

Aging Well

Learning Targets

- Describe two of the major life transitions that occur during young adulthood.
- Identify the benefits of regular physical activity during the aging process.
- Describe three dietary needs of older adults.
- Identify common sources of stress for aging individuals.

Terms to Learn

activities of daily living

chronological age

physiological age



The Big Picture

We are all aging all of the time. If we are lucky, we will get to live long enough to experience all of the stages of life, including growing old. The decisions and choices we make each day—even when we are younger—affect how long we might live and how we experience all of the stages of our lives. Learning about the aging process can help you better understand how your health affects the length and quality of your life.

Write About It

Do you ever think about growing older? What do you imagine your life might look like when you are 65 or older?

We're all growing older every day, but

aging is a slow process that affects each of us differently. As a result, it is somewhat subjective. Most young people consider anyone who is 10 to 20 years older than themselves to be old, and many people over 60 still think of themselves as young and vibrant. In reality, decisions you make now can affect the aging process that you'll experience decades from now. For example, eating a balanced diet and doing weight-bearing exercises can help you develop strong bones that protect you from osteoporosis later in life and keep you safe if you fall or have a traumatic accident.

Conversely, if you choose, for example, to start smoking at a young age, you will accelerate the aging process of your skin and organs, making you look and feel older sooner. You can also begin a slow process of damaging your lungs in a way that results in cancer later in life.

This lesson explores some of the ways in which aging is affected by healthy lifestyle choices and how the aging process affects healthy lifestyle recommendations.

Stages of the Lifespan

The average adult lifespan in the United States is 80 years for females and 75 years for males. Over this lifespan, a person passes through six developmental phases (see figure 1). Each phase is marked by unique factors related to well-being.



Figure 1 Six developmental phases.

Young Adulthood

The fourth stage of the lifespan is young adulthood. This is marked by major milestones that include beginning a career, college graduation, marriage, and the birth of children. During this time, self-identity is more firmly set. People begin to establish themselves as contributing members of society. You're likely to enjoy good physical health during these years if you follow recommendations for physical activity and nutrition.

Defining moments for many people during young adulthood include beginning a career, college graduation, marriage, and the birth of children.



Christoph Hohnel – Fotolia

However, since major life transitions during these years can be stressful, young adults are more susceptible to sadness and depression than younger or older people. Common sources of stress are financial strain and relationship challenges. If you develop a strong sense of identity and good coping skills now, you'll position yourself to make your early adulthood a positive and productive time.

Middle and Older Adulthood

The fifth and sixth stages of the lifespan are middle and older adulthood. At these stages, it is important to maintain emotional and physical health. Managing stress is also an important factor at this age. Adults have more care and support responsibilities for themselves and their children, or for older adults, their parents. People can experience inner changes with new career and personal goals or changes in relationships as children move away from home. As for physiological changes, some people begin to experience back or joint pain, wrinkles, or hearing or vision loss. Women experience menopause during this time, too. Although there can be many changes at these stages, people generally feel more established.

Physical Activity and Aging

Regular physical activity is beneficial to people of every age. A person is never too old to participate in some sort of physical activity. Still, as people move through the middle-age years and into the senior years, the habits they developed in their teens and young adulthood have a considerable effect. Regular physical activity has been shown to delay the onset of most chronic diseases, reduce adult weight gain, improve mood, and delay disease- and illness-related death (see figure 2). Regular exercise has also been shown to help reduce the risk of dementia—the leading cause of disability among people over 80.

Diverse Perspectives: Being an Older Parent

Our names are Madeline and Steve. We are both almost 60, and we have a son in high school and a daughter in junior high school. We met at work when we were both in our 30s and got married at almost age 40. Both of us wanted children earlier in life but had been committed to our careers; we also wanted to spend the first few years of our marriage traveling.

Having children in our mid-40s was difficult physically—we didn't have as much energy as we'd once had. But we've both noticed that we don't seem to get as stressed out about parenting as younger parents do, and we're financially more secure than a lot of younger parents. Our kids are great, but I know they think we aren't as cool as some of their friends' parents. When the kids were younger, we often felt uncomfortable around much younger parents as well. We know it embarrasses our kids when strangers say, "Are these your grandparents?" That's probably one of the hardest parts.





Figure 2 The benefits of physical activity for older adults. Some of these could apply to middle adulthood, too.

