

Normal Aging

It has become evident through research that 50% of the factors that influence health include environment, heredity and health services. The other 50% depends upon the individual's lifestyle. Imagine a person has direct control over at least half of the factors that influence their health. Since we have power over our health, we have some control over the way in which we age. It is our responsibility to become as aware and informed as possible about our own bodies and minds and the changes that may occur during the normal aging process.

Normal aging is an expression used to describe those changes, not associated with disease, that occur in the average individual as they grow older. These changes are universal and affect all older people. However, they affect each person differently. For example, each of us can expect to have a hearing loss as part of our own aging process but the onset and degree of this hearing loss will be different for each of us.

The onset of the changes is gradual. We may have little awareness of their occurrence because we adapt to them as they happen. In fact it may take an event such as having to wear glasses or not being able to hear at a party to make us aware of our own aging. The gradual process gives the individual time to adapt their behaviour to cope with the changes.

The changes due to aging are progressive and generally irreversible. They are built into the human body and they occur inside us. We can maintain better health by improving our lifestyle but we cannot stop the total process. Age-related changes are influenced by a variety of factors. Heredity plays a part in how long we live. Physical environment and lifestyle including exercise, diet and daily habits are equally important. A positive attitude and ability to cope with stress increase the prospects of living longer. Married people generally live longer than single people suggesting that a supportive relationship and the sharing of daily stress are contributing factors. Thus it is important to develop new relationships and maintain and enrich old ones.

All the events in life affect how a person ages. The aging of each person is uniquely theirs and different from that of all other people. Chronological age is not the only factor determining how well someone is managing their life.

Information about some of the physical changes that can be part of a person's aging process is useful in helping to adapt attitudes and behaviour. Some general changes are:

- The body has less reserve capacity. It has less ability to cope with any additional stress placed on it by disease or accident. Regular activity alleviates these concerns. An organ that is not used will decline in function.
- The control system which keeps the body's regulation systems in balance loses some effectiveness. For example: our thermostat's response to hot and cold becomes less efficient; our eyes respond less rapidly to change in light.

- The body has less resistance to infection and the symptoms of infection can be different from those in a younger person. For example, an older person can have an infection with no rise in body temperature.
- Older people generally suffer less from acute illnesses but they have more chronic health problems (e.g. arthritis). Any disease tends to progress more slowly.
- The body requires a longer recovery time from physical and emotional stress. For example: you may not be able to manage two late nights in a row; it takes longer for an older person to recover from the death of a friend or family member.

If we have the good fortune to grow old, we will experience certain changes and even some chronic disabilities. It is not what we have wrong with us or how old we are that matters. What really matters is how we manage our situations and take charge of our well-being to live healthier, more meaningful lives.