

# Normal Aging (from AARP)

The aging process happens during an individual's lifespan. We are all involved in this process and none of us can escape it. When we are young, aging is associated with growth, maturation, and discovery. Many human abilities peak before age 30, while other abilities continue to grow through life. The great majority of those over age 65 today are healthy, happy and fully independent. In spite of this, some individuals begin to experience changes that are perceived as signs of deterioration or decline. We must try to forget the stereotypes and look at older individuals as unique individuals, each with a particular set of resources and challenges.

The changes aging individuals experience are not necessarily harmful. With age, hair thins and turns gray. Skin thins, becomes less elastic, and sags. There is a slowing down of functions which goes forward throughout adulthood - loss of function of bodily organs. In the gastrointestinal system, for example, production of digestive enzymes diminishes, reducing the body's ability to break down and absorb the nutrition from food. Some of these losses may not be noticeable until later life.

Scientists theorize that aging likely results from a combination of many factors. Genes, lifestyle, and disease can all affect the rate of aging. Studies have indicated that people age at different rates and in different ways. Normal aging brings about the following changes:

**Eyesight** - loss of peripheral vision and decreased ability to judge depth. Decreased clarity of colors (for example, pastels and blues).

**Hearing** - loss of hearing acuity, especially sounds at the higher end of the spectrum. Also, decreasing ability to distinguish sounds when there is background noise.

**Taste** - decreased taste buds and saliva.

**Touch and Smell** - decreased sensitivity to touch and ability to smell.

**Arteries** - stiffen with age. Additionally, fatty deposits build up in your blood vessels over time, eventually causing arteriosclerosis (hardening of the arteries).

**Bladder** - increased frequency in urination.

**Body Fat** - increases until middle age, stabilizes until later in life, then decreases. Distribution of fat shifts - moving from just beneath the skin to surround deeper organs.

**Bones** - somewhere around age 35, bones begin to lose minerals faster than they are being replaced.

**Brain** - loses some of the structures that connect nerve cells, and the function of the cells themselves is diminished. "Senior moments" increase.

**Heart** - is a muscle that thickens with age. Maximum pumping rate and the body's ability to extract oxygen from the blood both diminish with age.

**Kidneys** - shrink and become less efficient.

**Lungs** - somewhere around age 20, lung tissue begins to lose its elasticity, and rib cage muscles shrink progressively. Maximum breathing capacity diminishes with each decade of life.

**Metabolism** - medicines and alcohol are not processed as quickly. Prescription medication requires adjustment. Reflexes are also slowed while driving, therefore an individual might want to lengthen the distance between him and the car in front and drive more cautiously.

**Muscles** - muscle mass declines, especially with lack of exercise.

**Skin** - nails grow more slowly. Skin is more dry and wrinkled. It also heals more slowly.

**Sexual Health** - Women go through menopause, vaginal lubrication decreases and sexual tissues atrophy. In men, sperm production decreases and the prostate enlarges. Hormone levels decrease.

The aging process also brings social and emotional change and loss into our lives. Inevitably, as we age, older relatives die, then some of our friends may grow frail and die, then the loss of a spouse affects many.

Physical losses and social losses that can accompany aging may be very difficult emotionally. Grief and sadness are normal reactions to such situations, and we cannot stamp out these reactions in ourselves or our older relatives. Just as the physical losses of later life can be compensated for, so can the social and emotional losses be overcome.

The physical aging process can be influenced in a variety of ways. Excess capacity is built into the human system. The bulk of the changes that take place over the years can be strongly affected by exercise levels and other lifestyle characteristics. People who live in areas with especially long life expectancy have the following characteristics, apart from hereditary or genetic influences:

**Dietary and Nutritional Factors** - diets tend to be low in animal fats and high in vegetables and whole grains.

**Moderate Consumption of Alcohol** - some alcohol is consumed, although alcoholism is uncommon.

**Physical Activity Throughout Life**

**Sexual Activity Continues in later Years** - sexually active and free to express themselves in this way.

**Social Involvement** - respected and valued and remain in community life.

**Physical Environment** - challenging and free from pollutants.

In general, the lessons are clear. Regular physical activity, a balanced diet, social involvement, moderate or no drinking, and no smoking, can significantly decelerate the aging process.