Just as important, when older people engage in physical activity and exercise, they retain a higher level of fitness and are generally more mobile. As a result, they are better able to manage **activities of daily living**, such as bathing, preparing food, eating, and dressing. This ability allows them to remain independent, productive citizens for longer periods of time. Active older adults can also play more with their grandchildren and great-grandchildren, travel more often and more easily, participate in more leisure activities, and remain more socially engaged and connected to their communities. Physical activity and exercise recommendations for older adults are presented in figure 3. In short, being active throughout your life is one of the most important things you can do to ensure wellness as you age.



Figure 3 Physical activity and exercise recommendations for middle-aged and older adults: three options.

Nutrition and Aging

Eating well throughout your life also plays a critical role in how healthy you will remain as you age. People's nutritional needs are similar at all ages. All teens, adults, and older adults should eat a balanced diet of nutritionally dense foods. They should all minimize their intake of saturated fat and sodium, eat plenty of fiber and foods rich in antioxidants, and limit their intake of alcohol.

Some differences, however, do exist. For example, most adults require fewer daily calories as they age because of a decreased metabolic rate. After age 19, the recommended total daily calories decrease by 10 per year for men and by 7 per year for women. As a result, by the time a person reaches age 70, daily need is about 350 to 500 calories lower than it was at age 20. But someone who remains physically active throughout life, and therefore loses less muscle, maintains a slightly higher caloric need than a sedentary person.

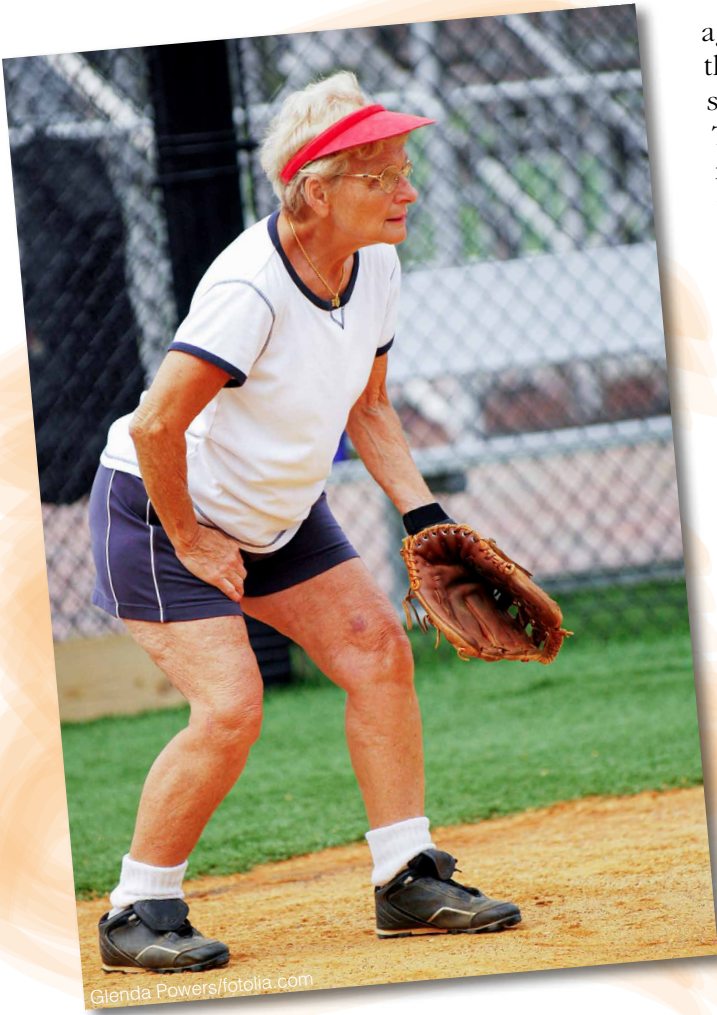
Though caloric need may drop with age, some nutrient needs may increase—for example, calcium and vitamins B₆, B₁₂, C, and D. As a result, older people need to eat high-quality, nutrient-dense foods. Dietary needs and nutrition status can also be affected by many diseases and health conditions. In addition, an aging person's ability to get proper nutrition can be hindered by poverty or economic struggle, tooth loss, certain medications, lack of social support, and loss of independence.

What Does It Mean to Grow Old?

In 2011, a Londoner named Fauja Singh completed his seventh marathon at the age of 100; he had run his first at age 89. We often think of aging as a process of becoming weaker and frailer. However, people like Fauja Singh have demonstrated that the fact of aging itself is not nearly as important as how we choose to

Most adults require fewer daily calories as they age because of decreased metabolic rate.





