

Body Changes That Come with Aging



With age comes many changes to the body. Both physical and mental changes occur, many of which are interconnected. For instance, nutrition can directly affect your level of energy and muscle mass. It also plays a role in brain health.

Fatigue

The cause of fatigue is often hard to pin down. For older adults, fatigue may result from underlying medical problems or their treatments. Chronic diseases can take a toll on the body. Diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and COPD are common problems that cause fatigue. Medicines and some treatments such as chemotherapy can leave you feeling sapped. Emotional problems such as depression, anxiety, grief, or financial problems are more common with age and may cause you to feel tired. Poor nutrition, lack of physical activity, and boredom can also play a role.

If you suffer from fatigue, try these tips to manage it.

- **See your healthcare provider.** It's important to rule out any underlying conditions that could be causing fatigue. Make talking to your provider the first step to managing fatigue. They can review your lifestyle and perform some basic tests to see if anything surfaces. They can also review what medicines you're taking and side effects they may cause.
- **Ask about an "annual wellness" or other comprehensive medical checkup** that you should qualify for. That way you can be sure that your heart, kidneys, and endocrine organs are all working as they should.
- **Think lifestyle changes**, such as quitting smoking and getting regular exercise. While these are good choices for anyone, at any age, putting a special focus on them can give you the boost of energy you need. Your provider can help you quit smoking and tell you what exercises are right for you.
- **Check your diet** to see if you are missing certain key nutrients. Protein and iron are particularly important and low levels can be identified and treated. Ask how much water and other liquids it would be best for you to drink each day.
- **Avoid naps that are longer than 30 minutes.** Napping late in the day can make it especially difficult to sleep at night. If you snore or gasp for breath when you sleep, ask your healthcare provider to screen you for sleep apnea.

Muscle loss (sarcopenia)

It's normal to have less muscle mass as you age. This can cause weakness and affect your balance, putting you at greater risk for falls. Inactivity and a poor diet (specifically low in protein) plays a role in muscle loss. The best way to prevent muscle loss is a regular exercise program including strength training. By maintaining strength and muscle mass you can stay independent longer. Always talk with your healthcare provider before starting any exercise or physical activity program.

Exercise comes in many forms, including activities that feel more like fun than hard work:

- **Dance.** Sign up for a dance class with your spouse or a friend or carve out some dance time at home.
- **Go bowling.** Join a bowling league or make a weekly date with some of your friends. If you have grandchildren, bring them along.
- **Rediscover a favorite sport.** Whether you love the elegance of golf or the challenge of tennis, make time for these leisure activities. If possible, vary your activities over the course of each week to work different muscle groups.

- **Enjoy the great outdoors.** When the weather cooperates, ride your bike, visit a local park for a hike, or simply go for a walk. These are all great exercises that get you outside and into the fresh air.
- **Join a local fitness center with a pool.** Work in regular swims to meet your cardiovascular needs without straining your joints. Swimming is an excellent exercise choice, particularly if you have arthritis joint pain.

To help prevent falls, you also want to practice exercises that improve your balance. Yoga and tai chi fit the bill. They will also help you manage stress, feel more relaxed, and improve muscle tone. Yoga or tai chi classes are widely available in many areas, from senior centers to the Y.

Taking some time to stretch every day can also help keep your joints flexible and keep you moving well. It's also important to lift some light weights. Canned goods from your cupboard are a fine substitute. You can also use a resistance band to tone your muscles.

Brain health

Getting older may mean your brain processes things slower or that you have trouble multitasking. But normally, your memory remains stable. But brain health includes more than just memory. Your sense of touch, your emotions, and how you move, and walk are all part of brain health. A number of things can negatively affect your brain health including:

- Drinking too much alcohol
- Smoking
- Poor sleep
- Poor diet
- Drinking too much or too little water
- Isolation
- Lack of activity
- Some medicines
- Depression
- Brain injury

These steps are important to maintain your brain health:

- Manage underlying conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, stroke, sleep apnea, and depression.
- Eat healthy. Prioritize lean protein, fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Limit alcohol.
- Get enough sleep. Aim for 7 to 9 hours per night. Talk to your provider if you have trouble sleeping.
- Quit smoking. Ask your provider for resources to help you quit.
- Get daily activity.
- Stay connected to friends and loved ones.
- Manage stress. Try relaxation techniques like exercises, stay active, see a counselor, or write in a journal.
- Keep your mind active by volunteering, reading, playing games or puzzles, being creative, or learning a new skill.

