

## AGING

### Age-Related Physical Changes

#### Part 2 of a Series

Aging is a process of gradual change over time that is most noticeable in children and older people. We reach our peak physical functioning and ability in our 20's and early 30's. These are the years that our bodies are the strongest, our senses are the keenest, and our minds are the sharpest.

While the sequence of change is similar, the rate at which we experience physical change tends to be quite individual, often based on lifestyle choices, genetics and environmental factors. Most physical changes associated with normal aging have little effect on a person's quality of life. Changes resulting from disease and lifestyle choices are not considered part of normal aging. Normal age-related physical changes include the following:

**BONES** – Once we reach the age of 30, bone marrow gradually starts to disappear from the bones in our arms and legs. (*Bone marrow is the soft, spongy tissue in the center of large bones that produces white blood cells, red blood cells, and platelets.*) In addition, there is a reduction in calcium that leads to decreased bone mass.

- ✓ **Concern** – Older people may be frail and have brittle bones. A fall can lead to a serious injury, loss of independence, disability and even death. Talk to a health care professional about diet, exercise, vitamins and supplements to help keep bones healthy and strong. In regards to a person's home, consider modifying the living environment to minimize the risk of falls and other safety hazards. Remove potential dangers such as throw rugs and extension cords. Add grab bars in the bathroom and make sure railings along stairs are secure.

For a free copy of a publication entitled "Older Consumers Safety Checklist" write: U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, Washington, D.C. 20207 or visit their website at [www.cpsc.gov/cpscpub/pubs/705.pdf](http://www.cpsc.gov/cpscpub/pubs/705.pdf)

**HAIR** – Hair loss and graying are commonly associated with aging. Receding hairlines and thinning of the hair are common by age 50, especially for men. Graying tends to vary by ethnic groups and individuals.

- ✓ **Concern** – People are often self-conscious and may seek treatment to cover or disguise graying or hair loss. Hair coloring, the use of a wig or toupee, hair transplant surgery and medications such as Rogaine® are all options.

**HEIGHT** – On average, beginning on our 40's, we lose one to two inches in height. Most of the loss occurs in the spine as the disks between vertebrae shrink.

- ✓ **Concern** – Aside from a person's clothing fitting differently over time, there are no specific health concerns.

**MUSCLES** – We tend to experience a steady reduction in physical strength due to a loss of muscle tissue, with the most rapid decline occurring after age 50.

- ✓ **Concern** – People should be careful not to over do it. Lifting heavy items or doing strenuous work may lead to injury or present health risks. Weight-bearing exercise such as walking, dancing, or lifting weights can help people maintain muscle mass, strength and balance.

**SKIN** – Age spots and wrinkles become noticeable around age 40 or 50 and skin becomes less elastic. Wrinkles and sagging skin are most common in the arms, face and neck.

- ✓ **Concern** – Skin is less resistant to cuts and bruises. People who are self-conscious about their appearance may consider cosmetic surgery or other treatments. Make sure that dry skin is treated with moisturizing lotion to help prevent cuts, especially in winter months.

Did you know that as a result of lower body weight, inactivity, reduced muscle mass and changes to the skin, many older people are more sensitive to air temperature and are less insulated from the cold?

**TEETH** – While we may lose a few teeth, with proper dental care, teeth should last a lifetime. As we age, our teeth become more sensitive to hot and cold temperatures. Tooth decay, gum disease and discoloration of teeth occur with age.

- ✓ **Concern** – Chewing and tasting food can be challenging for people with missing or damaged teeth, dentures or gum disease. People concerned about the appearance of their teeth may consider whitening and other professional dental treatments.

**WEIGHT** – Most of us gradually increase weight in our 30's and 40's. People in their 50's often notice a gradual decline in weight. Past age 50, there may be noticeable changes to one's face, legs and arms due to a reduction of fat.

- ✓ **Concern** – People are encouraged to stay active and engage in low-impact exercise such as walking, swimming and bicycling for at least 30 minutes, three times a week. Eating a healthy and balanced diet can help people maintain a desirable and consistent weight.

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The Center for Aging with Dignity offers the Aging Series as a community service. We are devoted to keeping people "SAFE After 60" by advocating for and advancing best-practice programs on the safety and mistreatment of older people. (A2-July '11) Copyright © 2006-2011 Charles Puchta – University of Cincinnati. **DISCLAIMER** – This publication is designed to raise health awareness and is not intended to replace the advice of health care professionals.

References:

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- National Institute on Aging. (2002, January). Age Page: Taking Care of Your Teeth and Mouth retrieved from <http://www.niapublications.org/agepages/teeth.asp>

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