

Ageing well is an option



YOUR HEALTH

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We all age and as children, we actually look forward to the process. Height, strength and knowledge increase, as do skills such as cycling and driving. All these abilities peak at a certain age, after which they gradually decline.

Today, we live much longer than our ancestors. Many of them died young from infectious diseases, several of which are now preventable with timely immunisation or treatable with antibiotics. Many did not live long enough to develop heart disease and cancer.

When we are young, the body efficiently repairs damage and replaces worn-out or dead cells. As we grow older, this ability gradually declines. Oxidative stress can damage cells, proteins and DNA. Telomeres, the protective structures at the ends of chromosomes, also become shorter.

Sometimes we feel that senior citizens themselves have grown shorter. Height can really decrease by one to two inches with increasing age. The spine's intervertebral discs lose water and become thinner. Bone density loss can also compress the vertebrae. Weak core muscles may contribute to slouching and stooping.

The arches of the feet may also flatten with age. This can make the feet wider or longer, so you may unexpectedly find that your shoe size has increased.

The muscles of the digestive system may become less efficient. Reduced physical activity, inadequate fluid and fibre intake, and medications can contribute to constipation and abdominal discomfort. Some people also find that certain foods (like milk) become more difficult to digest as they grow older. Prescribed medications can aggravate both constipation and diarrhoea.

The cartilage of the ears and nose changes with age, and the

surrounding tissues lose elasticity. This, together with the effects of gravity and changes in facial fat and skin, may make the ears and nose appear larger. Sometimes, the mouth may droop.

Knowing about these changes means you can take timely steps to reduce their impact.

■ **Stay well hydrated.** Drink enough water to keep your urine pale yellow. Eat plenty of vegetables, fruits and whole grains to provide adequate fibre and prevent constipation

■ **Take prescribed medications correctly.** Take vitamin or mineral supplements only if you have a dietary deficiency. Calcium and Vitamin D are particularly important for people at risk of osteoporosis

■ **Maintain a healthy body weight.** Weight often increases with age as activity decreases. Control portion sizes and remain physically active

■ **Keep moving.** Aim for regular aerobic activity such as brisk walking, cycling, swimming or playing a sport. Aim for about 150 minutes of moderate aerobic exercise a week

■ **Prevent muscle loss.** Sarcopenia, or age-related loss of muscle mass

and strength, can affect mobility and independence. It can also increase the risk of falls and fractures. Do resistance or weight-bearing exercises at least two or three times a week

■ **Maintain flexibility and balance.** Yoga, stretching and specific balance exercises can help maintain mobility and reduce the risk of falls

■ **Look after your teeth.** Healthy teeth and gums make chewing easier and help maintain good nutrition. Regular dental check-ups and good oral hygiene are especially important as you age

■ **Protect your sight and hearing.** Have your eyes and hearing checked regularly, and use spectacles or hearing aids when required.

Ageing is the gradual, time-related decline in some of the physiological functions of the body. It affects everyone but we can reduce its impact. Regular exercise, sensible nutrition, adequate sleep, social interaction and preventive healthcare can help us remain physically and mentally active.

