Aging is inevitable

Know what it takes to support healthy aging in older adults through proper nutrition

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Aging is inevitable. The Bible even mentions aging. With technological advances and modern science, we may delay the aging process, but we can never halt it. The aging process, also known as senescence, is part and parcel of the human life cycle's natural progression. The aging process, however, may differ between individuals.



According to authors Bronson Flint of International University of the Health Sciences and Prasana Tadi from Asram Medical College in Eluru, India, who published their work on Physiology, Aging in 2023: "It is essential to recognize that aging involves a great deal of interplay between lifestyle and genetics. An individual who maintains a healthy lifestyle has access to adequate, routine medical care and screenings, and enters into late adulthood with a clean bill of health will experience a vastly different aging process than someone who is sedentary, makes poor diet and lifestyle choices, and has lived with chronic disease before and upon entry into late adulthood."

We cannot alter our genetic predispositions, but we can manipulate our environment through lifestyle and behavioral modifications that will affect how our genes work. This is epigenetics.

There will be changes from head to toe as we enter the phase of late adulthood. Physical, mental, and emotional states will decline. Therefore, supportive care to prevent complications and rapid decline is a must. The goal is to be in optimum health that is appropriate for this life stage. We cannot expect all older adults to be able to climb mountains at the age of 90, even if there are very few fortunate ones who are able to do so. Simply not being bedridden and having a clear mind at this age is already a sign of good health.

Major aspects of one's lifestyle are nutrition, movement, sleep, and stress management.

As we age, the smooth muscles in the intestines may weaken, leading to constipation. Left unmanaged, this promotes the development of diverticulosis, or the presence of pouches in the colon or large intestine. When food enters the pouch, inflammation may arise.

That is why consumption of wholesome fresh produce from fruits and vegetables is non-negotiable at any age. More so during late adulthood. Plant food sources from fruits, vegetables, psyllium, and whole grains like oats, colored rice, quinoa, adlai, and the like provide dietary fiber. Soluble fiber helps to form stool, while insoluble fiber helps with flushing out the stool.

However, it is important to be well hydrated. Water helps expand fiber in the gut. Consuming a high-fiber diet with inadequate water intake will further aggravate constipation. Unfortunately, during senescence, the sense of thirst diminishes. Thirst signals dehydration levels to prompt us to drink. It is important to stay hydrated throughout the day in the absence of thirst sensation. There should be intentional or mindful drinking of at least eight glasses of water daily. More if an individual perspires a lot or if doing any exercise.

In addition, fiber helps keep the gut microbiome healthy. The gut or intestines are home to trillions of beneficial bacteria that play a huge role in immunity, digestive health, metabolism of nutrients, and even mental health.

Wholesome, minimally processed plant food sources not only provide dietary fiber, but they are also abundant in phytochemicals or plant nutrients that help combat oxidative stress that forms toxic free radicals related to the development of chronic illnesses such as heart disease, cancer, and diabetes. These phytochemicals and antioxidants likewise support cellular repair and overall health.

Furthermore, plant foods provide protein to help maintain and build muscle mass. As we age, we lose more muscle mass quite rapidly. This increases our risk for injuries and fractures. It decreases our strength and mobility. Having a variety of vegetables that include soy and other legumes like chickpeas or garbanzo beans and the like will provide all the building blocks of protein known as amino acids to prevent muscle loss.

While you can still consume animal sources of protein such as fish, chicken, eggs, and lean cuts of red meat from pork, beef, and lamb, it is best to be avoided or kept to a minimum. Many older adults already have heart, kidney, and other health conditions that will be aggravated by consuming animal protein that is high in cholesterol, saturated fats, and purines that cause elevated uric acid and gout.

Contrary to common belief, hyperuricemia, or high uric acid and gout, is not caused by the consumption of beans. It is caused by increased intake of purines and fats from animal protein sources, including excess refined sugars that get converted to fat in the body. Fat prevents the kidneys from excreting uric acid. Therefore, do not be wary of adding legumes like tofu or soy to your diet as a protein source.

Bone health will decline as we age. But before you grab that glass of milk to get your daily dose of calcium, know that while animal milk has a higher calcium content, the human body can only absorb 30 percent of calcium from one cup of milk. Whereas a cup of leafy vegetables like bok choy or dark green vegetables like broccoli may contain only half of the calcium content of dairy. The body can absorb 50 percent of its calcium content. Plus, the benefits of fiber and phytonutrients that are absent in dairy products.

Consuming animal food products increases the acid load in the body. This will cause bone resorption. Calcium will be drawn from the bones to neutralize the acid production brought about by the breaking down of animal protein. This process weakens the bones.

To support optimum nutrition and healthy aging, being physically active and having strength and conditioning exercises with the guidance of a health professional is important to preserve muscle mass, strengthen the bones, and sustain functionality and mobility.
It is also important to have proper oral care and have regular visits to the dentist to ensure that the older adult can properly chew food and absorb nutrients.
Embrace aging gracefully. Consult a registered nutritionist dietitian for proper assessment and guidance to ensure optimum health and nutrition.