

ASK A DOC

■ BY DR RAYMOND A. JAMES, D.O.

Embracing healthy aging

Aging is a natural part of life, and let's face it, it's better than the alternative! While we can't stop the passage of time, we can certainly make the journey of aging a healthy and fulfilling one. Healthy aging isn't just about maintaining physical health; it involves nurturing your mental, spiritual and physical wellbeing. As you age, you should be thinking about healthy choices and behaviors. So, let's explore the wonderful world of aging gracefully, one step at a time.

Nurturing your mind: wisdom knows no age

Mental wellbeing starts with good sleep, which improves your brain performance, mood and health. It's harder to get good quality sleep as we age, and we often need more sleep than we're getting. I'm not talking about how many hours you spend in bed. Improving your possibility of getting nurturing sleep begins with sleep hygiene. We need to pay more attention to the things that affect our sleep. Is a pet disrupting your sleep? Do you have a partner who snores? Do you snore? What's the lighting like in your bedroom?

Folks don't always get themselves in a pattern of being relaxed and clearing their mind, getting mentally prepared for bed. Ask yourself if you are preparing your mind for restful sleep. You should do this at least 30 minutes to one hour before going to bed. Is your room cool enough? Dark enough? Free of blue lights from electronics that stimulate your adrenal glands and create a negative circadian pattern?

Without good sleep practices, people often turn to sleep medicines. Once in a while someone reaches for a Tylenol or Advil PM or ProSom or some other medicine that induces sleep. Most people who use an antihistamine, which is a central nervous system depressant that can last from six to eight hours, wake up a little groggy the next morning. So that's the downside. Melatonin in small amounts can help, but there are non-medical choices. I would rather see folks go for an evening walk, read before bedtime and moderate their alcohol intake. More than a glass of wine can disrupt sleep patterns.

Often, people get up in the middle of the night when they can't sleep, and they watch TV or surf the internet. This is not good, because it activates adrenal glands that produce cortisol and create a circadian rhythm pattern wherein they're more likely to be up the next night at that time as well. They're better off to lie in bed (even if it's 20 or 30 minutes) and meditate, have peaceful thoughts, count sheep or imagine themselves floating in water or lying on a

beach – somewhere peaceful that allows them to relax their body and ease back into sleep.

For others, their bladder is what wakes them up. As we age, our bladder muscle tends to get less toned (like the rest of our body) and it's harder to empty our bladder completely when we urinate. So, make sure you dial back on the amount of water you drink one to two hours before bedtime, and be sure you urinate before you go to bed, to lessen the urge to get up.

If you sleep deeper, you're less likely to have those nerves in your bladder fire to make you want to get up and urinate. And maybe you really don't need to urinate, it's just become a habit. Maybe if you instead lie there and relax your body, your bladder will relax, and you can go back to sleep.

Social interactions are your mind's superfood

I believe that as you reach retirement, it's a good time to reassess your relationships to identify any unhealthy ones and give adequate time to the relationships that are healthy. Be honest about the people who are negatively affecting your psyche. And maybe you can begin to distance yourself from relationships that bring you down and reduce your mental sense of wellness and health.

This also means cultivating your relationships with the people who are most important to you, especially your family. Now that you have the time to do it, make it a priority to plan the next trip or the next dinner together and do the things you enjoy doing. Why not spend time and find fun with family and friends, and maybe even make some new connections as well?

Strong bonds are the key to a happy life

Conversations and laughter are the best mental exercises, and they're much more enjoyable than endless reruns on TV. Meaningful conversations and interactions combat feelings of loneliness and keep your mind engaged. Researchers at Brigham Young University recently discovered that people with stronger social relationships have a 50 percent greater chance of survival than those who don't. In the Blue Zones, five longevity hotspots around the world, socializing with friends is an important part of life. Okinawans have moais, groups of people who travel through life together. Sardinians finish their days at a local bar, chatting with friends they've known all their lives. And Adventists potluck.

For me, I decided at one point to make more of an effort to contact and talk to an old connection more frequently. He had been a good friend and my best man at my wedding, but we hadn't seen or talked to each other very often. Now, once a month we talk, and every three months or so, we drive and meet halfway to see each other. And whenever we get together, we say, "We should do this more often," because it's so uplifting and brings us both joy. It's an effort, it takes planning, and it takes

time, but it's worth it.