Nutrition

What nutrients do older adults need? Nutrients you need from food to keep you healthy include:

- **Protein.** Protein can help build muscle and prevent infections. It's found in meats, fish, eggs, cheese, milk, nuts, seeds, lentils, soy products, and beans. This is the most common nutrient that older adults don't get enough of.
- **Carbohydrates.** These help give you energy. They have fiber to help with digestion. Carbohydrates are found in grains, fruits, beans, and other legumes.
- **Fats.** Healthy fats help your organs, skin, hair, and brain. They also help your body absorb certain vitamins. Foods like nuts, salmon, tuna, seeds, and olive oil contain healthy fats. Limit foods that contain unhealthy fats, such as butter, shortening, and fried foods.
- **Vitamins.** These include vitamins C, D, B-6, B-12, folate, and others. These help your body repair tissues, use energy, and do many other processes. You get vitamins by eating a variety of foods including fruits, vegetables, grains, and protein foods.
- **Minerals.** These include iron, magnesium, calcium, iodine, selenium, copper, zinc, and others. These help with many things. They make sure your cells have enough oxygen, your nervous system works well, and your bones stay strong. You get minerals by eating a variety of foods including fruits, vegetables, grains, and protein foods.

Older adults may have changes in appetite, trouble absorbing nutrients, slowed digestion, and underlying conditions that can cause nutrition problems. Depression and loneliness or moving to a senior facility can also play a role. Poor nutrition can lead to loss of muscle, weight loss, weak bones, slow wound healing, loss of independence and other issues. Talk with your healthcare provider about the reasons you may be eating less food, or less variety of foods. They can help you make changes to get better nutrition. These may include:

- Working with a nutritionist or dietitian
- Finding foods that are easier to eat if you have trouble chewing or swallowing
- Taking medicines to help with digestive problems
- Having protein, vitamin, mineral, or other nutritional supplements
- Getting counseling or medicine for depression
- Getting dental care to fix pain and other problems
- Talking with your housing facility about other food options
- Signing up for local services to help with shopping for and preparing food
- Signing up for local services that provide cooked meals to seniors
- Eating your meals in social settings
- Getting financial assistance

Older adults are at risk of not getting enough protein in their diets. This is known as protein-energy malnutrition (PEM). Protein is one of the most important nutrients for staying healthy. Talk with your healthcare provider about the best ways to get enough protein every day. This may include:

- **Adding protein to every meal.** This includes turkey, chicken, beef, pork, lamb, fish, shellfish, eggs, and cheese. Protein is also found in foods such as nuts, nut butters, beans and other legumes, seeds, and tofu. You can also get protein from animal milks and soy milk.
- **Having protein supplements between meals.** There are many kinds of protein drinks and other protein supplements. These have protein from whey, soy, and other sources. If you have trouble digesting lactose or soy, ask your healthcare provider which type of protein supplement may be best for you.

If you need to gain weight

Unintentional weight loss can be a problem for older adults. It may be caused by many things like medication side effects, decreased sense of taste and smell, dementia, cancer, problems chewing or swallowing, depression, or financial issues. Ask your provider what a healthy weight is for you. If you need to gain weight, your provider may suggest to:

- Have meals with other people.
- Get help with meals from a loved one, Meals on Wheels, or other local organizations.
- Eat high calorie foods. This may include peanut butter, cream, butter, whole milk, eggs, and cheese. You may add milk powder to foods or drinks.
- Eat high protein foods or protein supplements.
- Eat snacks between meals. Try eating small meals often if you get full quickly.
- Eat foods that sound good to you.
- Drink liquids that contain calories, such as milk, juice, milkshakes, or smoothies.

Immune system changes

Older adults are at greater risk for infections. The immune system becomes less effective with age. To prevent infections:

- Be sure you are up to date with your vaccines as recommended by your provider. This may include vaccines for COVID-19, flu (influenza), shingles, and pneumonia.
- Wash your hands often. Use soap and clean, running water. Scrub for at least 20 seconds. Make sure to scrub the backs of your hands, between your fingers, and under your fingernails.

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