

# HEALTH IN OUR HANDS!

The Arkansas State University Wellness Program Newsletter  
[www.clt.astate.edu/wellness](http://www.clt.astate.edu/wellness)



## Healthy Aging

In this article common health concerns of the aging population including mental and social health will be discussed.

### Common Health Concerns

As a person ages many health concerns arise. The following are the most common health concerns addressed by the aging: arthritis, cancer cardiovascular disease, and diabetes.

**Arthritis** is the most common cause of disability in the United States, limiting the activities of nearly 21 million adults. The word arthritis actually means joint inflammation. The term arthritis is used to describe more than 100 rheumatic diseases and conditions that affect joints, the tissues which surround the joint and other connective tissue. The pattern, severity and location of symptoms can vary depending on the specific form of the disease. Typically, rheumatic conditions are characterized by pain and stiffness in and around one or more joints. The symptoms can develop gradually or suddenly. Certain rheumatic conditions can also involve the immune system and various internal organs of the body. There are a number of risk factors which may lead to arthritis both modifiable and non-modifiable (age, gender, and genetics). The following are modifiable risk factors associated with arthritis:

- Overweight and Obesity: Excess weight can contribute to both

## Healthy Aging Part 2

the onset and progression of knee osteoarthritis.

- Joint Injuries: Damage to a joint can contribute to the development of osteoarthritis in that joint.
- Infection: Many microbial agents can infect joints and potentially cause the development of various forms of arthritis.
- Occupation: Certain occupations involving repetitive knee bending and squatting are associated with osteoarthritis of the knee.

**Cancer** is a common concern among the aging population. The type of cancer that causes the most concerns varies between genders. Prostate cancer, lung cancer, and colorectal cancer are the three most common cancers among men in descending order. Lung cancer, prostate cancer, colorectal cancer, and liver cancer are the leading causes of cancer death among men in descending order. Breast cancer is the most common cancer amongst women followed by lung cancer and colorectal cancer. Like men, lung cancer is the most common cause of cancer death among women followed by breast cancer and colorectal cancer. The number one prevention of cancer is screening.

**Cardiovascular disease**, commonly referred to as heart disease, may refer to several conditions. The most common condition in the United States is Coronary Artery Disease, which can cause heart attacks, angina (chest pain), heart failure, and arrhythmias. Some

conditions as well as some lifestyle factors can put people at a higher risk for developing heart disease. Cholesterol levels in the blood can contribute to heart disease, along with a sedentary lifestyle. Genetics may also predispose a person to heart disease. Proper screening and knowing family health history can help a person to properly set-up a plan to combat or prevent heart disease.

**Diabetes** is a disease in which blood glucose levels are above normal. Most of the food a person eats is turned into glucose, or sugar, for the body to use for energy. The pancreas, an organ that lies near the stomach, makes a hormone called insulin to help glucose get into the cells of the body. When a person has diabetes, the body either doesn't make enough insulin or can't use its own insulin as well as it should, causing sugar to build up in the blood.

Diabetes can cause serious health complications including heart disease, blindness, kidney failure, and lower-extremity amputations. Risk factors for type 2 diabetes include older age, obesity, family history of diabetes, prior history of gestational diabetes, impaired glucose tolerance, physical inactivity, and race/ethnicity. African Americans, Hispanic/Latino Americans, American Indians, and some Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are at particularly high risk for type 2 diabetes. Symptoms of diabetes include the following:

- Frequent urination
- Excessive thirst
- Unexplained weight loss
- Extreme hunger
- Sudden vision change

- Tingling and numbness in hands or feet
- Fatigue
- Dry skin
- Sores that are slow to heal
- More infections than usual

Proper diet and physical activity can help to both prevent and reduce the exacerbation of all these conditions.

Another common and serious concern that should be considered is **fall risk**. Older adults are at a greater risk for falls due to decreased strength, endurance, and balance that is common with age. Falls are serious because they may lead to hospitalization from a fracture, leading to downtime further decreasing strength and endurance.

Fall prevention is important and can be implemented early on. The number one strategy for fall prevention is increasing strength and endurance through exercise.

### Mental Health

Mental health is essential to overall health and well-being. Common mental health concerns amongst the aging include Alzheimer's and depression. Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia among older adults.

Alzheimer's disease involves parts of the brain that control thought, memory, and language and can seriously affect a person's ability to carry out daily activities. Scientists do not yet fully understand what causes Alzheimer's disease. There probably is not one single cause, but several factors that affect each person differently. Age is the most important known risk factor for Alzheimer's disease. The number of people with the disease doubles every 5 years beyond age 65.

Depression is a true and treatable medical condition, not a normal part of aging. However older adults are at an increased risk for experiencing depression. Someone who is depressed has feelings of sadness or anxiety that last for weeks at a time. They may also experience:

- Feelings of hopelessness and/or pessimism
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness and/or helplessness
- Irritability, restlessness
- Loss of interest in activities or hobbies once pleasurable
- Fatigue and decreased energy
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering details and making decisions
- Insomnia, early-morning wakefulness, or excessive sleeping
- Overeating or appetite loss
- Thoughts of suicide, suicide attempts
- Persistent aches or pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems that do not get better, even with treatment

Because people are living longer, the aging population is growing and many who are reaching the 65 year mark are now looking after their parents who maybe suffering from Alzheimer's disease or dementia. This may cause undue stress on the care givers leading to possible health risks including heart disease, obesity, cancer, just to name a few. The care giver may also feel guilty leading to even more stress.

Proper diet and exercise may help to reduce the effects that stress may have on the body.

### Social Health

The health of older adults is influenced by many factors. One of the least understood is the role that social support and personal relationships play in health and aging. Adults who have lived 65 years or longer have significant experience, expertise, and corresponding skills to share with the community. Their civic participation also yields enormous health benefits and social connections for them personally as they contribute to the world and maintain vitally important relationships.

There are also opportunities for the aging population to participate in activities and programs

offered in Jonesboro specifically geared toward those 65 years and older:

- St. Bernard's Senior Services including the Senior Life Center: [http://sbrmc.com/centers-of-excellence/senior-services/#senior\\_life\\_centers](http://sbrmc.com/centers-of-excellence/senior-services/#senior_life_centers)
- ASU Healthy Ager Program Contact Shawn Drake: 870-972-2667 or Rebecca Matthews: 870-972-2492
- East Arkansas Area on Aging: <http://www.e4aonline.com/>

### References

- <http://www.cdc.gov/aging/>
- <http://www.healthaging.net/#>
- <http://www.webmd.com/healthy-aging/default.htm>
- <http://www.norc.org/nshap>
- [http://www.healthtrust.org/initiatives/aging/index\\_aging.php](http://www.healthtrust.org/initiatives/aging/index_aging.php)

### Other News:

#### Events:

- October 22, 2011: Susan G Komen Race for the Cure 8:00am Little Rock, AR
- October 22, 2011: St. Bernard's Health and Wellness Institute Opening 12:00pm

\*\*If you have any suggestions for newsletter topics, please contact Dean Susan Hanrahan at [hanrahan@astate.edu](mailto:hanrahan@astate.edu).

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