Young at Heart
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Compiled by Dr. Angelo Grazioli, Mullingar, Republic of Ireland, August 2016
Staying healthy as you age

Staying healthy and feeling your best is important at any age and that doesn’t change just because you have a few more grey hairs. As we grow older, we experience an increasing number of major life changes, including career changes and retirement, children leaving home, the loss of loved ones, and physical changes. How we handle and grow from these changes is the key to staying healthy. These tips can help you maintain your physical and emotional health and live life to the fullest, whatever your age.
Finding and following your formula for staying healthy as you age

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, aging brings anxiety and fear instead. 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 stem from myths about aging that are exaggerated by the media or simply untrue. The truth is that you are stronger and more resilient than you may think.
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 new learning can occur 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 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.
No matter what your age, it’s never too late to make healthy changes in your life!

While seeking advice from your health care provider is a good place to start, if you want to stay healthy as you age, this booklet is for you. It offers tips and tools to help people ages 65 and over eat healthy foods and be physically active.

Healthy eating and regular physical activity are your keys to good health at any age. They may lower your risk for obesity, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and certain cancers. They may even help you ward off depression and maintain orthopedic health (related to bones and muscles).
HEALTHY WEIGHT

Why is keeping a healthy weight important?

As you age, you may notice changes in your body’s makeup. You may lose muscle mass, which may increase frailty. You may also burn fewer calories, especially if you are not very physically active. To prevent weight gain, you may need to eat fewer calories than you did when you were younger. This means you have fewer calories to help you get the nutrients your body needs for energy. So, you need to eat foods that are high in nutrients or are “nutrient dense” (see page 5).

Keeping a healthy weight is crucial, but what is healthy varies from person to person. Ask your health care provider about what a healthy weight is for you.

Among older people, being underweight is of concern and may be related to not having enough to eat, not eating enough foods that are nutrient dense, or having an illness or disease.

Being overweight or obese is also of concern as extra weight may increase your risk for heart disease, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, and bone issues. Eating wisely and being physically active to preserve muscle and bone may help you maintain strength and a healthy weight as you age.
What is a healthy weight for me?

Two standard measures for seeing if you are at a healthy weight are these:

- The body mass index (BMI) is a measure of weight in relation to height. While a BMI score of 18.5 to 24.9 usually indicates a healthy weight for adults, the BMI is limited in how well it gauges body fat in older people or those who have lost muscle.

- Measuring around your waist may tell you if you carry extra fat. A waist circumference of more than 35 inches for women or 40 inches for men indicates increased risk for a number of health problems.

Check with your health care provider if you have concerns about your weight.
When you get older, your body begins to need fewer calories, but you need just as many nutrients. Nutrient-dense foods pack a lot of vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients your body needs into a small amount of calories.

Eat more of these nutrient-dense foods

Older adults, along with other Americans, are advised to “eat from the rainbow” of foods rich in nutrients, like these:

- fruits and vegetables (choose a range of types with vibrant colors)
- whole grains, like oatmeal, whole-wheat bread, and brown rice
- fat-free or low-fat milk and cheese, or soy or rice milk that is fortified with vitamin D and calcium
- seafood, lean meats, poultry, and eggs
- beans, nuts, and seeds
Adults over the age of 50 have different dietary needs from those of younger adults.

Eat less of these foods

Some foods have many calories but offer few nutrients. Older adults should eat less of these foods:

- sugar-sweetened drinks and desserts that have added sugars
- foods with butter, shortening, or other fats that are solid at room temperature
- white bread, rice, and pasta made from refined grains
How can I follow a healthy eating plan?

Control portion sizes
A portion is the amount of one food you eat in one sitting. Many people eat more than they need, especially when eating out or getting takeout. Try these tips:

- Avoid eating in front of the TV, computer, or other screen. You may not notice how much you are eating if you are distracted.
- Read the Nutrition Facts label found on food and drink packages to see how many calories and how much fat are in a single serving size of an item.

