

## Aging Well

**Staying healthy and feeling your best is important at any age. These tips can help you cope with change and live life to the fullest.**



### **The keys to healthy aging**

Coping with change is difficult, no matter how old you are. The particular challenge for older adults is the sheer number of changes and transitions that start to occur—including children moving away, the loss of parents, friends, and other loved ones, changes to or the end of your career, declining health, and even loss of independence. It's natural to feel those losses. But if that sense of loss is balanced with positive ingredients, you have a formula for staying healthy as you age.

Healthy aging means continually reinventing yourself as you pass through landmark ages such as 60, 70, 80 and beyond. It means finding new things you enjoy, learning to adapt to change, staying physically and socially active, and feeling connected to your community and

loved ones. Unfortunately, for many of us, aging also brings anxiety and fear. How will I take care of myself late in life? What if I lose my spouse? What is going to happen to my mind? However, many of these fears often stem from popular misconceptions about aging. The truth is that you are stronger and more resilient than you may realize. These tips can help you maintain your physical and emotional health, whatever your age or circumstances

Myths about healthy aging

**Myth: Aging means declining health and/or disability.**

**Fact:** There are some diseases that become more common as we age. However, getting older does not automatically mean poor health or that you will be confined to a walker or wheelchair. Plenty of older adults enjoy vigorous health, often better than many younger people. Preventive measures like healthy eating, exercising, and managing stress can help reduce the risk of chronic disease or injuries later in life.

**Myth: Memory loss is an inevitable part of aging.**

**Fact:** As you age, you may eventually notice you don't remember things as easily as in the past, or memories may start to take a little longer to retrieve. However, significant memory loss is not an inevitable result of aging. Brain training and learning new skills can be done at any age and there are many things you can do to keep your memory sharp. The sooner you start, the sooner you'll reap the benefits.

**Myth: You can't teach an old dog new tricks.**

**Fact:** One of the more damaging myths of aging is that after a certain age, you just won't be able to try anything new or contribute to things anymore. The opposite is true. Middle aged and older adults are just as capable of learning new things and thriving in new environments, plus they have the wisdom that comes with life experience. If you believe in and have confidence in yourself, you are setting up a positive environment for change no matter what your age.

## **Aging well tip 1: Learn to cope with change**

As you age, there will be periods of both joy and stress. It's important to build your resilience and find healthy ways to cope with challenges. This ability will help you make the most of the good times and keep your perspective when times are tough.

**Focus on the things you're grateful for.** The longer you live, the more you lose. But as you lose people and things, life becomes even more precious. When you stop taking things for granted, you appreciate and enjoy what you have even more.

**Acknowledge and express your feelings.** You may have a hard time showing emotions, perhaps feeling that such a display is inappropriate and weak. But burying your feelings can

lead to anger, resentment, and depression. Don't deny what you're going through. Find healthy ways to process your feelings, perhaps by talking with a close friend or writing in a journal.

**Accept the things you can't change.** Many things in life are beyond our control. Rather than stressing out over them, focus on the things you can control such as the way you choose to react to problems. Face your limitations with dignity and a healthy dose of humor.

**Look for the silver lining.** As the saying goes, "What doesn't kill us makes us stronger." When facing major challenges, try to look at them as opportunities for personal growth. If your own poor choices contributed to a stressful situation, reflect on them and learn from your mistakes.

**Take daily action to deal with life's challenges.** When a challenge seems too big to handle, sweeping it under the carpet often appears the easiest option. But ignoring the problem doesn't make it go away; it allows both the problem and your anxiety to build. Instead, take things one small step at a time. Even a small step can go a long way to boosting your confidence and reminding you that you are not powerless.

## **Staying healthy through humor, laughter, and play**

Laughter is strong medicine for both the body and the mind. It helps you stay balanced, energetic, joyful, and healthy at any age. A sense of humor helps you get through tough times, look outside yourself, laugh at the absurdities of life, and transcend difficulties. See: [Laughter is the Best Medicine.](#)

### **Tip 2: Find meaning and joy**

A key ingredient in the recipe for healthy aging is the continuing ability to find meaning and joy in life. As you age, your life will change and you will gradually lose things that previously occupied your time and gave your life purpose. For example, your job may change, you may eventually retire from your career, your children may leave home, or other friends and family may move far away. But this is not a time to stop moving forward. Later life can be a time of exciting new adventures if you let it.

