

## AGING

### Aging and our Senses

#### Part 3 of a Series

Older people can expect some decline in their five senses. While the sense of smell, taste and touch all change with age, often the most noticeable changes affect our vision and hearing. As senses change, older people may find it more difficult to socialize and participate in activities. Changes to our senses may also increase the need for assistance with personal care.

For people experiencing a decline in their senses, simple actions can often be taken to help maintain quality of life. For someone who has difficulty seeing at night, hold activities earlier in the day and take advantage of lower prices at movie matinees and early bird dinner specials. If a person is hard of hearing, it can be helpful to reduce background noise, speak louder and slower, and pronounce words more carefully. The loss of vision and hearing can also affect a person's ability to drive safely.

**HEARING** – Starting around age 30, we begin to experience hearing loss. By age 40 or 50, it can be hard for many people to distinguish between which sounds are coming from nearby and which are from farther away. Higher tones such as the voices of women and children can be more difficult to hear as we age.

- ✓ **Concern** – Older people may find it hard to engage in or follow a conversation. It can be challenging to talk on the telephone or hear music or the television. People with impairment often use hearing aids or hearing amplifiers such as a pocket talker. Others may choose to avoid social situations where their impairment may be noticeable or they may feel conspicuous or uncomfortable.

**SMELL** – As we age there tends to be a decline in our ability to detect and identify odors. Other factors which affect smell include smoking and medications.

- ✓ **Concern** – Older people may be less aware of body odor or excessive use of perfume, and people may lose their natural ability to detect spoiled food or smoke. Regularly replace smoke detector batteries. If you believe a person may not notice odors or detect unsafe smells, offer support and kind words to help avoid potentially embarrassing or dangerous situations.

If a person has body odor, help avoid a potentially embarrassing situation and bring it to his or her attention. It is important to help people maintain their dignity in a respectful manner.

**TASTE** – The intensity of taste and the ability to identify different tastes diminishes as we age. Older people tend to maintain the ability to detect sweet taste, but have more difficulty detecting sour, salty and bitter tastes. Other factors that affect taste include dentures, medications and smoking.

- ✓ **Concern** – If older people find eating to be less enjoyable or satisfying, they may eat less often or eat only those foods with a distinctive or strong flavor. It is important for people of all ages to eat a healthy and balanced diet, not just the foods that taste good.

**TOUCH /SENSITIVITY** – As we age, our sense of touch often declines due to skin changes and reduced circulation. We become less sensitive to temperatures such as hot and cold water. Small motor skills such as opening a jar or handling silverware may also become more challenging. People with arthritis, diabetes or vascular disease may face additional challenges and limitations.

- ✓ **Concern** – Many older people may not be aware of their diminished sense of touch and as a result could unintentionally injure themselves. People leading a more inactive or sedentary lifestyle are often less sensitive and may not notice potential dangers.

**VISION** – As we age, the changes to our vision are often noticeable. The pupil of the eye becomes less responsive to changes in lighting making it difficult to see in the dark. The lens of the eye gradually thickens and yellows. There is a loss in visual acuity, which is the ability to notice detail. Of the many eye diseases that affect older people, the most common are cataracts, diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma and macular degeneration.

- *Cataracts* are a gradual clouding of the lens of the eye, making images less clear and sharp.
- *Diabetic retinopathy* is caused by a lack of circulation to the retina where the arteries in the retina become weakened and leak, forming small spots that cloud a person's vision.
- *Glaucoma* is a buildup of pressure inside the eye that ultimately can destroy the optic nerve and lead to blindness.
- *Macular degeneration* has to do with the deterioration of a portion of the retina responsible for focusing central vision in the eye making it difficult to read and recognize detail.
- ✓ **Concern** – It can become difficult for older people to see in dimly lit places such as a restaurant or theatre. Night driving and driving in rainy conditions can be dangerous due to an inability to see road signs, judge distance or recover from the sudden glare of oncoming traffic. As we age, many people will rely on reading glasses, bifocals or trifocals to help maintain their eyesight. Medical treatment or surgery may be an option for many conditions.

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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. (A3-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.

Reference:

- Bee, H. L. (2000) *The Journey of Adulthood* (4<sup>th</sup> ed., pp. 62-97). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

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