

# HEALTHY ACTIVE AGEING

Empower yourself to stay healthier, stronger and happier



Text by Dr Vanessa Mok, Registrar, Psychiatry

**G**rowing older is a normal part of life and ageing will affect you physically and mentally. As you age, it is important to keep practising healthy lifestyle habits that will help reduce stress and maintain physical and mental health. Although you cannot control everything that affects your health, keep in mind that many things are within your hands. There are things you can do to enhance your self-care that cost next to nothing and can be done alone or with friends. Ways to minimise the effects of ageing include staying mentally alert, intellectually curious and physically active. Here are some tips on how to stay healthier, stronger and happier in your golden years.

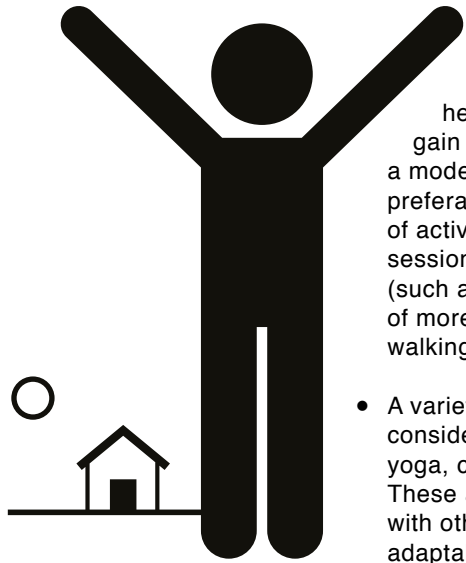


## 1 Make healthy lifestyle choices

- Eat a balanced, healthy diet – it has been said often enough, but as you get older, you must get smarter about eating better. Dietary requirements can change as your energy needs decrease, while your need for nutrients, such as proteins, vitamins and minerals, may stay the same or even increase with age. Some ways to eat better include consuming more fruit and vegetables, lean meat, fish and poultry, some dairy products such as milk or yoghurt, and to reduce fat where possible as well as drinking plenty of water.
- Make sure you get enough sleep. Waking up feeling refreshed will allow you to use that energy to get out into the daylight and do active things. You will be able to engage better in activities and sleep better the next night. Overall, your daily energy levels will increase. Dreams and deep sleep are also important for your brain to form memories and links, so quality sleep plays a vital part in helping you remember and process things better. Sleep is also the time your body repairs and restores itself.
- Moderate your consumption of alcohol and smoking. If possible, eliminate them altogether.

## 2 Stay as active as possible

- Physical activity improves balance, coordination, breathing, circulation and mental acuity. Increase in physical stamina aids in maintaining healthy bones, muscles and joints. Exercise helps control body weight, lowers your blood pressure and strengthens your muscles, which helps you avoid injuries by reducing your chances of falling.



- Regular exercise need not be strenuous to achieve health benefits. Older adults can gain significant health benefits with a moderate amount of physical activity, preferably daily. A moderate amount of activity can be achieved in longer sessions of moderately intense activities (such as walking) or in shorter sessions of more vigorous activities (such as brisk walking or climbing stairs).
- A variety of sports and activities worth considering include walking, jogging, yoga, cycling, swimming and tai chi. These activities can be done alone or with others, as part of an exercise regime adaptable to your lifestyle.

### 3 Keep your mind active



- An environment that is cognitively and even socially challenging facilitates and enhances cognitive performance as opposed to one providing little stimulation, which results in boredom and cognitive decline.
- Basically, do not be afraid of new experiences, and make use of opportunities to learn new things. The science is clear – active engagement in cognitively stimulating leisure activities is associated with better memory function, decreased depression and increased life satisfaction, and a reduced risk of dementia.
- Social interaction and social networks challenge you to keep in touch with society. Your children may grow up and move away or you may lose your spouse. Get to know your neighbours and other residents in the area by visiting and getting involved with a senior activity centre or community centre.
- Cultivating a variety of leisure, social, cultural and spiritual activities can be done alone, with family members or in the community. Things to consider include cooking, gardening, painting, rearing a pet, doing volunteer work or even taking up a part-time job.

### 4 Have a positive outlook

- Your attitude shapes the way you perceive, understand or interact with the world. A positive attitude helps you better deal with stress or negative feelings.
- In older adults, stress is thought to play a bigger role in triggering depression than in other age groups. But as you grow older, do realise that it is normal to have some feelings of insecurity and fear. Acknowledge your feelings and do not be afraid to share your emotions and worries. Be willing to talk to family, friends or even a healthcare professional so that they can give you the support you need.
- Recognise that there are some things that are out of your control in life, and direct your attention toward the things that you can control or influence. Focus on being thankful, being appreciative and enjoying your life.
- Try to keep a sense of humour and put some fun back into your life by doing something you really enjoy every day.

