

Staying Healthy for the Older Adult

A Guide on How to Take Charge of Your Health

About This Guide

Everyone, whatever their age or state of health, can benefit from choices that will lead to a healthier and more independent later life. This guide briefly describes important opportunities for improving your health.

After reading a short description of each opportunity, you will be asked to answer one or more questions about the topic. You can mark your answers on the Staying Healthy Checklist.

Your answers will help your doctor understand your personal situation and preferences. Based on your responses, your doctor may give you more detailed information on specific health topics, or arrange for various medical tests. Be practical about your choices: picking a few things you really want to do may work better than choosing everything and not being able to do it all.

Choosing a Healthy Lifestyle

"I knew I wanted to lose weight, so I came up with a plan. I set my goals for a month at a time. The first month, I decided to trade my usual high-fat desserts for low-fat yogurt or a piece of fruit. I also set a goal of walking 30 minutes a day, 4 days a week. As the months went by, I improved my habits even further. I've lost 7 pounds, and I'm determined to keep going." — Donna S.

How can you begin to improve your health habits? A good way to start is to set small goals, instead of large ones that you may not be able to meet. Taking small steps will lead to successes that will encourage you to continue along your road to better health.

For example, instead of trying to lose 15 pounds in the next year, set some smaller goals for eating better and being more active. You may decide to trade your morning donut for a bowl of low-fat cereal, or walk up the stairs rather than ride the escalator at the shopping mall, if you are able.

You can reduce your risk for heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, diabetes, and many other conditions by:

- Watching your weight
- Eating right
- Keeping active

Choosing a Healthy Lifestyle, continued

Watching Your Weight

Being overweight increases your risk for many health problems, including heart disease, diabetes, and high blood pressure.

To stay at a healthy weight, you need to balance the number of calories you eat with the amount you burn off by your activities. You can get to your healthy weight and stay there by doing two things: eating right and being physically active.

Eating Right

Eating the right foods in the right amounts can help you live a longer, healthier life. Many conditions — such as heart disease, obesity, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, and even some cancers — can be prevented or controlled by eating right. A healthy diet also provides the vitamins and minerals you need for good health, so you can remain stronger and more active. It is never too late to start eating right.

Keeping Active

Physical activity can also help prevent many problems including heart disease, obesity, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis (thinning bones), and mental health problems, such as depression.

Physical activity also helps you to maintain a healthy weight, reduce stress, sleep better, and feel better overall. Ideally, you should get at least a half-hour of continuous physical activity three times a week, like walking, biking, water exercise, or yard work. Even if you have health problems that keep you from exercising, there are simple ways you can increase your level of activity that will be beneficial to your health, such as standing up and walking in place during TV commercials.

On the checklist, answer questions 1, 2, and 3 about your diet and exercise.

Overcoming Depression

Everybody feels "down" or "blue" sometimes. But, if these feelings are very strong or last for most of the day, nearly every day for two weeks or longer, they may be due to a medical illness called "depression."

The good news is that depression can be treated. You don't have to face this problem without help.

On the checklist, answer question 4 about depression.

Choosing a Healthy Lifestyle, continued

Falls

Many older adults have more difficulty walking and falling is a common problem. If you have had a fall in the past year, tell your doctor, who can check your gait and balance and help you think about ways to make your home safer to help prevent falls.

On the checklist, answer question 5 about falls and home safety.

Daily Activities and Functioning

Some health conditions can make it hard for you to accomplish everyday tasks. If you are having trouble getting around the house or going places safely, or if you are having difficulty dressing, bathing, cooking, or doing other daily activities, tell your doctor. There are many ways to help you stay as independent as possible for as long as possible.

On the checklist, answer question 6 about your daily activities.

Alcohol Use

Alcohol can be healthy if you drink only a small or moderate amount, but it can cause problems with your health, your activities, and your relationships if you drink too much. Alcohol abuse can cause liver damage, heart problems, and several kinds of cancer. If you drink alcohol, limit the amount — no more than one drink a day for women and two drinks a day for men. (Note: One drink equals a 12-ounce bottle of beer or wine cooler, a 5-ounce glass of wine, or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits, such as gin, whiskey, or rum.)

On the checklist, answer question 7 about your alcohol use.

Getting Help to Quit Smoking

More than 430,000 Americans die each year from smoking. Smoking causes illnesses such as cancer, heart and lung disease, and stroke. When you quit, you lower your chances of getting an illness from smoking, no matter how old you are.

Quitting is hard. Most people try several times before they quit for good. If you are a smoker, there is help that can prolong your life.

On the checklist, answer question 8 about smoking.

