

Sensory Changes with Aging

All information about the outside world comes to you through your senses. Light from a beautiful scene stimulates your eyes. You smell that the toast is burning. You feel a friendly handshake. With aging, changes occur in all senses – hearing, seeing, touching, tasting and smelling. It is important to know what the changes are to safeguard your sense, such as protecting your hearing from loud noises. Have regular check-ups to evaluate changes in your senses and, if change does occur, use available means to compensate.

Hearing: with aging, the ear becomes less sensitive to high sounds. Sounds become distorted and/or softer. If your hearing is changing, you can try turning around and looking at the person to see their body language. Tell them if you have not heard what was said. Use your other senses such as sight to compensate with a skill like lip-reading. Hearing aids properly fitted and used can improve hearing for some people and should be investigated early before hearing loss is too extensive.

If you are trying to communicate with someone with hearing loss, let the person know that you understand. Show that you are willing to change your behaviour to compensate. First get the person's attention, then face the person in a good light so that they can see your face and read your body language. Keep your mouth uncovered and speak slowly and clearly in a low tone. If the person does not hear you, repeat yourself in different words. Don't shout, as it distorts your voice.

Seeing: Some of the changes in vision that occur with aging include loss of color perception (blues and greens tend to look an overall gray) and increase in short-sightedness. Greater contrast is often needed to distinguish objects from their background. The eye becomes increasingly susceptible to glare and longer time is needed to adjust from dark to light and vice versa. The field of vision becomes smaller making it necessary to move the head to see well.

Touching: The sense of touch does not change as much as the other sense as we age, so it can be used to compensate for loss of other sense. There may be some changes in sensitivity to heat and cold.

Tasting: Sensitivity to salt and sweet decreases as people grow older. This can affect appetite and lessen the enjoyment of eating. Food may taste bland unless carefully seasoned with herbs or spices.

Smelling: The sense of smell becomes less acute with aging. This can be hazardous because our sense of smell warns us of danger (e.g. burning food, leaking gas). It is important to know and safeguard the senses and to find ways to compensate for any losses that may occur over time.