

Information for People Who Provide Care for Elders

Caregiver

FACT SHEET

Bulletin #4209

Dispelling the Myths of Aging

As we discuss the aging process, we need to distinguish between changes that result from normal aging and changes due to disease. Physical changes that are part of the normal aging process happen to everyone, are not reversible and usually do not cause serious disability. Physical changes due to disease are often treatable and may be reversible, but in some instances may result in serious disability. Generally, changes due to normal aging cause a slowdown of bodily functions, while disease leads to temporary or permanent breakdown in functioning.

Remember, the aging process is as diverse as the people who go through it. Here are some facts about the aging process that you may find useful:

- Aging is a highly individual experience. People age at different rates.

- Aging is a very natural process. It begins at conception and continues throughout the life cycle.
- Genetics, nutrition, stress, exercise, health care and lifestyle all influence the aging process.

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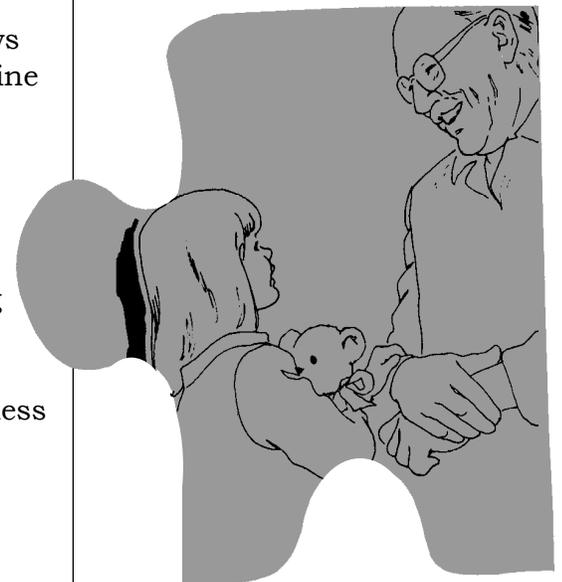
- Most older adults are in good health. Physiological, sensory, emotional and physical changes occur, but the human body and our ability to compensate for these changes often allows older people to function fine in their later years.

The Senses

- **Vision:** Even without disease, the eye is among the first of the senses to be affected by aging. The lens and cornea become less transparent, the pupil becomes smaller and the field of vision shrinks. Focusing becomes less

acute, and the ability to shift focus from near to far, and vice versa, decreases. Seeing eye spots increases. The ability to distinguish between greens and blues diminishes because the lens of the eye begins to yellow. As a result, elders may need more light to complete tasks or to read.

- **Hearing:** Hearing loss generally becomes evident from middle age onward. This loss appears to be caused by a decrease in the elasticity of the eardrum. Men often lose the ability to hear high tones; women lose the ability to hear low tones. Men also have a higher risk of hearing loss than women.



- **Taste:** The sense of taste starts to diminish around the age of 50. Very slight changes occur over the next 20 years of a person's life. At 30 years old, a person has 245 taste buds on each of the tiny bumps (called papilla) on the tongue. At 70, the number of taste buds per papilla decreases to around 88. Sweet and salty tastes seem to be the first affected. For older persons, normal seasoning may seem bland.

Using herbs (instead of salt) may be one way to boost the taste of foods without added sodium. This is especially helpful for older persons who have high blood pressure.

- **Smell:** Very few changes occur in the sense of smell as you age.
- **Pain and Touch:** The skin's sensitivity decreases as one ages. The skin becomes less taut, has pigmentary changes and has a loss of elasticity. Tissue loss occurs just below the skin.

Because the skin loses sensitivity, an older adult may not feel pain until the skin has already been damaged. This can happen when an older adult uses a hot water bottle, for example, or is burned while cooking.

Body Functions

- **Respiration:** Respiration rates decrease with age. In addition, lung capacity

lessens because the muscles and rib cage that control breathing stiffen. It takes more effort to move air in and out of the lungs and more air is left in the lungs after exhaling. Studies show that the amount of oxygen to blood transfer also decreases with age. Less oxygen going to the blood-stream means the person has less "fuel" to do work.

Most older adults are in good health.

- **Digestion:** Very few changes occur in the digestion process that are directly linked to aging. Nutrients still tend to be well absorbed and digested. However, basal metabolism (the rate at which the resting body converts food into energy) slows down as one ages. This means elders may need less food than when they were younger.

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Some evidence also suggests that the older stomach produces less hydrochloric acid, which is used to digest food. Poor fitting dentures and less mouth saliva may make chewing harder for the older

adult, which can also lead to poor digestion.

- **Reproduction and Sexual Activity:** Reproduction and sexual activity undergo changes as we age. Sexual activity may decline in later years, often because people become interested in other aspects of living. Illness or disease will affect sexual activities more than the aging process itself. Both men and women tend to take longer to achieve orgasm as they age.

For women, the end of menstruation signals a new era in their lives. The "change of life," or menopause, is caused by a decline in hormonal production and usually occurs between the ages of 45 and 50. With menopause, women may experience a thinning of the vaginal lining and less lubrication. The cervix and uterus tend to shrink. The vagina loses some of its elasticity.