### 5 See your doctor regularly

Do go for your routine check-ups and follow your doctor's recommendations for screening and preventative measures. Early detection and treatment may prevent health conditions from getting worse.

As you get older, you may find it difficult to cope with certain changes in your life. The most common challenges older adults face include:

- Death and loss of family, friends and loved ones
- Relationships and family problems
- Loneliness and feelings of isolation
- Adjustments to new roles such as life as a retiree
- Memory difficulties
- Physical health problems

Some of these challenges can in turn result in mental health problems. It is beneficial to detect them early, so you can seek help promptly and learn to cope with these difficulties.



## YOU'RE NOT ALONE

If you experience bouts of depression or grief, or know someone who suffers from dementia, know that help is at hand. Learn to recognise the early signs of these mental conditions and ways to manage them.



### Depression

It is normal to feel sad or down once in a while. However, take note if you feel an intense sadness that lasts longer than usual (over several weeks, for example). Depression is not a natural part of ageing, but it is a common problem and medical help may be needed. It can be triggered by a significant life event such as retirement, loss of a loved one, chronic illness or physical disability. Sometimes, depression can also occur without any obvious triggers.

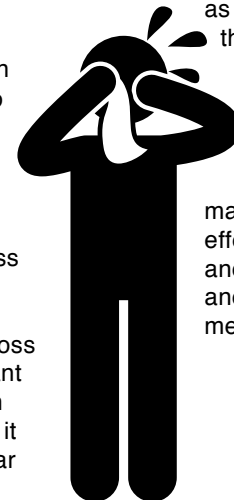
If you are experiencing more than half of these symptoms, you may be suffering from depression:

- Feelings of sadness and frequent tearfulness
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Excessive tiredness, where even the simplest of tasks seem strenuous
- Sleep disturbances that include difficulty sleeping or an excessive amount of sleep
- Significant decrease or increase in appetite
- Poor concentration
- Little or no interest and enjoyment in life
- Recurring thoughts of life not worth living or suicide

For most people, depression can be treated successfully, so see a doctor early as there is no reason to suffer silently.

### Grief

It is normal to grieve for the loss of health, a loved one, or your status or role. It is a natural response to help accept your loss and adjust to life after significant changes. Everybody grieves in their own way, and sometimes it can take six months to one year



to restore a sense of balance in one's life. However, it is worrying if you are unable to cope with the difficulty and cannot resume daily activities.

When grieving, common experiences include:

- Excessive tiredness
- Loss of appetite
- Forgetfulness or poor concentration
- Disturbed sleep
- Constant thoughts about the loss
- Neglect of self-care, including personal appearance or hygiene
- Social withdrawal from friends or usual activities

If you experience any of the above situations for a prolonged period of time or feel them intensely only many months after the loss, you may be suffering from complicated grief. Support and understanding from family and friends can help you cope with normal grief, but if you suffer from complicated grief, consult a doctor or healthcare professional for help.

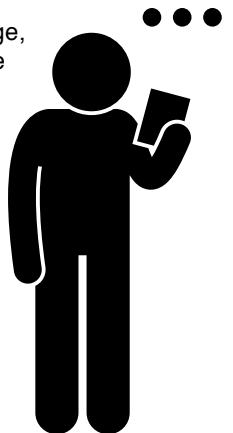
### Dementia

Some degree of forgetfulness is normal with age, but significant memory loss or cognitive decline is not an inevitable part of normal ageing. Dementia is a disease of the brain that can be due to many causes, with the most common being Alzheimer's dementia. Typical characteristics of dementia include:

- Gradually worsening memory
- Decline in ability to perform routine tasks
- Disorientation
- Difficulty in learning new things
- Loss in language skills
- Impaired judgment and ability to plan
- Personality and behaviour changes

These symptoms are usually noticed when they interfere with daily life and they intensify as the condition worsens. It is important to recognise these symptoms early, so do not brush off forgetfulness as a natural process of ageing. See a doctor as early as possible, because dementia does not only affect the older adult; family members also need support or counselling to cope with this change.

Emotional, mental and physical health are all connected. A healthy mind is as important as a healthy body and should be given the same attention. Successful ageing is defined as maximising your potential and minimising negative effects of getting older. It is never too late to start, and there is a lot you can do to improve your health and longevity, and reduce your risk for physical and mental disability as you get older. ©



Dr Vanessa Mok is a Registrar in Psychiatry at CGH. She received her MBBS from Imperial College London. Dr Mok is a member of the Royal College of Psychiatrists.