

Elders Reveal Keys to Healthy Aging

You're living, you're aging, but that's not such a bad thing, a new study shows.

The study of nearly 3,500 men and women age 65 and older started a decade ago and is still going. Here's what the researchers have learned so far:

- Most people -- even after age 85 -- still lived independently and reported being in excellent or good health.
- People with good vision, good hearing, and good moods viewed their health favorably.
- Having close ties to family and friends is also a plus.

The bottom line: Aging brings change, but not necessarily a dismal, lonely decline. The study appears online in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*.

Healthy Elders

Aging isn't what it's cracked up to be, the study shows.

"Older people are healthy," says researcher Truls Ostbye, MD, PhD, in a news release. Ostbye is a professor in Duke University's department of community and family medicine.

"We hear a lot about disease and disability among the elderly, but the quality of life in older individuals is actually, by most measures used, high up to the oldest of age," Ostbye says.

That's not to say that aging is a piece of cake.

Many serious health problems -- including high blood pressure, cancer, and stroke -- become more common with age. Vision, hearing, and memory often fade, and personal losses or isolation can bring depression late in life (or any time).

Positive Despite Challenges

The seniors in Ostbye's study weren't in prime shape. Still, they were generally upbeat about their health and ability to handle chores of daily life.

Here are some of the challenges they faced:

- Most had had at least one major illness, such as heart disease, diabetes, Parkinson's disease, stroke, cancer, or heart failure.
- Hearing, eyesight, and mental skills often slipped with time.
- Some couldn't handle all of their daily activities alone.
- Loneliness was most common among the eldest women, probably because they had outlived spouses.

Despite those issues, most scored high on surveys of 10 key traits, including senses, physical illness, mood, social support, and activities of daily living. That sample included 80%-90% of participants aged 65-75. For people aged 85 and older, 60% rated their health as being excellent or good.

Mood had the biggest effect. The researchers found that "persons of healthy mood [are] more than three times as likely to report good or excellent health."

All participants lived in Cache County, Utah, which has a high life-expectancy rate for people aged 65 and older.

More than 5,000 people -- about 90% of the county's elderly population -- participated in the first survey, which was done in 1995.

Following in Their Footsteps

You may be able to enhance your own aging process. Here are some ideas from the study:

- Make your eyes and ears a priority. Glasses, eye surgery (such as for cataracts), and hearing aids can renew links to the outside world.
- Treat depression and work on improving bad moods.
- If daily activities are harder than they used to be, look for new solutions.
- Keep in touch with family and friends.

Religious or spiritual ties may also help, the researchers note.

By Miranda Hitti

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