

Successful Aging is Healthy Aging

“Successful aging” is being the person you want to be in your later years. It means not only doing what you always have done, but being able to do things that you have always wanted to do. Perhaps nothing is more important to “successful aging” than good health. Many things can happen in older age that we cannot control, but health is one area where most people can make changes that make a difference.

“Health programs won’t do me any good. I’m too old.” “I don’t need to change how I take care of myself. I’m not old enough.” These are some of the reasons older people do not make use of health programs. In fact, if you are 60 or over, no matter how much or how little, you are one of the best candidates for health-promoting activities, whether it’s eating right, doing exercise, reducing your stress, or quitting smoking. Consider the following:

- * Older people have the kinds of conditions -- heart disease and stroke, arthritis, and diabetes for example -- that are most affected by fitness, diet, and other health-related behaviors.
- * Older people are better at living healthfully than other groups. Time after time, it is older rather than younger people who change their unhealthy behaviors as a result of health campaigns, even when the campaigns are aimed at younger people.
- * Older people can improve their health no matter what their age. A study in Brookline showed that people in their 90s who could not leave their wheelchairs were able to walk after doing weight-strengthening exercises.
- * For some people, many of the most debilitating conditions many people think are an inevitable part of aging, including incontinence or losing control of your bladder, confusion, and weakness, can be cured or managed by simply changing medications or doing special exercises.

The basics of healthy living are the same for older as for younger people -- diet, exercise, and making sure you have the right screenings and preventive health care, among others -- but there are also some important differences.

Set achievable goals that are important to you. Too often we think that people who eat a proper diet and exercise regularly should soon be running marathons. Some people may, but most of us should have more modest goals, especially in later years. You may not be able to run a marathon after starting your exercise program, but you may be able to walk down the street to the store for the first time in years. You may not be able to cure or prevent a health problem, especially if you have had it for a number of years, but you may be able to live with it better. If you decide on something that is important to you and you achieve it, you have been as successful as the person who enters the Olympic decathlon and wins.

Your body changes as you age and your healthy practices may have to change also. For example, for many older people a dietary problem is not eating too much food, but eating too little if they have problems with their appetite or teeth. And your nutritional

needs have changed also. Some vitamins and minerals you need more of and some you need less of. You need fewer calories than you did when you were younger because your metabolism is slower. You may need a different kind of exercise, more gentle and focused on stretching, rather than a contact sport, for example. Keep aware of your body and explore the many varieties of healthy behavior that can keep you going.

You may need to add new healthy practices. A major health problem for older people is medication mismanagement. The average older person takes many prescription as well as non-prescription medications. Taking medications together, drinking alcohol with your medications, taking wrong doses, or changing the dosage without talking to your doctor can all cause reactions that can land you in the hospital. In addition, older people's bodies process medications differently from younger people. A medication that caused no problems before may suddenly begin to cause an adverse reaction as you age.

Another health practice that older people need to consider is injury prevention. As we grow older and have lower vision or less mobility, falls in the home can be devastating. Make sure that you periodically check around your home for loose rugs, burnt-out light bulbs, clutter, and other hazards that can cause you to fall.

Communicating with your doctor is even more important as you age. You know your body best. You are doing your doctor a service if you let her or him know when you have some change or a new symptom. Ill health is not an inevitable part of aging, and difficulties need to be diagnosed and, if possible, treated. There is an old joke about a 90-year-old man who told a friend that he had a pain in his knee. "What do you expect at your age?" said the friend. The man said "The other knee is just as old and its fine!"

Taking care of yourself is the best thing you can do to take care of others. Many older people take care of spouses, parents, other relatives, or grandchildren. When so many people depend on you, it is easy to let your own health needs go unheeded. However, no one can care for others properly if they are not healthy themselves. If you can, take advantage of respite care or other opportunities to take an exercise or stress reduction class, or even just take a walk. Do not let your own health problems go unnoticed and untreated.

Convinced that it is time for some healthy behavior changes? You may wonder how to get started. Here are some suggestions to consider:

Next time you talk to your doctor, say that you would like to enhance your health and ask what she or he would recommend as a good place to start. Depending on what conditions you have or are at risk for, diet, exercise, medication management, socialization, stress management or something else may be the most important starting point given your individual situation.

Find out more about your health and your body. More and more health information is available in books, brochures, videos and educational programs. The more you know about your health and your body, the better able you will be to notice potential problems and make educated choices about what you need to do to enhance your health.

Just try one change -- you'll be on the way to more Time after time, older people who start with one small change then go on to make more and more. Think of that first low-fat meal as an investment. It could put you on the path to fitness, quitting smoking, reducing

your stress, and other healthy behaviors which in turn may lead to years of independence and a happier life with those you love.

Having fun is one of the best treatments ever. Laughing, spending time doing the things you enjoy, being with your friends and family, trying a new hobby or volunteer opportunity are all health-enhancers. If you really must have that hot fudge sundae while you sit and watch TV instead of stopping for yogurt at the end of your health walk, at least turn the channel to a comedy. What lifts your spirits will lift your health.

Do what you do with other people. Walking Clubs, support groups, and the like are one of your best tools for improving your health. When you do healthy activities with other people you enjoy them more and are more likely to keep doing them. As one of the walkers in our Walking Club said, "I start walking and talking, and before you know it I've gone three times around the track!"

Come down to the COA The Council on Aging has a whole array of programs that are healthy and fun, too.

* Simply joining in our many activities can help you feel better about yourself and so feel better physically.

* In addition, we offer health information through presentations by health professionals and brochures, books, and videotapes in our Reading Room.

* If you are concerned about your blood pressure, the Council on Aging and Board of Health have a screening once a month, usually on the second Monday of the month unless a holiday falls on that day.

* Finally, local health providers hold clinics at the Senior Center. You can receive podiatric care, massage and reiki, and hearing assessment at the COA. Call for more information.

The Bedford Board of Health offers many essential health services for seniors. The public health nurses provide home visits to frail elders to assess and evaluate health status, public health phone consultations including physician referrals, nursing home referrals, and caregiver assistance, health insurance information and assistance, and many other services. To access these services, call the Board of Health at 781-275-6507.