

MEN AND AGEING

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The ageing experience is different for men and women. Not just because our bodies are anatomically different, but seems also to be evident in the documented life expectancy between the two sexes.

If we look at life expectancy in Australia, men have a lower life expectancy than women. It is estimated that females on average live 5 years longer compared to males. Many wonder why this is the case.

Studies have attributed the lower life expectancy to a few reasons. The Victorian government has documented some of the reasons they believe women tend to live longer. They suggest that historically men would spend longer hours at work and not have time to visit a doctor. They also suggest men usually have higher risk jobs, are encouraged from a young age to be tough and may be reluctant to seek help. They also propose that more money has been put into the healthcare needs of women and children than into men's health (eg, education, health promotion.) It is also proposed that men tend to present to medical practitioners when their illness is in the later stages (1).

Many resources indicate similar characteristics of people who generally live longer. These characteristics include maintaining a healthy weight, eating a healthy diet, regular exercise, conscientiousness, retain a purpose in life.

It is also suggested that keeping busy with work and having responsibilities is good for us. Similarly, happiness and contentment in our relationships with our partners is helpful in our quest to live longer and healthier lives (2,3,4).

If we think about what measures men can take to age well and live longer, look at the above suggestions.

Maintaining good nutrition through a healthy diet is important as we age, because essential vitamins and nutrients are required for the body to function well. Adequate nutrients are required for effective blood circulation, and for adequate immune response to fight infections. Adequate volumes of healthy foods are required

to provide us with the energy needed to undertake the day's normal activities. Changes in our digestive tract as we age can affect the way our gut absorbs nutrients and how foods pass through it. Slow motility may cause constipation. It is important to incorporate high fibre foods and adequate fluids into your diet if you are experiencing this.

As we age, it is important to have regular check ups at the doctor's as deficits in essential vitamins and nutrients can affect our health.

Remaining active is a contributor to living a longer and healthier life. Being active has many benefits. Exercise is good at preventing cardiovascular disease (a leading cause of death) and it is good for balance and strength (key factors in falls prevention). If exercise is attended outdoors, it allows us exposure to vitamin D from the sun, which assists with calcium uptake and helps prevent osteoporosis. It also offers an opportunity to remain socially active in the community, another key factor for a healthy life.

Studies suggest many benefits of physical exercise. One report states that activity reduces stress and anxiety, improves self worth, reduces risk of chronic disease and reduces the functional decline that occurs with ageing (5).

For those reasons, it seems fairly clear that exercise is a crucial component in ageing well.

One chronic disease is osteoarthritis. Osteoarthritis is the most common limiting condition in Australia, 1.8 million males in Australia suffer with arthritis with a total of 1 in 5 Australians suffering from the condition (6).

If you suffer with osteoarthritis, the arthritis organisations in Australia recommend exercise as one of the most effective treatments. They suggest gentle regular exercise such as walking, water based exercises such as hydrotherapy, strength training, tai chi, yoga, cycling and even chair based exercises were the best options (6). It is advised to check with your GP before commencing any new exercise regime and establish which exercise would be best for you.

Better health, brighter life

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An issue to consider for ageing men is urinary incontinence. 15% of men over the age of 65 years have some degree of urinary incontinence (7). As we age the normal elastic tissue in the bladder wall becomes tougher, muscles also weaken. These both affect the bladder's ability to empty properly.

As men age, their prostate gland increases in size. In fact, by the age of 40 most men's prostates have started to get bigger. It is believed that around 90% of men by the age of 80 are affected by an enlarged prostate (8). As an enlarged prostate can come with many symptoms, it is important to have regular prostate checks as you age.

The prostate is a gland that sits just under your bladder and around your urethra. Enlargement of this gland may obstruct the urethra making it very difficult to pass urine through it. The prostate may even press upwards against your bladder, causing pressure and distention to your bladder. Symptoms of prostate problems include difficulty starting your urine flow, dribbling or slowness passing urine, pain when voiding, blood in your urine, a feeling of not emptying your bladder properly, waking frequently at night to urinate, urgent need to pass urine, painful ejaculation, decreased ability to get an erection or decreased libido (9). If you get any of these symptoms, it is important you advise your GP.

As an ageing male, it is important to pay attention to your body and any changes you may be experiencing. You should have regular check ups and seek help when needed. As mentioned, keeping active and involved in social activities is a crucial component in ageing well. Your local council should be able to advise you what men's social groups, sporting/ exercise programs, educational programs, interactive/hands on programs such as "The men's shed", may be running in your area.

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