Actively aging

There’s no escaping it: all of us are getting older. In fact, statistics show that North Americans are quietly undergoing a grey revolution. Whether you yourself are looking forward to retirement, or are anxious about helping older loved ones stay happier and healthier longer, the following tips can show you how to live a physically, socially and emotionally vibrant life well into the golden years.



Getting physical

Weakening bones, chronic pain, and declining mobility: probably the most striking stereotype of aging is the gradual decline of physical strength. As people age there’s often a feeling of being betrayed by the body.

While coming to terms with mobility challenges or chronic conditions can be difficult for everyone involved, it doesn’t mean exercise has to stop. Regular physical activity can actually help manage or improve many conditions including, type 2 diabetes, depression and osteoporosis. In fact, one recent McMaster University study of 70-year-old seniors who participated in bi-weekly resistance training reinforces what the science continues to suggest; regular exercise can actually reverse the aging process.

Regular physical activity for older adults doesn’t require expensive equipment, risk or a grueling program. Start by consulting a physician to determine what you or your older loved one is and is not capable of and consider:

New ways to work activity into the day. From "actively" dusting, to walking to the grocery store or raking leaves, exercise comes in many forms. Try incorporating a variety of exercises that focus on endurance, flexibility, strength and balance. For a more detailed list of physical activities that may be suitable for you or your older loved one visit the MedlinePlus website.

Specialized programs for older adults or those with physical challenges. Many recreation centres offer fitness classes geared towards the specific needs of older participants (e.g., resistance training to keep bones strong) and can accommodate those with mobility concerns or chronic conditions. Joining a group activity is not only a great way for seniors to stay connected to others in the community it has also been shown to boost mood. Lend your support and time to an older relative’s outside interests by offering to act as "chauffeur" to and from the activity.

Focusing on the positive. A physical setback can affect more than the body—it can also drag emotions down, leading to frustration and even depression. As a caregiver of an older adult, try to emphasize your loved one’s abilities. Your father’s bad knee, for example, may make walking more difficult, but he might still be able to go swimming regularly (which is also a great low impact way to maintain muscle strength and endurance). Stay realistic though, as overdoing exercise can lead to seriously negative consequences.

Fostering brain gain

Missing a friend’s birthday, leaving the coffeemaker on all night or even temporarily forgetting your neighbor’s phone number; these are everyday occurrences for most people. But for many older adults these lapses can cause stress because they fear it’s the start of the brain’s downward spiral.

Fortunately, with some focused attention on flexing grey matter "muscles" a lot of the memory and agility loss accepted as part and parcel of aging can be avoided by:

Getting busy. The phrase “use it or lose it,” absolutely applies to the aging brain. Keep those neurons firing at full force by taking up a second or third language (or brushing up on an old one), joining a book club (not only for the reading, but for the mind-boosting discussions as well), doing word or number puzzles or any other new form of learning that switches the brain off of TV-watching cruise control and on to new ideas, activities or ways of thinking.

Staying connected. Research shows regular social activity and strong social ties act as a kind of anti-aging vaccine by keeping the immune system strong, greatly lowering dementia risk and, as a Harvard School of Public Health study suggests, possibly even helping seniors live longer. Encourage older relatives to pursue their passions whether painting, ballroom dance or lawn bowling. If cost is a concern, look into less-expensive community-based programs or get the family to pitch in to pay for lessons, classes or activities as part of a birthday or holiday gift.

Pumping exercise into the day. Over the last few years the notion of a mind/body connection has been growing in popularity and now the science is also starting to back this link.

Aside from the body benefits mentioned in the previous section, a review of research by the American Psychological Association also found that physically active older adults were better at spatial activities and other cognitive functions than sedentary seniors. The review also suggested that over-65 adults who regularly exercised 15-30 minutes, three times a week cut their risk for developing Alzheimer's disease, even when genetic history made them more susceptible to the condition. Aerobic activity such as walking or swimming in particular seemed to have the greatest positive impact on brain function.

Eating smart. How the brain (and body for that matter) functions largely depends on what it's fed. While a healthy, well-balanced diet is a great starting point; more and more food "superstars" are beginning to emerge from the scientific research.

Folic acid for instance, is thought not only to boost brain power, but also acts to protect it from Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease. Aside from supplements, legumes, asparagus, orange juice and peanuts are all excellent folic acid sources. Green tea has been touted a tonic to protect aging minds from decline. Omega-3 fatty acids, most commonly found in oily fish such as salmon and herring, are also believed to slow the cognitive deterioration of aging.

Nourish an older loved one's body and mind by sharing a nutritious meal you've prepared and making sure to pack him or her the left-overs. Worried your relative is having difficulty with healthy day-to-day meal preparation? Look into community delivery services such as Meals on Wheels which can deliver nutritionally-balanced inexpensive meals right to your loved one's door.

Getting help. Major changes in behavior or trouble with everyday tasks are your cues to seek the support of a physician as they may indicate the onset of depression (common and under-diagnosed in seniors), problems with medication or the onset of a physical or cognitive condition. Common trouble signs include:

- Trouble making meals or loss of appetite
- Memory loss (e.g., forgetting entire situations or conversations ever happened)
- Extreme changes in personality or mood
- Confusion
- A decline in household or personal care
- Little or no energy
- Language changes
- Difficulty focusing and/or doing routine tasks
- A decreased interest in friends and hobbies
- An effort to hide anguish or distress
- A disregard for responsibilities
- Extreme sadness or increased anxiety

Healthy living at any age

Whether your 28 or 88, remaining healthy isn't simply about eating your fruits and veggies, or riding a stationary bike. Instead it's a frame of mind that recognizes and embraces the many facets of life that together create a healthy lifestyle. Though it's vital to balance these elements at any age, responding to these ever-changing needs quickly and effectively becomes even more important to overall quality of life as you or your older loved ones enter this challenging but fulfilling stage of life.

Aging "actively" is about accepting life's challenges with its perks and understanding that good health is a recipe that strives to strike a balance between physical, cognitive and emotional well-being.