Lifestyle choices we make throughout life affect our health and wellness more strongly than our chronological age does.

age. Research shows that the lifestyle choices we make throughout life affect our health and wellness more strongly than our **chronological age** (numeric age) does. This is particularly true as we move through midlife and into older ages. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle can keep your **physiological age**—the effective age of your body based on its ability to function well—lower than your chronological age. As you continue through life and eventually enter old age, making healthy lifestyle choices is critical to your ability to stay healthy, maintain your independence, and enhance your quality of life.

Stresses of Aging

Albert is a retired military officer who lost his wife two years ago. He has no children and was an only child. Albert has arthritis and takes several medications for heart and blood pressure problems. When his wife, Patricia, was alive, she picked up his medications, helped with meal preparation, and managed some of the household tasks. As a result, Albert rarely felt uneasy or alone. Now, without her help, Albert finds himself struggling. He doesn't have money to hire help, and he has to ask neighbors to pick up his medications. He stresses for days about whom to ask and hates to inconvenience his busy younger neighbors. His pain is sometimes so bad that he struggles to prepare his meals, and he feels he has no one to turn to. Figuring out what to eat and getting groceries are also sources of stress.

Stress is a part of all stages of life. In Albert's younger years, he might have felt stress mostly in relation to his military job. As an older adult, his stress relates largely to managing his pain and living in daily isolation. Understanding stressors and managing stress effectively are part of a lifelong process that can greatly affect how well we age.

Older adults do experience some common, and sometimes unfamiliar, stressors (see figure 4). However, many studies have shown that older adults report less stress overall. It's possible that older adults have the same experience of stressful situations as younger adults but have learned to deal with stress more effectively and have become more resilient over time. The wisdom that comes with age can help a person put common stressors in perspective. An older adult who has managed difficult times in the past may not seem as bothered by stressful experiences in later years.

Learning to cope with stress in the earlier stages of life—and doing so throughout life—not only helps you slow down the aging process and reduce your risk of disease, but also can help you be more resilient later in life.



Figure 4 Common causes of stress in older adults.

Skill-Building Challenge

Analyzing Influences

The way older adults are portrayed and viewed in media may influence how you think about older adults and your own aging. Identify three different examples of older adults in the media, and reflect on how they are being portrayed and how that makes you think and feel about aging. Use the following questions as a guide.

- Where did you see this portrayal of an older adult (e.g., social media post, movie character, television character, commercial)?
- How was the older adult being portrayed in the source you identified? Describe what typical and nontypical stereotypes you noticed.
- How do these portrayals influence the way you think about aging and older adults? Do you think this is fair or accurate? Why or why not?
- What experiences do you have with older adults that influence your perceptions of older adults? How do these compare to the media perceptions?

Healthy Living Skills



ACCESSING INFORMATION

Studies show that pet owners are more likely than other people to live longer and to recover from major adverse health events, such as heart attacks. Research why pets might affect longevity. Use at least two valid and reliable sources to help you identify potential reasons for this connection. Check to see if there are resources in your community that might connect pets with individuals or that might be able to provide interactions between pets and seniors. Summarize your findings in a one-page handout for community members.

LESSON SUMMARY

Major life transitions associated with young adulthood include beginning a career, college graduation, marriage, and the birth of children.

Being physically active as we age delays the onset of diseases, reduces weight gain, improves mood, and delays illnesses and diseases related to death. It can also improve a person's ability to engage in activities of daily living, which can result in a longer period of independence and improved social engagement, which in turn help with longevity.

Older adults need fewer total calories, but they also need to pay attention to getting enough calcium and B, C, and D vitamins. They should also minimize saturated fat and sodium and eat a diet high in fiber.

As we age, we still experience stress. Changes to our health, managing pain and diseases, coping with loss and social isolation, and transitioning into retirement can all cause stress.

REVIEWING CONCEPTS AND VOCABULARY

1. Bathing, preparing food, eating, and dressing are examples of _____.
2. Regular exercise has been shown to play a role in reducing the risk of _____, which is the leading cause of disability among people over age 80.
3. How many years you have been alive is your _____ age.
4. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle can affect how well your body functions as you age, which can give you a lower _____ age.
5. Physical pain and managing diseases can be a source of _____ among older adults.

THINKING CRITICALLY

List and discuss the major physical and mental changes that occur with aging. Which ones can you affect through your own choices? What changes can you begin to make now to help you age well? Write a letter to yourself as you are now, and another letter to yourself at age 65, to remind yourself of these changes and to motivate yourself to make healthy choices.

TAKE IT HOME

Think of a person you know and respect who is older than 65—for example, a parent, grandparent, neighbor, or family friend. Interview the person about their life. Find out what challenges the person faces and what steps they take to try to overcome them. Ask them what advice they have for you about staying healthy as you age. Create a brief summary about what you learn.