Doing Your Part to Stay Healthy as You Age

There are constant reminders about the effects of aging. Along with a few gray hairs and some wrinkles, at first you may notice physical signs such as difficulty reading fine print or feeling a little sluggish in the morning. As you get older, you are likely to have aches and pains and take longer to recover if you get injured. You will also have a greater chance of developing a chronic condition such as high blood pressure or arthritis.

Certain conditions that tend to develop with aging can compromise cognitive function if they are not well-managed. They include diabetes, heart disease, poor vision and hearing, sleep loss and depression. But advancing age doesn't have to mean declining health.

The Big Picture

In a National Center for Health Statistics survey, more than 75 percent of U.S. adults over the age of 65 reported being in good physical health as opposed to fair or poor health.

With respect to mental health, there is no upper age limit to productivity and creativity, according to Mark E. Williams, M.D., author of The Art and Science of Aging Well: A Physician’s Guide to a Healthy Body, Mind and Spirit. Dr. Williams says “there is no reason to expect an absence of creative intellectual accomplishment in old age, and it is remarkably easy to find monumental achievements inspired by very old minds.”

While aging slows down the brain’s ability to search and retrieve factual information, he said recognition and matching of stored information with information in the environment does not change much over time.

A Harvard Health article on how memory and thinking ability changes with age describes how the hippocampus, which supports brain memory functions, shrinks with aging while the branching of dendrites (nerve cells) increases to strengthen connections within the brain. Scientists speculate that this may be the foundation of wisdom: “As if, with age, your brain becomes better at seeing the entire forest and worse at seeing the leaves.”

Steps to Healthy Aging

To grow old gracefully – and in good health – the International Council on Active Aging promotes full engagement in seven overlapping dimensions of wellness:
1. Emotional health is an important aspect of the aging process. It involves being aware of feelings and making adjustments to support a balanced lifestyle. Attributes such as being trustworthy and respectful may be cultivated through counseling, stress management, humor and sharing personal histories.

2. Intellectual/cognitive pursuits help keep your mind alert and your memory sharp. Attending classes or lectures, doing arts, crafts and other hobbies, acting, playing games or doing puzzles, travel, reading, writing and public speaking are examples.

3. Physical wellness involves consistent physical activity, good nutrition, getting enough sleep, limiting alcohol intake, not smoking, getting regular medical check-ups (including dermatology, vision, hearing and dental) and following care recommendations. A fulfilling sex life also contributes to healthy aging.

4. Professional/vocational aspects of healthy aging include paid work and voluntary contributions that enhance personal skills and help others. Adults who use their experience to contribute to society as teachers and mentors tend to be healthier.

5. Social interactions with work colleagues, family and friends boost self-esteem, reduce episodes of anxiety and depression, and contribute to a sense of personal well-being.

6. Many people find that spirituality adds purpose and meaning to their life, in turn promoting better health. This may involve group and individual faith-based activities, meditation, exercise (yoga, tai chi) and spending time close to nature.

7. Environmental consciousness creates a sense of connectedness and is a constructive way to be a good steward for future generations.

More Tips
The National Institute on Aging recommends:

- Following Dietary Guidelines for Americans to ensure you eat a balanced diet and maintain a healthy weight. The guidelines focus on consuming nutrient-dense foods high in vitamins, minerals and anti-oxidants. Nutrient-dense foods have little or no solid fats and added sugars, refined starches or sodium. Examples include fresh vegetables, fruits, whole grains, eggs, beans and peas, unsalted nuts and seeds, fat-free and low-fat dairy products, fish and lean meats. It’s vital to drink plenty of water.

- Practicing four types of exercise to improve endurance, strength, balance and flexibility. Balance exercises help prevent falls, a major cause of disability in older adults. Strength exercises build muscles and reduce the risk of osteoporosis. For heart health, 150 minutes of physical activity per week – and preferably daily exercise – is recommended. Refer to the Go4Life campaign for resources.

- Intellectual stimulation to help compensate for age-related brain changes and medical conditions that affect the brain. In the Advanced Cognitive Training for Independent and Vital Elderly (ACTIVE) trial, healthy older adults participated in 10 sessions of memory, reasoning or processing-speed training. Improvements in each category persisted for 10 years after training was completed.

Finally, HealthinAging.org reminds us that it’s better to prevent an injury or illness than treat it after it develops. Throughout your lifetime, you can make healthy lifestyle choices. Getting recommended screening tests and vaccinations, and obtaining care for early signs and symptoms of medical complaints and mental health issues can help you stay active and independent as you get older.