

*7 Secrets
To
Healthy Aging*

*By
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7 Secrets to Healthy Aging

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Jean Root, D.O.

Geriatric Medicine Specialist

Where is the Fountain of Youth and why has it been so elusive over the centuries? While the modern age has brought with it increased longevity, it hasn't necessarily brought good health or youthful vigor. In fact, more than ever, people dread the thought of getting old. Someone back in the 1940's or '50s dubbed the last third of life "the golden years". It was the beginning of an era that saw the promotion of industries by the kind of benefit plans they provided to their employees such as health insurance and pension plans. The idea that people could relax and enjoy their "golden years" came to be an expectation. People worked and went about their daily lives assuming that their health would be good enough for them to enjoy their retirement and didn't usually make any special effort in regard to staying healthy. To be fair, there are a lot of things that we know now about maintaining health that we didn't know back in the '40s and '50s. The development of the Social Security system and what is considered "old" is another story for another time. The reality of aging and health has now caught up with the romanticized picture that was created in earlier years. Many people find that their health suddenly starts to deteriorate with retirement and their "golden years" become a series of physical problems and emotional trials that can be disheartening, painful and depressing. I don't want to paint too black a picture, but I do want to focus attention on the things that we can do to make our later years healthier and happier.

Healthy aging is finding a balance between the physical, the emotional and the spiritual. Today's medical community is just beginning to recognize the importance of emotional and spiritual health on physical functioning. Indeed, when the body fails us, it is often our emotional and spiritual foundations that enable us to heal and continue living "on the bright side". So, here are my seven secrets to healthy aging:

- 1) Physical Health – I recommend the same thing for elders that I recommend for all age groups. Take advantage of Preventive Medicine measures and you may avoid many of the debilitating, chronic illnesses that plague us as we age.
 - a. Floss and brush your teeth. Oral health is a vitally important component to overall health.
 - b. Get routine vision check-ups and follow the advice of your optometrist/ophthalmologist.
 - c. If you're having trouble hearing, don't blame it on others; get your hearing evaluated. You might benefit from a hearing device.

Swallow your pride if you don't want to be seen wearing a hearing aid. In the long run, you'll benefit from the hearing aid if you have a hearing problem that is responsive to one because hearing loss can be very socially isolating. Social isolation is one of the quickest ways to start on the downhill slide to poor physical and emotional health.

- d. Get regular physical examinations at your doctor's office and follow his/her advice on laboratory tests, X-rays, etc. He/she will check your blood pressure, blood sugar, cholesterol, blood count and other items that are a good indication of your overall health.
 - e. Get your immunizations – if you're 65 or older that includes yearly influenza, a one time Pneumovax® for pneumococcal pneumonia, tetanus every 10 years and a shingles vaccine.
 - f. Women – get a bone density test and take routine calcium and Vitamin D. Women need about 1200 mg. of calcium per day and it is hard to get that much in your diet alone. They also need 400 – 800 international units (IU) of vitamin D. These are just the basic building blocks of bone and bone health is critical to remaining healthy and functional.
 - g. Women – yearly mammograms and Pap smears until around age 70. You should continue past 70 if you have had any tests that are abnormal, are in a high risk category, or just feel that you want to be on the safe side.
 - h. Men – prostate Specific Antigen (PSA) yearly or more often if you're in a high risk category, along with digital rectal exam for prostate size and texture.
 - i. Men and Women – digital rectal exam for blood in the stool.
 - j. Men and Women – your sigmoid colon is the rectum and left side of your colon and that is where tumors are most commonly found. A sigmoidoscopy is an exam where a flexible tube with a viewing scope examines the tissue and the doctor has the ability to take samples of tissue that looks abnormal. Recommended every 5 years.
 - k. Men – Ultrasound screening for an abdominal aortic aneurysm (a bulging out of the lower aorta) that can rupture and cause sudden death.
- 2) DON'T SMOKE!!! If you do smoke, join a smoking cessation program and ask your doctor to help with medications if necessary. Smoking has no redeeming social value. It is a physical and emotional addiction to nicotine. You are harming yourself, anyone who lives with your second hand smoke and society at large for the expense of taking care of you when you have chronic lung disease.
- 3) Drink alcohol in moderation only. 2 drinks/day for men; 1 drink/day for women.

- 4) Eat a balanced diet and DRINK WATER!!! – Drink the equivalent of at least 6 eight ounce glasses of water daily. By the “equivalent” I mean something fluid that is mostly water. It can include coffee, tea, soda, milk and juice. Water is essential for kidney, bladder and bowel function. A balanced diet includes protein (meat, cheese, dairy products, soy products, nuts, etc.), carbohydrates (starches, cereal grains, fruits, pasta, rice, etc.) and fats (cooking oil, butter, marbled meat, etc.). Most older adults do very well with between 1500 and 2000 calories daily. The new food pyramid recommends 9 servings of fruits and vegetables daily with moderate use whole grains and minimal use of highly processed foods. You need to eat enough muscle meat or other source of iron to keep from becoming anemic and go very light on the fats and oils. Take a multivitamin daily just in case you’re missing something in your diet. Avoid obesity. It is detrimental to all aspects of your health and makes it more difficult to function at an optimal level. It also places you at higher risk for surgery, recovery from anesthesia and can complicate your recovery/rehabilitation.
- 5) Stay physically fit. Fitness relates to your level of physical activity, endurance and flexibility. The tendency of all of us is to become less physically active as we age. This is just the opposite of what we should be doing because everything is beginning to deteriorate from disuse. LIFE IS MOTION! When you stop moving you start losing function. A sedentary lifestyle causes wasting of muscle and weakening of bones, tendons and ligaments. Metabolism slows, we gain weight and our heart and lungs begin to lose their normal capacity. Joints become stiff and unwilling to work. Constipation sets in and sleep is less effective. Exercise doesn’t have to be calisthenics like you used to do in gym class but it needs to be something! Walking is one of the best exercises for elders but it needs to be done on a regular basis – at least 3 times a week, preferably 30 minutes a day. Swimming, biking, aerobic classes, yoga, tai chi and other forms of exercise are all good forms of activity. Weight bearing exercise is especially important to avoid bone loss that leads to osteoporosis. It’s important for men and women both but women are at higher risk for bone loss. If you are not accustomed to exercise, you need to get clearance from your doctor, then start gradually and build up to at least a moderate range to maintain good physical health. In addition, you feel better mentally and emotionally and are actually less tired when you exercise. Most people who exercise regularly look forward to it and miss it when they can’t do it. For those with limited mobility, in a wheelchair for example, there are exercise routines that involve both the upper and lower body but don’t require standing or balancing.
- 6) Stay mentally and emotionally fit. Sometimes it really takes work to keep our mental and emotional equilibrium with all the changes that take place

in our lives as we age. Excessive worry, anxiety and depression can be devastating and debilitating. We must learn to make peace with ourselves and our view of life. Counseling, meditation, socialization with like minded groups and individuals; and coming to terms with our families enhance our quality of life and enable us to go into our later years with less stress and strain, with more peace and tranquility and with a sense that our lives have not been in vain.

- 7) Water your soul. Spiritual health is a very individualized matter. Many older adults continue to rely on the spiritual values and the religious affiliations with which they were raised. They find themselves quite content and secure in their beliefs. Others fall away from the tradition of their family of origin and engage in a spiritual journey that spans everything from atheism to devout religious observance. Elders are more acutely aware that they have a limited life span and want to find a place of spiritual resonance. The ability to pursue your spiritual longings and follow your heart is an important ingredient in feeding and watering your spiritual side and achieving a balance that enhances the physical, mental and emotional aspects of a well lived life.