

SEASONS OF FAITH AND HOPE

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Some Myths About Aging

The National Institute on Aging provides us with clarification concerning some of the following common myths about aging. Additional information can be found on their web site.

1. Depression and loneliness are normal in older adults.

As people age, some may find themselves feeling isolated and alone. This can lead to depression, anxiety and sadness. However, these feelings are not a normal part of aging. Growing older can have many emotional benefits, such as long-lasting relationships and a lifetime of memories to share with loved ones. Studies show that older adults are less likely to experience depression than young adults. Older adults with depression may have less obvious symptoms or be less likely to discuss their feelings than younger individuals. Although depression is a potentially serious mood disorder, there are treatments that are effective for most people. Speaking with a medical professional can help determine if treatment is indicated.

2. The older one gets, the less sleep is needed.

A common misconception is that older people need less sleep as they age. Sometimes, they have a harder time falling and staying asleep. Older adults need the same amount of sleep as all adults—7-9 hours each night. Adequate sleep can help reduce the risk of falls and improve overall mental well-being. It also helps keep one healthy and alert.

3. Older adults can't learn new things.

Older adults are still able to learn new things, create memories, and improve their performance in a variety of skills. While aging does often come with changes in thinking, many cognitive changes are positive, such as having more knowledge and insight from a lifetime of experiences. Learning new skills may even improve cognitive abilities. Forming new social connections with others and engaging in social activities can keep one's brain active and may also improve cognitive health.

4. It is inevitable that older people will get dementia.

Dementia is not a normal part of aging. Although the risk of dementia increases as people get older, it is not inevitable. Many people live into their 90s without significant declines in thinking and behavior that characterize dementia.

Occasionally forgetting an appointment or losing keys are common typical signs of mild forgetfulness. If you have serious concerns about memory and thinking, or notice changes in your behavior and personality, you should talk with a doctor to find the cause and to determine the next steps.

5. If a family member has Alzheimer's disease, I will have it too.

A person's chance of having Alzheimer's disease may be higher if one has a family history of dementia because there are some genes that we know increase risk. However, having a parent with the disease does not necessarily mean that someone will develop the disease. Environmental and lifestyle factors, such as diet, exercise, exposure to pollutants and smoking may affect a person's risk for Alzheimer's disease. While you cannot control the genes you inherited, you can take steps to stay healthy as you age, such as getting regular exercise and controlling high blood pressure.

6. Older adults should take it easy and avoid exercise, so they don't get injured.

Studies show that you have a lot more to gain by being active, and a lot to lose by sitting too much. Inactivity is more to blame than age when older people lose the ability to do things on their own. Almost everyone, at any age and with most health conditions, can participate in some type of physical activity. It is well known that physical activity may help manage some chronic conditions. Exercise and physical activity are not only great for your mental and physical health but can keep you independent as you age.

7. Now that I am older, I will have to give up driving.

Natural changes can occur with age that may affect a person's ability to drive, like having slower response speed, diminished vision or hearing, and reduced strength or mobility. The question of when it is time to limit or stop driving should not be about age, rather, it should be about one's ability to drive safely.

8. My blood pressure is lower or returned to normal, so I can stop taking my medication.

High blood pressure is a common problem for older adults and can lead to serious health problems if not treated properly. If you take medication for high blood pressure and your pressure goes down, it means the medication is working. It is very important to continue your treatment long-term. If you stop taking the medication, your blood pressure could rise again, increasing your risk of stroke and kidney disease.