Men's reproduction capacity remains viable even into old age. Men tend to take longer to achieve a full penile erection but, once achieved, the erection can be maintained longer. However, they may not feel as much for as long as when they were young.

- **Elimination:** In general, older adults experience very few bowel changes. However, they may have less frequent bowel movements because they're less active and don't

eat as much. Not everyone needs daily bowel movements for good health.

Aging does affect kidneys and bladder capacity, however. The kidneys of a 75-year-old will filter about half the amount of blood as a 30-year-old. The bladder capacity in an older adult is also about half that of a younger person (about two cups in a 30-year-old and one cup in a 70-year-old). The smaller bladder capacity results in more frequent urination.

A decrease in muscle tone may also result in incomplete emptying of the bladder. Many older persons may experience incontinency. This is especially common for older women who have had many children. Older men may have a hard time starting or maintaining a urine stream or fully emptying their bladder because of an enlargement of the prostate.

Body Structure and Organs

- **Muscles:** A person's strength generally peaks around 30 years of age and then gradually diminishes. Life style and activity levels can mitigate some of the muscle loss associated with aging. Generally, a man will lose 10 pounds of muscle between the ages of 30 and 70. The cells that replace the muscle fibers are connective tissue (collagen) or fat, which causes the

muscles to stiffen and to become slower. Because collagen makes motion more difficult, an older person may not want to be physically active.

- **Bones:** A decrease in bone density and deterioration of spinal discs cause shrinking with age. A 5'10" man at 30 years of age will probably shrink to 5'9" by 70. Respiration, walking, stability and digestion can be affected by this change. Bones become more brittle and are more apt to break as one ages. This brittleness occurs because of a decrease in bone calcium content, which causes the bones to be thinner and more porous. The incidence of arthritis, an inflammation of the joints, increases with age.
- **Teeth:** Very little change happens to the teeth. However the enamel on the tooth surface and the dentin underneath the enamel tend to decrease. These changes do not cause tooth loss. The loss of teeth often occurs because of disease or neglect.
- **Heart:** The heart becomes less efficient as one ages. The amount of blood the heart can pump decreases by about 25 percent between the ages of 30 and 70. The heart must work harder to support bodily functions. Arteries often become clogged because of a build-up of cholesterol and other fatty deposits. This build-up causes a narrowing of arteries and may lead to

hypertension or high blood pressure.

Mental Changes

Normal aging is not linked to a loss of intelligence. Certain chronic, mental or organic diseases may, however, interfere with normal intellectual functioning. Profound loss and depression can account for an older adult not wanting to be challenged mentally.

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Impaired intellectual function in older adults happens because of certain abnormal conditions. The term senile dementia refers to a progressive and disabling disease that often leads to a shortened life span. Senile dementia is often caused by arteriosclerosis, heredity or environmental pollutants. Less than ten percent of older adults in the United States suffer from this condition.

Alzheimer's disease is a type of dementia caused by a deterioration of brain cells. What causes the deterioration is unknown. Alzheimer's strikes adults as young as 40 years of age and is characterized by behavioral and personality changes, worsening memory and disorientation.

One normal change in memory does seem to be associated with aging. Often, an older adult will be able to recall past events more vividly than recent ones. However, a lack of remembering often stems from not listening carefully, from distractions and from not knowing how to remember.

Changing Roles, Staying Healthy and Meeting Your Needs

Aging is not a process of decline; it is a process of becoming, of continuing to meet life's challenges and of growing into a complete human being. The second half of life brings many changes: new career, retirement, widowhood, a new home, an "empty nest." Many of these changes bring new freedom and opportunities.

Although these changes may open new horizons, many of them also involve loss. Each change, even when accompanied by loss, offers the opportunity to grow. If you can cope successfully with change, you will continue to grow.

Feeling good about yourself is part of coping successfully. People who cope with change know their own abilities and limits and want to make their own decisions. They do as much for themselves as possible, but are not reluctant to ask for help when they need it. Coping involves giving and receiving help as well as enjoying and accepting others as they are.

How Caregivers Can Help Aging Family Members, Loved Ones or Friends

The first thing to remember is that the basic needs of older people are no different than those of a younger person. Four basic needs, in addition to food and shelter, are central to the life experience and must be met for an older person to remain healthy.

First, each person must know that they are loved, wanted and needed. Second, though the world of an aging person may become much narrower, the individual must continue to be socially involved. Companionship is important. As a person becomes older, they may feel they are of no use. They may not be able to work or sometimes may not even be able to care for themselves.

Third, elders need to feel useful. Meaningful activities that encourage self-sufficiency should be encouraged. Finally, older people need to be recognized for the positive things they are able to do. We all want to be accepted as we are.

Before you can improve your relationship with an aging family member, loved one or friend, you need to acknowledge your feelings about their aging process. Once you understand your own reactions to aging, you can begin to understand how and why the older person reacts the way they do. With this information, you can begin to make the changes necessary

to improve your relationship with them.

Try to remember to build on the older person's strengths. Be available to the older person and listen when they express feelings of loss. It is important to be honest with your aging family member, loved one or friend. Saying what you feel or think means sharing your inner thoughts in a constructive way. This can be a little risky, but it shows that you trust and respect them and the role they play in your relationship.

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Prepared by Deborah B. Killam, Extension educator, Aging and Mature Life Skills.

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