses our curiosity, such as reading the life story of the composer or artist.

Retirement provides time to travel, a favorite pastime of many people. If elders have planned financially, they may have resources to indulge. Many travel services now offer packages for people with special needs.

Elders have time to spend on their favorite hobbies, whether it's playing golf or bridge. Some may learn to do something that they always wanted to do.



Remember that the sky is the limit! Active people are more vital, involved and interesting. When you reach out, opportunities open up. Soon you, too, will be saying, "I don't know how I ever had time to work."



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## Getting Involved: Tips for the Elder

**I**f you are faced with having leisure time and wondering how to fill it, take some time to reflect before taking action. Give yourself permission to do things for you. This will ensure that you are making the choices that best suit your needs and desires.

- Think of people whom you know and see as active and involved. Use them as role models. What things do they do that appeal to you? What wouldn't you want to do? If you have a spouse or partner, include him/her in this process.
- Consider your physical limitations and how you feel about an activity. Think about things that are within your abilities, but adapt to meet your needs if necessary.
- Be realistic about what you can afford. Perhaps a trip to France on the Concorde is out of the question, but a special cruise offered by the local travel agent is within your means. Maybe you like to use your resources in another way, such as day trips with your grandchildren.
- Reach out to others and remember the importance of having people of all ages in your life. Many times, couples function by themselves and then, when one is no longer living, the other has nowhere to turn.