

## It's always a good time to think about healthy aging

By Kim Krisberg

People should start thinking about healthy aging when they're young, including healthy habits in their daily routines until they've become second nature. That's a good way to help prevent the chronic diseases that many seniors live with. But it's not the only path to a healthy and long life.

"Healthy habits should begin when we're young and continue as we age," says Kathleen Cameron, MPH, senior director of the Center for Healthy Aging at the National Council on Aging. "Good nutrition, regular physical activity, being socially engaged — all those things are important across the life span and making them a part of everyday routines is really critical...We're aging every day, so it's never too early to start."

Starting early is key to fending off serious chronic disease — one of the most common health risks that come with getting older. Right now, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 85 percent of

older adults have at least one chronic disease and about 60 percent have two chronic conditions. For instance, nearly a quarter of Americans ages 60 and older have diabetes, and 90 percent of Americans ages 55 and older are at risk for high blood pressure.

"It's the chronic conditions that lead to those losses of independence and functional declines that really limit an older person's ability to engage with society at large," Cameron says. "So preventing those illnesses in the first place is really important."

Once you reach older age, there are still plenty of ways to protect and improve your health and well-being — even with a chronic illness. Cameron says a good place to start is with a yearly wellness checkup, which Medicare provides to all patients free of cost. Older adults can take advantage of the opportunity to discuss a range of issues with their doctors, including needed preventive screenings, cognitive risks, falls prevention and mental health concerns. In fact, the National Institute on Aging says good patient-provider communication is especially important for older people, many who are managing multiple conditions and illnesses.

On that note, Cameron encourages older adults to create a list of all their medications and review it with a provider — such as a physician or pharmacist — at least once a year to avoid potentially negative drug interactions, which can be a risk for falls.

Good nutrition and physical activity are often central to that management equation, as they are to overall healthy aging. According to NIA, regular physical activity can help prevent a variety of health and injury risks, such as osteoporosis and falls, and can serve as an "effective treatment" for chronic conditions such as arthritis, high blood pressure and heart disease. In fact, research shows that even those who don't start exercising until their 60s or 70s still experience positive benefits, such as a lower risk of heart attacks.

Good nutrition can provide similar preventive benefits, but it's also important because seniors



may be especially vulnerable to malnutrition. Older bodies also have different nutrient needs than younger ones. Again, Cameron recommends older adults discuss nutrition and exercise with their health providers.

From the physical to the psychological, Cameron says mental health is often overlooked in healthy aging discussions, even though the number of older adults living with conditions such as depression and addiction are expected to increase dramatically.

According to the National Council on Aging, the number of older U.S. adults with a mental disorder such as depression, dementia or anxiety is expected to double to 15 million by 2030, while the number of people struggling with addiction is projected to reach 5 million by 2020.

There are opportunities to reduce and prevent those risks, too. Cameron encourages older adults with chronic pain to talk with their physicians about pain treatment plans that don't over rely on addictive painkillers.

She also says social isolation is a driving force behind depression and suicide risk among older adults — "in fact, some research shows that social isolation is as bad for your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day," she notes.

"Stay engaged as much as possible," she says, adding that local senior centers are great places for reducing social isolation and building community.

Lastly, Cameron says, don't be afraid to lean on family and friends when you need to.

"It's okay to ask for help," she says.

>> For more information on healthy aging, visit [www.nia.nih.gov](http://www.nia.nih.gov)



### Preventing falls key for health

Death rates from falls are going up in the U.S., increasing 30 percent between 2007 and 2016. CDC says that if rates continue to rise, seven fall-related deaths will happen every hour by 2030.

Falls remain the most common cause of injury-related death among older people, sending 3 million to emergency departments every year, including 300,000 people hospitalized for hip fractures.

To prevent and reduce fall risks, CDC says to:

- ◆ talk to your doctor about a fall assessment,
- ◆ do strength and balance exercises,
- ◆ have your vision checked, and
- ◆ make your home safer by taking precautions such as removing tripping hazards and installing railings.