Vitamin Power for Older Adults

Government dietary guidelines recommend these vitamins:

- Vitamin B12. If you are 50 years or older, choose foods high in vitamin B12, such as fortified cereals, or take a B12 supplement (2.4 mcg total of B12 a day). Vitamin B12 helps your brain, blood, and nervous system.
- Vitamin D. If you are older than 70, you need 800 IU (international units) of vitamin D a day (600 IU for adults under 70). Natural sources include sunlight, salmon and tuna, and foods fortified with vitamin D such as cereals, dairy products, and orange juice. Vitamin D can help prevent softening of the bones and reduce the risk of bone fractures.
Plan and prepare your own meals

Eating healthy meals can be easier when you plan ahead and make them enjoyable. Try the tips listed below and see the Resources section for more ideas:

- Cook ahead and freeze portions for days when you don’t want to cook.
- Keep frozen or canned vegetables, beans, and fruits on hand for quick and healthy meal add-ons. Rinse canned foods to remove extra salt. Drain juice and syrup from canned fruit to remove extra sugar.
- Eat often with someone you enjoy. If you can't cook for yourself, contact the ElderCare Locator listed in the Resources section for local programs that deliver meals.

Sodium Tips

Too much sodium (salt) can lead to high blood pressure.

/ If you are 51 years or older, reduce your salt intake to less than 1,500 mg a day (about 2/3 of a teaspoon of salt).
/ Read the Nutrition Facts label to find the sodium content. / Limit how much packaged food you eat.
/ Reduce salt when cooking or eating your food.
/ Buy foods that are low in sodium.
/ Buy store brands of whole-grain breads, pastas, and other healthy items.
/ Read weekly sales flyers to plan meals around healthy items at good prices.
/ Buy and split bulk items or fresh produce with neighbors.
/ Buy canned or frozen vegetables with low sodium. They are healthy, low-cost, and store well until you need them.

Ask your health care provider about healthy eating plans

You may want to check with your health care provider or dentist if

- you find chewing difficult, don’t want to eat, or have trouble with your dentures.
- you feel that life events such as the death of a loved one or moving from your home are keeping you from eating well.
- you think your medicines may be making your food taste bad or affecting your appetite.
- you think you should take a daily vitamin like iron or vitamin C.
Tips for a Healthy Eating Plan

/ Eat breakfast.
/ Do not skip meals, as doing so may make you hungrier later.
/ Choose high-fiber foods, like whole-grain breads and cereals, beans, deeply colored vegetables (like kale and sweet potatoes), and fruits.
/ Drink fluids throughout the day. You may feel less thirsty as you get older. But your body still needs water and other fluids to stay healthy and keep you regular.

Eating healthy meals can be easier when you plan ahead and make them enjoyable.

Are my eating habits healthy?

Many factors may affect an older adult’s ability to eat well, including mouth pain, a fixed income, eating too little, living alone, and certain diseases.
Five myths about exercise and aging

Myth 1: There’s no point to exercising. I’m going to get old anyway.

Fact: Exercise and strength training helps you look and feel younger and stay active longer. Regular physical activity lowers your risk for a variety of conditions, including Alzheimer’s and dementia, heart disease, diabetes, certain cancers, high blood pressure, and obesity. Not only can exercise help stem the decline in strength and vitality that comes with age, it even improve it. And the mood benefits of exercise can be just as great as 70 or 80 as they were at 20 or 30.

Myth 2: Older people shouldn’t exercise. They should save their strength and rest.

Fact: Research shows that a sedentary lifestyle is unhealthy for adults over 50. Inactivity often causes older adults to lose the ability to do things on their own and can lead to more hospitalizations, doctor visits, and use of medicines for illnesses.

Myth 3: Exercise puts me at risk of falling down.

Fact: Regular exercise, by building strength and stamina, prevents loss of bone mass and improves balance, actually reducing your risk of falling.
Myth 4: It’s too late. I’m already too old to start exercising.

**Fact:** You’re never too old to start exercising and improve your health! In fact, adults who take up exercise later in life often show greater physical and mental improvements than their younger counterparts. If you’ve never exercised before, or it’s been a while, you won’t be encumbered by the same sports injuries that many regular exercisers experience in later life. In other words, there aren’t as many miles on your clock so you’ll quickly start reaping the rewards. Just begin with gentle activities and build up from there.