Choosing a Healthy Lifestyle, continued

Hearing

Hearing loss is a common health problem among older people. Your chances of hearing loss increase after age 50. How can you tell if you have a hearing problem? Here are some signs:

- You strain to hear a normal conversation or ask people to repeat what they say.
- You may find yourself turning up the volume of the TV and radio so loud that others complain.
- Other people may complain that you can't hear.

Hearing aids can help you hear better, and improve life for you and those around you.

On the checklist, answer question 9 about your hearing.

Vision

As people grow older they often develop vision problems such as glaucoma, cataracts, or macular degeneration. Older people are also more likely than younger people to suffer accidental injuries because of vision problems. By age 65, you should have regular eye exams, usually once a year. Eye exams are your best protection against vision problems and blindness.

On the checklist, answer question 10 about your vision.

Shots to Prevent Diseases

You can prevent some serious illnesses by getting shots (immunizations). This section tells you which shots you need and when you should get them. If you can find out what shots you have had and when (shot records), bring that information to your doctor's visit.

Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B vaccination is recommended if you travel to areas where Hepatitis B is common (for example, the Far East), or if you work with blood, have multiple sexual partners or a same-sex male partner, or inject street drugs. If you have had either a Hepatitis B vaccination or the disease, you do not need it again, so you may check "no".

Flu

People 50 or older need a flu shot every year, at the start of flu season (around October or November).

Shots to Prevent Diseases, continued

Pneumonia

Everyone needs a pneumonia shot once around age 65. If you have lung, heart, or kidney disease; diabetes; HIV; or cancer, you may need this shot sooner. Re-vaccination (once) is recommended if you were younger than 65 when you first received the vaccine, and at least 5 years have gone by since your last vaccination.

Tetanus and Diphtheria (Td)

A Td booster shot against diphtheria and tetanus is recommended every ten years. Asking for this shot on mid-decade birthdays (55, 65, and so forth) can help you remember when you are due for another shot.

On the checklist, answer questions 11A, 11B, 11C, and 11D about shots.

Tests to Find Diseases or Conditions Early

"I knew many of my friends were getting mammograms. But I didn't think it was very important because no one in my family ever had breast cancer. Then a good friend of mine was diagnosed with breast cancer, and she had no family history of it. So I decided to ask my doctor about the testing. She told me that all women 40 and older need a mammogram every year or two."

— Anita T.

Many diseases and conditions can be prevented or controlled if they are found early. The tests you have and how often you need to have them will depend on your age, medical history, and risk factors, such as family history and lifestyle. This section will help you decide what tests you need and how often you will need them.

High Blood Pressure

High blood pressure can lead to heart disease, stroke, and kidney disease. It is most common in African-Americans and people older than 45.

You should ask your doctor what a normal blood pressure is for you and have your blood pressure checked every year. Most doctors recommend treatment of high blood pressure for persons of any age, although there is less information on the benefits of treatment for people over age 85.

On the checklist, answer question 12 about your blood pressure.

Tests to Find Diseases or Conditions Early , continued

High Cholesterol

Too much cholesterol can clog your blood vessels and is a major cause of heart disease. To help lower your cholesterol and keep it at a healthy level, you must eat the right foods, maintain a healthy weight, and be physically active. Your doctor or nurse may also suggest that you take medicine to lower your cholesterol.

People 50 or older should have their cholesterol checked. Most experts recommend checking it every 5 years. Your doctor or nurse may suggest you have your cholesterol checked more often, especially if it is too high. Most doctors recommend having cholesterol checked until at least age 75. Treating cholesterol after 75 may still be helpful.

On the checklist, answer question 13 about your cholesterol.

Electrocardiogram (ECG)

An electrocardiogram (ECG) is a heart test that can help to diagnose heart attacks and heart rhythm problems. Medical experts disagree about whether an ECG is a necessary part of a routine medical check-up. This is because an abnormal ECG is not always a sign of heart trouble. Also, an ECG does not always accurately predict who will have a heart problem, such as a heart attack, in the near future.

For people who are at risk for heart problems, it can be helpful to have a “baseline” ECG. If you develop a heart problem later, your doctor can compare your baseline ECG to your current ECG.

On the checklist, answer question 14 about ECGs.

Fasting Plasma Glucose (FPG)

Fasting plasma glucose (FPG) is a blood test to find diabetes. It is paid for by Medicare once a year for older people who have any risk factors for diabetes, such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, being overweight, or a family history of diabetes. FPG is also covered for women with a history of diabetes during pregnancy or who gave birth to a baby that weighed more than 9 pounds.

Medical research shows that diabetes screening is beneficial in older people who have heart disease or diabetes risk factors, such as those noted above. Doctors also agree that good blood sugar control by people with diabetes can reduce the complications of diabetes. This is another reason that diabetes screening is important.

However, there is not strong medical research to indicate that screening older people for diabetes with the FPG is necessary, if they do not have any risk factors.