Everyone has different ways of experiencing meaning and joy, and the activities you enjoy may change over time. If your career slows down or you retire, or if your children leave

home, you may find you have more time to enjoy activities outside of work and immediate family. Either way, taking time to nourish your spirit is never wasted.

If you're not sure where to get started, try some of the following suggestions:

**Pick up a long-neglected hobby** or try a new hobby. Taking a class or joining a club or sports team is a great way to pursue a hobby and expand your social network at the same time.

**Learn something new**, such as an instrument, a foreign language, a new game, or a new sport. Learning new activities not only adds meaning and joy to life, but can also help to maintain your brain health and prevent mental decline.

**Get involved in your community.** Try attending a local event or [volunteering for a cause](#) that's important to you. The meaning and purpose you find in helping others will enrich and expand your life. Community work can also be a great way of utilizing and passing on the skills you honed in your career—without the commitment or stress of regular employment.

**Travel somewhere new** or go on a weekend trip to a place you've never visited

**Spend time in nature.** Take a scenic hike, go fishing or camping, enjoy a ski trip, or walk a dog in the park.

**Enjoy the arts.** Visit a museum, go to a concert or a play, join a book group, or take an art appreciation class.

**Write your memoirs** or a play about your life experiences

The possibilities are endless. The important thing is to find activities that are both meaningful and enjoyable for you.

## Tip 3: Stay connected

One of the greatest challenges of aging is maintaining your support network. Staying connected isn't always easy as you grow older—even for those who have always had an active social life. Career changes, retirement, illness, and moves out of the local area can take away close friends and family members. And the older you get, the more people you inevitably lose. In later life, getting around may become difficult for either you or members of your social network.

It's important to find ways to reach out and connect to others, regardless of whether or not you live with a spouse or partner. Along with regular exercise, staying social can have the most impact on your health as you age. Having an array of people you can turn to for company and support as you age is a buffer against loneliness, depression, disability, hardship, and loss.

The good news is that there are lots of ways to be with other people. It doesn't matter what you do, so long as you find ways to get out of the house (if possible) and socialize:

**Connect regularly with friends and family.** Spend time with people you enjoy and who make you feel upbeat. It may be a neighbor who you like to exercise with, a lunch date with an old friend, shopping with your children, or playing with your grandkids. Even if you are not close by, call or email frequently to keep relationships fresh.

**Make an effort to make new friends.** As you lose people in your circle, it is vital to make new connections so your social life doesn't decline. Make it a point to befriend people who are younger than you. Younger friends can reenergize you and help you see life from a fresh perspective.

**Spend time with at least one person every day.** Whatever your living or work situation, you shouldn't be alone day after day. Phone or email contact is not a replacement for spending time with other people. Regular face-to-face contact helps you ward off depression and stay positive.

**Volunteer.** Giving back to the community is a wonderful way to strengthen social bonds and meet others interested in similar activities or who share similar values. Even if your mobility becomes limited, you can get involved by volunteering on the phone.

**Find support groups in times of change.** If you or a loved one is coping with a serious illness or recent loss, it can be very helpful to participate in a support group with others undergoing the same challenges.

## **Tip 4: Get active and boost vitality**

Don't fall for the myth that growing older automatically means you're not going to feel good anymore. It is true that aging involves physical changes, but it doesn't have to mean discomfort and disability. While not all illness or pain is avoidable, many of the physical challenges associated with aging can be overcome or drastically mitigated by exercising, eating right, and taking care of yourself.

And it's never too late to start! No matter how old you are or how unhealthy you've been in the past, caring for your body has enormous benefits that will help you stay active, sharpen your memory, boost your immune system, manage health problems, and increase your energy. In fact, adults who take up exercise later in life, for example, often show greater physical and mental improvements than their younger counterparts—because they aren't encumbered by the same sports injuries that many regular exercisers experience as they age. Similarly, many older adults report feeling better than ever because they are making more of an effort to be healthy than they did when they were younger.