Myth 5: I’m disabled. I can’t exercise sitting down.

**Fact:** Chair-bound people face special challenges but can lift light weights, stretch, and do chair aerobics, chair yoga, and chair Tai Chi to increase range of motion, improve muscle tone and flexibility, and promote cardiovascular health. Many swimming pools offer access to wheelchair users and there are adaptive exercise programs for wheelchair sports such as basketball.
How much physical activity do I need?

As you grow older, an active lifestyle is more important than ever. Regular exercise can help boost energy, maintain your independence, and manage symptoms of illness or pain. Exercise can even reverse some of the symptoms of aging. And not only is exercise good for your body, it’s also good for your mind, mood, and memory. Whether you are generally healthy or are managing an illness, there are plenty of ways to get more active, improve confidence, and boost your fitness.

Exercise is the key to healthy aging

Starting or maintaining a regular exercise routine can be a challenge as you get older. You may feel discouraged by illness, ongoing health problems, or concerns about injuries or falls. Or, if you've never exercised before, you may not know where to begin. Or perhaps you think you're too old or frail, or that exercise is boring or simply not for you.

While these may seem like good reasons to slow down and take it easy as you age, they're actually even better reasons to get moving. Exercise can energize your mood, relieve stress, help you manage symptoms of illness and pain, and improve your overall sense of well-being. In fact, exercise is the key to staying strong, energetic, and healthy as you get older. And it can even be fun, too, especially if you find like-minded people to exercise with.
No matter your age or your current physical condition, you can benefit from exercise. Reaping the rewards of exercise doesn’t have to involve strenuous workouts or trips to the gym. It’s about adding more movement and activity to your life, even in small ways. Whether you are generally healthy or are managing an illness—even if you’re housebound—there are many easy ways to get your body moving and improve your health and outlook.

Do a variety of physical activities
Healthy older adults should do four types of activities regularly: aerobic (or endurance) exercise and activities to strengthen muscles, improve balance, and increase flexibility. See the table on pages 12–13 to learn more.

For any new physical activity, if you have not been active, start slowly and work up to your goal. To track your progress and stay motivated, keep a daily diary of what you do and how long you do it.
## TYPES OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is it?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>AEROBIC ACTIVITY</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Aerobic (or endurance) exercise uses your large muscle groups (chest, legs, and back) to increase your heart rate and breathing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• You can speak several words in a row but not have a long chat while exercising.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### What are the benefits?
- Stay active as you age.

### What can I do?
- Go for a brisk walk.
- Do heavy housework or gardening.
- Look into a water aerobics or tennis class for seniors. You may find free or discounted classes at a local community or senior center.

### How often?
- Aim to spread at least 150 minutes of moderately intense activity throughout the week.
- Reach your 150-minute goal by exercising at least 10 minutes at a time.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTIVITY TO STRENGTHEN MUSCLES</th>
<th>What is it?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• This activity strengthens your muscles by making you push or pull against something, such as gravity, hand-held weights, exercise bands, or even soup cans.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What are the benefits?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Increase your strength and independence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reduce your need for a cane.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Improve your balance at the same time.</td>
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<tr>
<th>What can I do?</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Raise and lower arms and legs for a number of counts. You can even do this while seated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Climb stairs in your house or at a mall if you can do so safely. Use your cane if needed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Dig in the garden, rake, and push a lawn mower.</td>
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<tr>
<th>How often?</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Aim for at least 2 days a week.</td>
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</table>
### Types of Physical Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity to Improve Balance</th>
<th>What is it?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Balance activity requires you to keep control of your body as you move.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• It may help strengthen muscles in your abdomen (stomach area), lower back, hips, and legs.</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What are the benefits?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Stay steady on your feet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reduce the risk of a fall or injury.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Improve your strength at the same time.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What can I do?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Try walking heel to toe in a straight line.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Practice standing on one foot.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Stand up from a chair and sit down again without using your hands.</td>
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<tr>
<th>How often?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Aim for 3 or more days a week.</td>
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</table>
## TYPES OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

