

Vibrant Living

Aging well may sound self-explanatory. But the term encompasses many aspects of health—among them, eating right, exercising and maintaining mental acuity and social circles.

Of course, it all starts with basic, health-minded decisions. More than one-third of deaths in the United States can be attributed to smoking, lack of exercise or a poor diet, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). In other words, many of us can stand to adopt better habits.

Meeting nutritional needs becomes increasingly important as the years go by. Proper diet as we get older means limiting saturated fat intake and ensuring we get adequate fiber, calcium and vitamin D. The CDC recommends eating five servings of vegetables and fruits each day.

Physical activity should also become a daily habit. If you approach your golden years without it, research shows that you'll lose about 10 percent of muscle mass per decade between the ages of 50 and 70. Not only does that mean becoming physically weaker, you're also likely to gain weight faster, become less active, and as a result, be less alert.

"Exercise for the young is important, but exercise for older people is imperative," says Joyce Hanna, an exercise physiologist at Stanford and Associate Director of the Health Improvement Program. "Our bodies cannot stand the stress of inactivity."

And while Hanna and other experts on aging agree that time can take its toll on the body, they feel even more strongly that we have the power to stave off those effects with regular exercise.

By exercising, you maintain muscle tissue, which in turn preserves your figure, strength and your body's ability to burn calories—instead of storing them as fat. Exercise also boosts quality of sleep, cardiovascular health, self-esteem and, recent studies indicate, cognitive abilities.

"If there's one thing that older people fear the most," Hanna said, "it's losing their mental ability."

Yes, scientists now believe that exercise benefits our brain as well. But jogging around the lake everyday is not the only way to maintain your mental edge. Nor do you have to fuss over

crossword puzzles or Sudoku—both of which mostly involve the retrieval of stored information—in order to stay sharp. Learning anything new from reading or practice can challenge the brain in novel ways and improve mental resiliency. Learning to play a musical instrument or speak a new language are good examples. Also, controlling high blood pressure and cholesterol and taking a daily multivitamin may prevent mental decline.



Photo credit: Linda A. Cicero / Stanford News Service

Interaction with others cannot be neglected, either, if we are to maintain a good quality of life in our later years. Having a social network has been shown to reduce depression and stress. Staying embedded in a family or group can actually slow disease.

So, don't wait until you start seeing gray hair to address these areas. Eating right, exercising and staying socially connected and mentally engaged are all habits you can commit to today.

"There's so much we can do to control how we age," Hanna says. "It's all about the choices that we make everyday."