On the checklist, answer question 15 about diabetes screening and FPG.

Tests to Find Diseases or Conditions Early , continued

Osteoporosis

If you have osteoporosis, or thinning bones, your bones can break more easily. This condition is more common in women than in men. After women have gone through menopause, their bodies make less estrogen (a hormone that helps protect their bones), and their bones become more prone to breaking. Getting enough calcium and vitamin D throughout your life is important to preventing thinning bones.

Half of all women past menopause will break a bone. A bone mineral density test (BMD) can help determine whether your bones are thinning. If this test indicates that you have osteoporosis, your doctor may suggest that you take a medicine to reduce your chances of broken bones.

Women who are 65 or older should be tested regularly for osteoporosis. You should begin to be tested at age 60 if you are at increased risk for fractures, for example, if you are thin or have been a smoker. Men over age 80 are also at risk for osteoporosis.

On the checklist, answer question 16 about osteoporosis.

Skin Cancer

Skin cancer can often be prevented.

You can lower your risk for skin cancer by doing the following

- Limit the time you spend in the sun, especially between 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m.
- Wear sunglasses and protective clothing such as broad-brimmed hats, long-sleeved shirts, and long pants, when you are in the sun.
- Use sunscreen. (But, don't stay out in the sun longer just because you are wearing sunscreen.)
- Ask your doctor to look at any spots or bumps that are new or that have increased in size, changed color, or look different in any way

On the checklist, answer question 17 about skin cancer.

Tests to Find Diseases or Conditions Early , continued

Colon Cancer

Colon cancer is second only to lung cancer as a cause of death from cancer. But if colon cancer is caught early, it can be treated.

Older men and women are more likely to get colon cancer than younger people. Starting at age 50, you should be tested for colon cancer. Tell your doctor if you have had polyps or if you have family members who have had colon cancer, breast cancer, or cancer of the ovaries, uterus, or prostate. These problems (risk factors) make your risk of colon cancer higher.

If you have any of these risk factors, you may need to be tested for colon cancer more often and at an earlier age. A number of effective tests, used separately or together, can identify colon cancer. Each has advantages and disadvantages, and you should learn about the different tests to decide how you want to be tested.

Most doctors recommend colon cancer screening in people of average health from age 50 until age 75. Some people may benefit from continued screening into even later years.

On the checklist, answer question 18 about colon cancer.

***The next two topics are for women only.
If you are a man, skip down to "Prostate Cancer."***

Tests to Find Diseases or Conditions Early, continued

Breast Cancer

Breast cancer is the most common cancer among women in the U.S. Women 50 or older are at higher risk for breast cancer than younger women. If you have a sister or mother who has had breast cancer, your risk is even higher. A mammogram every 1 to 2 years can help find this disease early when it is easier to treat.

Mammograms have a few limitations. They may not find all breast cancers. Also, they may appear to show that you have cancer when you really do not. These false-positive results could lead to unnecessary biopsies. There is some disagreement among experts on exactly who should have mammograms, how often, and for how many years.

If you are over 75, you should read more about breast cancer screening because experts do not agree on the benefits of screening for your age group.

On the checklist, answer question 19 about breast cancer.

Cervical Cancer

All women who are or have been sexually active are at risk for cancer of the cervix unless their uterus has been completely removed. Most deaths from cancer of the cervix can be prevented if the cancer is found and treated early. A Pap test is used to find cervical cancer. All women should have a Pap test at least every 3 years, and women at increased risk for cervical cancer may need the test more often. There is some disagreement among experts on who should be tested, how often, and for how many years.

Your doctor may suggest stopping Pap tests if:

- You are older than 65, have had regular, normal Pap tests, and are not at increased risk for other reasons.
- You have had a complete hysterectomy.

On the checklist, answer question 20 about cervical cancer.

***The following topic is for men only.
Women are now finished with the questionnaire.***

Tests to Find Diseases or Conditions Early, continued

Prostate Cancer

Prostate cancer is most common in men older than 50. You also may be at increased risk for prostate cancer if:

- You are African-American.
- Your father or brother has had prostate cancer.

Tests such as a PSA (prostate-specific antigen) blood test or a digital rectal examination (DRE) can help detect prostate cancer, but these tests also have risks. They sometimes have false positive results, which may lead to unnecessary biopsies and treatment.

It is not yet clear whether these tests save lives, so not all doctors agree that prostate cancer screening is useful. Most doctors do **not** recommend screening for men over 75.

You should fully understand the benefits and risks of prostate cancer screening before you get tested. Your doctor can give you more information.

On the checklist, answer question 21 about prostate cancer.

Don't forget to bring the checklist, marked with your answers to the above questions, to your next doctor's appointment.

If you have ideas on how to make this information clearer or more useful, please e-mail your ideas to bruce-robinson@smh.com