<table>
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<tr>
<th>ACTIVITY TO INCREASE FLEXIBILITY</th>
<th>What is it?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Flexibility activity improves your range of motion.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What are the benefits?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Keep the full range of motion of your muscles and joints.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Prevent stiffness as you age.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lower your stress.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What can I do?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Stretch all muscle groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Take a yoga class or practice yoga with a video.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How often?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Aim for 3 or more days a week.</td>
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</table>
Many activities give you more than just one benefit! Water aerobics with weights gives you strengthening and aerobic benefits. Yoga combines balance, flexibility, and strengthening. Choose what you like to do—some physical activity is better than none.

How can I become more physically active?

- Pick an activity you enjoy and start with small, specific goals, such as “I will take three 10-minute walks this week.” Slowly increase the total amount of time and number of days you are active.
- If you live in an assisted living or retirement facility, ask if the fitness center offers a free health checkup and fitness program.
- Start a walking group with one or more friends where you live or through your place of worship.

You can get 30 minutes of exercise through three sets of activity, such as dancing for 10 minutes at three different times.
How can I start or maintain an exercise program that works for me?

You can start slowly and increase your goals as you build your strength over time. For example, you can do many arm and leg exercises without weights to get started. As you progress, you can add hand-held weights, like soup cans, to improve your strength.

Remember to follow these safety tips:

- Ask your health care provider about ways you can safely increase the amount of physical activity you do now.
- Take time to warm up and cool down.
- Start slowly and build up to more intense activity.
- Wear a sturdy pair of shoes.
- Stop if you have pain, become dizzy, or feel short of breath.
- Drink water.
Ask your health care provider about being active

Healthy older adults generally do not need to check with a health care provider before becoming physically active. However, health care providers may be able to recommend types of exercise that are best for you and ways to progress at a safe and steady pace.

If you have a health issue or problem, you should talk with your health care provider to find out if there are any limits on what you can do. Your provider can help you plan for the types and amounts of exercise that are healthy for you.

Tips for keeping 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. Other people may enjoy puzzles or trying out new cooking recipes. Find something that you enjoy and continue to try new variations and challenges. 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 try baking if you’ve mostly been cooking over the stove.

• **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? Learn to play golf? There are many inexpensive classes at community centers or community colleges that allow you to tackle new subjects. Volunteering is also a great way to learn about a new area. Taking classes and volunteering is a great way to boost social connections, which is another brain strengthener.
Tips for staying connected

One of the greatest challenges of aging is how your support network changes. 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, death, 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 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, or shopping with your children. 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 circle doesn’t dwindle. 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, and the meaning and purpose you find in helping others will enrich and expand your life. Volunteering is a natural way to 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.
Tips for sleeping well as you age

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. Poor sleep habits are often the main causes of low-quality sleep in older adults.

- **Naturally boost your melatonin levels at night.** Artificial lights at night can suppress your body’s production of melatonin, the hormone that makes you sleepy. Use low-wattage bulbs where safe to do so, and turn off the TV and computer at least one hour before bed.

- **Make sure your bedroom is quiet, dark, and cool,** and your bed is comfortable. Noise, light, and heat can interfere with sleep. Try using an eye mask to help block out light.

- **Develop bedtime rituals.** A soothing ritual, like taking a bath or playing music will help you wind down.

- **Go to bed earlier.** Adjust your bedtime to match when you feel tired, even if that’s earlier than it used to be.

- **Increase your activity levels during the day.** If you are too sedentary, you may never feel sleepy or feel sleepy all of the time. Regular aerobic exercise during the day, at least three hours before bedtime, can promote good sleep.
• Eat breakfast every day.

• Select high-fiber foods like whole-grain breads and cereals, beans, vegetables, and fruits.

• Have three servings of vitamin D-fortified low-fat or fat-free milk, yogurt, or cheese every day to help keep your bones strong as you age.

• Drink plenty of water or water-based fluids.

• Ask your health care provider about ways you can safely increase your physical activity.

• Fit physical activity into your everyday life. Take short walks throughout your day.

• Stay connected with family, friends, and your community.