Spiritual health: nurturing your inner self

Do you have spiritual health, and are you actively pursuing it? If you're someone who is religious and it brings you joy, make the effort to get together with a group of like-minded people, whether it's going to church, a Bible study group or even a book club. Spend time with people with similar beliefs and values. That's fellowship.

But spiritual health doesn't necessarily refer to religion. It's about connecting with your inner self and finding a sense of purpose and meaning in life. Really think about your values, passions and what gives your life meaning. Knowing this can guide your decisions and bring a sense of fulfillment.

Connect with nature

We are so lucky to live in Boca Grande, recently named "America's Best Small Beach Town" by Travel and Leisure magazine. Since it's your backyard, go ahead and spend time outdoors, appreciate the beauty of nature and feel connected to the world around you. It can lift your spirits and provide a sense of tranquility. While you're at it, cultivating a sense of gratitude for the present moment helps foster positive emotions and enhances your overall wellbeing.

Physical health: caring for your body

Those Blue Zones mentioned above also teach us the importance of a healthy diet and staying active. As we age, our gut doesn't absorb nutrients as well, so we are more likely to need supplements. You may be low in vitamin D or B. When you get to be 65 or 75, you might benefit from a water-soluble senior multivitamin. They are designed to help fill the void. Not everyone needs one, but for most of us, a silver vitamin can be helpful, especially when you're traveling or not eating well.

That iron stomach you used to have isn't what it used to be, so that second or third piece of pizza may not sit so well. You also need to be sure that your meals are eaten at least three hours before bedtime. As you age, the muscles in your lower esophageal sphincter can't squeeze as tightly, so you're more likely to have heartburn and reflux when you lie flat in bed.

Seniors over 70 tend to lose a pound of muscle a year, so while they may have lower caloric needs, they need to be sure to get an adequate amount of protein. Plant protein is healthier than animal protein. A balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins and healthy fats is key. Stay hydrated and limit processed foods and sugary snacks.

Regular physical activity has numerous benefits. It improves cardiovascular health, strengthens muscles and bones and enhances flexibility. Activities like walking, swimming and yoga are gentle yet effective. Get out there and maintain your muscle mass, because if you don't use it, you lose it. Ideally, you're doing

30 minutes of cardiopulmonary exercise five days a week. That's the minimum. If you meet that minimum of 150 minutes a week, you will feel better, your blood pressure will be better, and your heart and lungs will be in better shape. Those are clear health benefits.

That 30 minutes of exercise needs to be nonstop. If you play tennis, that's a good workout, but it's not the continuous one you need. On the days you're not playing, go for a walk at a brisk pace that still allows you to talk comfortably. Or try biking or swimming – something continuous.

Flexibility becomes more important as you age, because you depend on it even more than muscle mass. If you're still running or playing tennis in your sixties and approaching your seventies, that's great. But you have to begin to work more on flexibility and add in balance exercises. They will make you less likely to fall and less likely to get injured. The risk of injury from a fall becomes a greater threat as you age. And when you get to 80, falls become the biggest threat.

Do preventive maintenance on your body

Just like an old car, there's a higher risk that something could break as you age, and you want to catch things early to prevent more significant issues down the line. An annual exam helps you watch for changes in kidney and liver function, maintain healthy bone marrow, healthy blood count, healthy heart, lungs and eyes.

It's also a chance for you to bring up any aches or pains you are noticing that might not be a big deal, just a normal part of aging ... or maybe a symptom that is suggestive of something serious. The annual visit is a good chance for you to describe symptoms that are new since your last visit and talk about whether or not these are issues.

Live your best life

Film star Bette Davis was quoted as saying, "Getting old ain't for sissies." It requires a willingness to confront the inevitable challenges of advancing years. In the end, healthy aging is an all-inclusive journey. Your mind, body and spirit are interconnected, each supporting the other. So, embrace the adventure of growing older and celebrate your achievements.

'Ask A Doc' was an original creation of the late Hank Wright, MD, as "Curbstone Consult," and is brought to you by the Boca Grande Health Clinic. Do you have a medical or healthcare question you'd like answered? Just email your question to 'Ask A Doc' at the Boca Grande Health Clinic at bghc.org/contact or to mshortuse@bocabeacon.com, or submit it by mail to Ask A Doctor, c/o the Boca Beacon, P.O. Box 313, Boca Grande, FL 33921. To ensure your privacy, your name will not be used in the printed response.

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