

## **How to grow old gracefully**

### **Exercise, optimism and preventive care can cut risk of chronic diseases**

U.S. residents might be living longer these days, but more and more Americans have chronic diseases, such as diabetes, which decrease their lifespan and boost medical costs. Some 133 million adults — almost half the adult population — have some type of chronic health condition, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). With such staggering statistics, you might think illness and impairment are synonymous with aging.

But experts say old age need not be marked by disease and disability. Older adults can take action, even well into their 60s and 70s, to reduce the risk of developing chronic disease and avoid injury.

"I think the old myth was somehow after age 60, 65, there's just nothing you can do anymore," said Margaret Moore, a public health advisor for the CDC's Healthy Aging Program. But really, "there are lots of things you can do to improve your function [and] your health well into older age," she said.

Among the beneficial behaviors: Exercise, stretching, preventative measures such as flu shots and disease screening, and even a generally optimistic outlook on life.

"There's certainly going to be some changes that occur with getting older," Moore said, "but it doesn't have to mean disability, it doesn't have to mean disease."

#### **Staggering stats**

The number of U.S. adults aged 65 and over living with certain chronic conditions has increased in recent years.

The percentage of older adults living with diabetes has doubled, from 9.9 percent in 1984 to 18.4 percent in 2006-2008, according to statistics provided by the CDC. The number living with heart disease has risen in that same time period from 16.4 percent to 31.6 percent (although this increase could partly be due to better detection methods).

Rising rates of chronic disease have been mirrored by rising rates in obesity, which is known to be a major risk factor for heart disease, cancer and diabetes. Since the 1960s, the number of overweight men aged 65 to 74 has increased from 10.4 percent to 33.0 percent in 2003-2006. And the number of overweight women has gone up from 23.2 percent to 36.4 percent in that period.

Our nation as a whole is suffering from an obesity epidemic, with about two-thirds of the population being overweight or obese, according to the CDC.

### **Foremost: exercise**

If there's one step you could take to improve your health and help you steer clear of chronic disease, it's exercise, experts say. And it really is never too late to start.

"I have known patients who have started exercising in their 70s and reaped great benefits from it," said Carmel B. Dyer, a geriatrician and director of the Division of Geriatric and Palliative Medicine at the University of Texas Medical School at Houston.

Exercise helps control your weight, lower your blood pressure, and strengthen your muscles, which in turn make you less likely to fall. And more muscle mass helps you metabolize drugs more like a young person, Dyer said, which means the drugs will be cleared from the body more effectively.

Physical activity has also been linked to a decreased risk of dementia, she said.

If you can keep your weight down, you'll decrease your risk of diabetes, which affects about 23.3 million Americans, as well as certain types of arthritis, which hinders activity for about 19 million Americans, according to the CDC.

As a nation, we could do better when it comes to exercise — in 2006-2007, about one-third of adults over 65 said they had no leisure time physical activity in the past month, according to CDC statistics.

But older adults need not join a gym, or suffer through rigorous workouts. Instead, more mild activities, such as walking, gardening, or anything to keep moving would be sufficient, CDC's Moore said.

And a "healthy weight" doesn't necessarily have to be what you weighed when you were in your 20's, according to Dyer.

"You want to exercise enough so that you're not obese, but not too thin, so you have reserve. But you don't have to become so fanatical about it that you have to get down to your college weight," she said.

Stretching is also important, Dyer said. Your muscles tend to shorten and stiffen if you aren't as active, and stretching activities such as yoga, will help improve your flexibility.

"You wouldn't think that five minutes of stretching in the morning would be all that helpful to you in old age, but it's extremely helpful," she said.

### **Another key: prevention**

Preventive measures, such as getting a yearly flu shot, and screening for breast, cervical and colorectal cancers are also important for growing old gracefully.

Judging from statistics, Americans don't have a stellar record when it comes to getting these services. Only about one-quarter of adults aged 50 to 65, and less than 40 percent of those over 65 are up to date with them, the CDC says.

Keeping an eye on other disease indicators, such as high blood pressure and the early stages of diabetes, can also make a difference in terms of the degree of disability people experience later in life, Moore said.

"While you might not actually prevent the disease, you can prevent the disability that would come from not treating the disease promptly enough," she said.

There are even steps you can take to reduce the severity of arthritis, the nation's most common disability affecting about 46 million U.S. adults, about 50 percent of which are over the age of 65.

Staying educated about the disease, avoiding further joint injury, and keeping physically active are among the tips for managing arthritis.

"Once you have arthritis, staying physically active can help reduce the pain you get, and the symptoms; that's counterintuitive, but well documented that it does help," said Charles Helmick, who helps lead the CDC's Arthritis Program.

## **Optimism**

Churchgoing and a generally sunny outlook on life have also been linked to longer, healthier lives.

For instance, one 2006 study found that regular church attendance can add 1.8 to 3.1 years to your life. However, scientists are still unsure about why churchgoing extends life, or if other factors could be at play.

Decreased stress levels, from spiritual activities such as meditation, may be partly responsible for the religious benefits, Dyer said.

A slew of studies also suggest that optimistic people live longer, and are less likely to develop certain chronic conditions, such as heart disease.

For example, a 2004 study including about 1,000 men and women found that those who described themselves as optimistic had a 55 percent lower risk of death overall, and a 23 percent lower risk of death from heart failure than pessimists.

A more recent study on some 97,000 postmenopausal women had similar findings. Optimistic women in the study had a 14 percent lower risk of dying from any cause, and a 9 percent lower risk of developing heart disease.

Dyer said she has seen powerful effects of optimism in her practice.

"I've been practicing geriatric medicine for almost 20 years, and I've notice that my patients who sort of make the best of everything, when there's lemons they make lemonade...they seem to live longer and happier lives," Dyer said. "I think if you're more optimistic, you're more positive, you're going to do better, you're going to feel better."

Source: MSNBC.COM, **By Rachael Rettner**