**Exercise.** A recent Swedish study found that exercise is the number one contributor to longevity, adding extra years to your life—even if you don't start exercising until your senior years. But it's not just about adding years to your life, it's about adding life to your years. Exercise helps you maintain your strength and agility, increases vitality, improves sleep, gives your mental health a boost, and can even help diminish chronic pain. Exercise can also have a profound effect on the brain, helping prevent memory loss, cognitive decline, and dementia.

## Exercise tips for older adults

Check with your doctor before starting any exercise program. Find out if any health conditions or medications you take affect the type of exercise you should choose.

Find an activity you like and that motivates you to continue. You may want to exercise in a group, like in a sport or class, or prefer a more individual exercise like swimming.

Start slow. If you are new to exercise, a few minutes a day puts you well on the way towards building a healthy habit. Slowly increase the time and intensity to avoid injury.

Walking is a wonderful way to start exercising. Exercise doesn't have to mean strenuous activity or time at the gym. In fact, walking is one of the best ways to stay fit. Best of all, it doesn't require any equipment or experience and you can do it anywhere.

Exercise with a friend or family member. You can help to keep each other motivated and you'll not only benefit from the physical activity, but also from the social contact as well.



**Eat well.** As you age, your relationship to food may change along with your body. A decreased metabolism, changes in taste and smell, and slower digestion may affect your appetite, the foods you can eat, and how your body processes food. But now, more than ever, healthy eating is important to maintain your energy and health. Avoiding [sugary foods and refined carbs](#) and loading up on high-fiber fruits, vegetables, and whole grains instead will help you feel more energetic, while eating with others is a great way to stay in touch with friends.

**Get plenty of sleep.** Many adults complain of sleep problems as they age, including insomnia, daytime sleepiness, and frequent waking during the night. But getting older doesn't automatically bring sleep problems. [Developing healthy sleep habits as you age](#) can help you ensure you get enough quality sleep each night. Make sure your bedroom is quiet, dark, and cool, avoid artificial light from screens for at least one hour before bed, and increase your activity levels during the day. A soothing bedtime ritual, like taking a bath or playing music can help you wind down and get a good night's sleep.

## Tip 5: Keep your mind sharp

There are many good reasons for keeping your brain as active as your body. Exercising, keeping your brain active, and maintaining creativity can actually help to [prevent cognitive decline](#) and memory problems. The more active and social you are and the more you use and sharpen your brain, the more benefits you will get. This is especially true if your career no longer challenges you or if you've retired from work altogether.

**Try variations on what you know.** For some people, it might be games or sports. Other people may enjoy puzzles or trying out new cooking recipes. Find something that you enjoy and challenge your brain by trying new variations or increasing how well you do an activity. If you like crosswords, move to a more challenging crossword series or try your hand at a new word game. If you like to cook, try a completely different type of food, or if you're a golfer, aim to lower your handicap.

**Work something new in each day.** You don't have to work elaborate crosswords or puzzles to keep your memory sharp. Try to work in something new each day, whether it is taking a different route to work or the grocery store or brushing your teeth with a different hand.

**Take on a completely new subject.** Taking on a new subject is a great way to continue to learn. Have you always wanted to learn a different language? Learn new computer skills?

# HelpGuide

Learn to play the piano? There are many inexpensive classes at community centers or community colleges that allow you to tackle new subjects.



## Get more help

[Living Better, Living Longer](#) - Taking steps now to help ensure a happier, healthier future. (Harvard Medical School Special Health Report)

[Aging and Health A to Z](#) - List of articles on aging, including health problems. (Health in Aging Foundation)

[Health Information](#) - Covers many aspects of aging well, including sleep, eating well, exercise, falls, and alcohol abuse. (National Institute on Aging)

[Go4Life](#) - Tips to help you fit physical activity into your daily life. (National Institute on Aging)

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