



Care Partner Information

Tips for Providing Older Adult Care

Changes with Aging

Every organ in the body has more physical ability than is needed for survival. As a person ages, their organs lose some of this extra ability. These changes happen slowly and do not normally cause symptoms. But they can make it harder for the body to recover from stressors like extreme heat, illness, or injury.

For example, most older adults are more likely to overheat on a hot day. Older adults sweat less, so their bodies are not able to cool themselves. The kidneys also help a person stay safe in the heat by making stronger urine when more water needs to stay in the body. In older adults, the kidneys cannot do this as well. This means that when it is hot older adults need to drink lots of water, wear cool clothes, and limit the time spent outside.

Every person faces different changes and challenges as they age. For example, one person might find it harder to breathe at high altitude. For another person, it might be hard to get comfortable on a hot day. A third person might find that it takes them more time to run a marathon than when they were younger.

Below are several changes to the body that are commonly noticed by older adults.

Skin: Skin becomes thinner, drier, more wrinkled, and easier to damage. Not smoking and protecting the skin from the sun can help.

Bones: Some bone loss happens with aging. When it is severe it is called osteoporosis. Eating foods with calcium, like dairy and leafy greens, can help prevent severe bone loss.

Muscles: Muscle mass starts to shrink around the age of 30. The only way to slow down muscle loss is to exercise — especially strength training. Both bone loss and muscle loss can cause a person to become shorter.

Vision: Some vision changes are not caused by disease. For example, it can be harder to focus, especially up close. It also can be harder to see color, see in the dark, or judge depth. Prescription glasses can help, and are used by most older adults.

This Care Partner Information page is part of a series on older adult caregiving tips. They are written to help family and community caregivers, direct care workers and community health representatives care for older adults. Available in English and Spanish at www.aging.arizona.edu

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Changes in hearing: About half of those older than 65 have some hearing loss. Not being able to hear a conversation in a noisy environment is often one of the first signs. It also can be harder to hear higher pitched and softer sounds, like the voices of women and children. Hearing aids can help. Talking face-to-face in a quiet place also makes it easier to hear.

Changes in taste and smell: Taste and smell can be weaker with age. This makes food not taste as good, and can cause older adults to use too much salt and sugar, or not eat enough. Loss of smell can also be unsafe. It is harder to smell a gas leak, smoke from a fire, or spoiled food.

Changes in the digestive system: Some older adults digest food slower, and do not need to use the bathroom as often as when they were young. This can cause constipation. It can help to stay active, eat a high fiber diet, and drink water.

Changes in the bladder: Some people find that they need to urinate more often, or that they leak urine when they cough, sneeze or laugh. This is because the bladder becomes less stretchy and cannot hold as much urine. The urge to go can also come later, and the muscles that hold it in are weaker. For some, it can help to do pelvic floor exercises, drink less caffeine and alcohol, and quit smoking.

Changes in the brain and nerves: Some older adults will notice it takes longer to react. This can make it harder to drive, and easier to fall. It may also be harder to remember some things, like the name of a person they do not know very well. But most healthy older adults will not lose the skills and knowledge that they use regularly. Also, many older adults do better at solving hard problems in life because their past experiences give them wisdom.

Changes in the immune system: Older adults often get fewer colds. This is because they have had so many colds in their life that the immune system knows how to fight most of them off. But some infections are more common in older adults, such as shingles (Varicella Zoster) and the flu. It can take longer for older adults to recover from an infection. So, it is important for older adults to stay up to date on all immunizations (shots) to prevent illness.

Remember: Aging is a process, not a disease!

QUICK TIPS

- Changes happen to everyone, but are different from person to person.
- Normal changes with aging happen bit by bit, over time.
- Some changes with aging can be slowed with exercise and good nutrition.

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