



Regional Geriatric Assessment Program of Ottawa-Carleton

A Resource for Successful Aging

Healthy Aging: Old age Ain't for Sissies

There are three key characteristics of healthy aging: low risk of disease and disease related disability, high mental and physical function, and active engagement with life. The MacArthur Study on Aging suggested that only 30% of aging has anything to do with genetics. Approximately 70% of physical and mental decline accompanying aging is likely due to lifestyle risk factors including physical activity, smoking, nutrition, and injury prevention. Therefore, Dr. Dalziel's concept of healthy aging is doing the best you can by practicing optimal health promotional behavior with "the cards you have been dealt," based on your genetics and any diseases you might have.

The recent Statistics Canada report "How Healthy are Canadians?" showed that elderly Canadians are not only living longer but they are also more healthy. In the last ten years, life expectancy has increased by 2.4 years for males and 1.4 years for females, but baby boomers are suffering from less arthritis, hypertension and chronic lung disease when compared to a similar age group 20 years ago. In those over 65, rates of activity limitations and admission to nursing homes are actually lower. However, to me the most important fact in this report was the revelation that seniors' health status is more dynamic than previously thought. Half of those who reported fair or poor health in 1994 reported improved health in 1998. In 1994, 310,000 seniors reporting activity dependency on others. By 1998 13% had improved to "limited but not dependent" and 19% now had no limitations whatsoever. Not only is it not too late to "teach old dogs new tricks" but also much evidence has been accumulated to suggest that "only recent bad habits hurt you and only recent good habits help you".

Take Smoking for Example

Smoking is the number one preventable cause of disease and death in Canada. It is also implicated in 8 of the top 14 causes of death for seniors. But it is never too late to quit: smoking cessation rates are actually higher for older people than for younger people, and within five years of stopping smoking regardless of your age your risk of serious lung disease and cancer is reduced to practically that of a non-smoker. If you are still smoking, I strongly suggest you consult your family physician who can help you with programs and medications to stop this most dangerous health habit.

The "Fountain of Youth"

The benefits of both aerobic exercise for the heart and lungs and strength training for muscles have been demonstrated in hundreds of studies over the past decade. Health related benefits have been shown with arthritis, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, cancer, osteoporosis, hypertension, stress and depression to name a few. It is clear that the real "fountain of youth" for seniors is exercise. Again it is never too late to start. Two studies recently have shown the incredible benefits associated with starting an exercise program. In a Japanese study using a stationary bicycle and resistance exercise for only 4 hours a week, for only 25 weeks, seniors became five years younger in terms of lung capacity. Another study looked at strength training in 90-year old women in nursing homes. Simple quadriceps strengthening exercises done only 3 times a week, for only 8 weeks resulted in an increase in quadriceps strength by 174% and marked improvement in mobility with decreased falls and use of walking aids.

Fall prevention is another key area. Falls are divided into acute and chronic. If you suddenly have several falls over a short period of time this is strong evidence of an underlying acute medical illness and you should see your doctor promptly. On the other hand, if you have a tendency to have a few falls every year this could indicate a tendency towards falling. Again you should see your physician because often there are medical conditions that can be optimized, drug side effects that can be prevented, or exercise and balance programs that can be started.

Steps to Healthy Aging

- Stop smoking
- Eat sensibly and include calcium in your diet
- Exercise
- Fasten your seat belt while driving
- Get a flu shot
- Take care of your teeth and gums
- Use sunscreen

Areas that are clearly proven in terms of reducing the impact of a disease once present (secondary prevention) include the treatment of hypertension, aggressive treatment of osteoporosis, screening for alcohol, vision and hearing problems and common cancers, review of factors contributing to falls, and screening for problems with memory function. It is never too late to change, be as healthy as you can be!

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