

The Healthy Aging Checklist

Cheatsheet: How to Promote Physical Health

By Leslie Kernisan, MD MPH

About the Healthy Aging Checklist

Maintaining the best possible health while aging is key to maintaining what is most important to us: **our ability to be as physically and mentally capable as possible, so that we can remain active, engaged in our lives, and as independent as possible.**

In fact, most “aging” problems that older adults and families struggle with — like difficulties with mobility, memory, or independence — track back to underlying health problems.

To promote healthy aging – and to optimize health even if a person has chronic illnesses or an “incurable” condition like Alzheimer’s disease -- it’s important to do six key things. This Healthy Aging Checklist is a framework that can be used by all older adults.

The Healthy Aging Checklist

- ✓ Promote Brain Health & Emotional Health
- ✓ Promote Physical Health
- ✓ Check For & Address Common Aging Health Problems (includes falls, pain, memory changes, incontinence, loneliness, and polypharmacy)
- ✓ Learn to Optimize Management of Chronic Health Conditions
- ✓ Get Recommended Preventive Health Services for Older Adults
- ✓ Address Medical, Legal, and Financial Advance Care Planning

Cheatsheet: How to Promote Physical Health

The following cheatsheet will help you promote physical health, including strength, mobility, and good maintenance of the body’s organs and inner workings. It summarizes the six key actions that I believe are most important for maintaining physical health, plus one optional action to consider.

For more details on why I recommend these actions, and additional links and resources, see the full article here:

[How to Promote Physical Health: The Healthy Aging Checklist Part 2](#)

Healthy Aging Checklist, Part 2

Cheatsheet for Promoting Physical Health

Maintaining the inner and outer workings of the body is key to healthy aging, and to maintaining independence. Here's what to do:

Highly recommended actions:

	Action	For more information
☐	Exercise regularly, including strength training twice a week. Exercise helps maintain strength and mobility in aging, plus it improves virtually all health outcomes, provided one doesn't overdo it or become injured. Strength training is especially important in later life. Research has shown that even less-than-recommended exercise improves health and mobility, but the ideal is to do four types of exercises: strength, endurance, balance, and flexibility.	How Exercise Helps Aging Adults: Key points from a landmark study How much physical activity do older adults need? (CDC.gov) How can strength training build healthier bodies as we age? National Institute on Aging: Four Types of Exercise and Physical Activity
☐	Don't smoke. Smoking is bad for all aspects of physical health. Although it's best to quit sooner than later, even people who've developed tobacco-related illnesses will feel better and live longer if they quit. Quitting is hard but the chance of success goes way up if one gets medication and counseling, rather than trying to quit on one's own. E-cigarettes can help some people quit & are better than smoking tobacco.	Quitting Smoking for Older Adults (NIHSeniorHealth.gov) Cardiovascular risk of smoking and benefits of smoking cessation Get Free Help: Speak to an Expert (Smokefree.gov)

Highly recommended actions:		
	Action	For more information
☐	Get enough sleep. Chronic sleep-deprivation is linked to cardiovascular disease, increased inflammation in the body, and decreased immune function. Although aging does make sleep lighter and more fragmented, it is not normal to often wake up tired or to feel one sleeps badly. Sleep problems are very common in older adults, but they can be treated once they are properly identified. Do not rely on sedatives long-term; they are bad for the brain and increase fall risk.	How Sleep Affects Health, & Changes With Aging 5 Top Causes of Sleep Problems in Seniors, & Proven Ways to Treat Insomnia How to Sleep Well as You Age
☐	Avoid chronic stress. Chronic stress has been linked to cardiovascular disease, insulin resistance, and decreased immune function. Research also suggests it accelerates “cellular aging.” Common causes of stress in older adults include financial stress, relationship stress, work-related stress, and caregiving stress. Use general approaches (such as improving sleep, exercising, etc) and learn approaches specific to your source of stress. Avoid tranquilizers as they are bad for brain health.	How stress affects your health Stress Management: How to Reduce, Prevent, and Cope with Stress

Highly recommended actions:		
	Action	For more information
☐	Maintain a healthy weight. Obesity is a major risk factor for disability in late life. It has also been linked to many health problems including cardiovascular disease, diabetes and glucose intolerance, certain cancers, and sleep-related breathing disorders. Research shows that losing a modest amount of weight (5-7% of body weight) can improve physical health and symptoms. Older adults should be careful to not lose too much lean muscle mass while losing weight. Note that unintentional weight loss is a major red flag, and should be brought to the attention of your doctor.	Obesity in the elderly: More complicated than you think Rethinking Weight Loss and the Reasons We're "Always Hungry" Weight Loss, Exercise, or Both and Physical Function in Obese Older Adults
☐	Eat a “healthy diet.” A healthy diet is one that doesn’t provoke negative health effects, such as being prone to: take on extra weight, develop insulin resistance, develop atherosclerosis, and/or have uncomfortable symptoms in the belly or bowels. Exactly what to eat for a healthy diet is being debated, and may be different for different people. Research suggests that the Mediterranean diet works well for many. This usually means lots of vegetables and fiber, and minimal ultra-processed foods and added sugar.	How to Follow the Mediterranean Diet for Senior Health, & Related Research Findings Dietary Guidelines For Americans

Optional Action:		
☐	Tinker with your nutrition and your microbiome. Exciting new research finds that our health is significantly influenced by the bacteria in our body, especially in our intestines. The effect these bacteria have on us seems to be influenced by what we eat. We don't yet know how to optimize the microbiome, other than minimizing antibiotics. Eating a high-fiber diet can help, and for some people eliminating certain foods seems to improve health. <i>What likely doesn't work:</i> Extra vitamins, supplements, and anti-oxidants have not been shown to improve health, and their quality is often suspect.	We can change diet to generate a healthier microbiome and a healthy individual Vitamin D: The Healthy Aging Dose to Prevent Deficiency & FAQs Vitamins and Minerals in Aging

About Dr. Leslie Kernisan and Better Health While Aging:

Leslie Kernisan, MD MPH, is a practicing geriatrician who believes it should be easier for older adults to have the best possible health and quality of life as they age.

Through her website Better Health While Aging, she provides practical information on how to address many common health problems that affect older adults. She also addresses common concerns and dilemmas related to helping older parents and other aging relatives.



Visit BetterHealthWhileAging.net to find more useful articles on senior health, family caregiving, and [helping older parents](#).

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