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LIFE STAGES

Older is definitely - wiser!



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It's more important than ever for the over-50's to stay healthy. Here are some lifestyle ideas on how to feel younger and fitter - for longer.

The current picture

There's no doubt that the UK population is living longer, thanks to a combination of improved diet, living conditions, healthcare and scientific breakthroughs, (1) and it's a similar picture across much of the industrialised world (2).

For many, this can mean retiring later, and living better for longer. Science backs this up, too. The Tromso Study has been running since 1974 and highlights the fact that today's eighty-year-olds are as fit as those five years younger from the previous generation (3). Commenting on an article proposing that western societies should value their ageing populations (4), Arild Angelsen, professor of Environmental and Development Economics at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences says, "The idea that care of older people is a burden is a little misleading. The population is getting older, it's true, but people have to recognise that older people are fitter than before".

Laura Carstensen, director of The Stanford Center on Longevity, agrees. "Most people say they don't want to grow old, but they also want to live a long time". She prefers to use the term 'perennial' to describe the older generation; both for its positivity and suggestion that with good food, care and 'tending', they could go on blooming for years. She agrees that today's older generations are in better shape, physically and cognitively, in addition to being more highly educated and engaged in an active lifestyle than ever before; noting that in Victorian times, forty was deemed 'old' (5).

What about the future?

Dr. David Sinclair, PhD, is a professor of genetics at Harvard Medical School and an expert in the relatively new field of rejuvenation. He deems ageing a disease that can be researched and treated; explaining that in the future, 113 could be a conservative estimate for life expectancy! (6) Currently researching NMN, a molecule which has been shown in lab studies to slow ageing in mice, he recounts the use of it in his book (7) and webinar (8), discussing the strategies used to promote his own personal approach to longevity (6).

Being aware of the unique nutritional and environmental needs of older adults is an important first step to helping people to grow older gracefully. It is thought that many of the burdens on society which are linked to unhealthy ageing (such as chronic, age-related conditions) may actually be preventable with the introduction

of diet and other lifestyle changes (9).

So what's the problem?

As we age, the body's ability to consume a good quality diet reduces, just at a time when the body's nutritional needs increases (9). Appetite loss and reduced food intake (10) are common problems (11), often due to illness, [bereavement](#), [loneliness](#) or [depression](#) which may compound issues. Additionally, digestion slows down. Difficulty swallowing, constipation, a reduction in stomach acid and inflammation of the GI tract due to food allergies or as a side effect of medication can be common, and may have an impact on nutrient absorption (12). Taste buds may also be affected, leading to food tasting bland and boring.

Here are some top tips on how to ensure you're getting the most out of the food you're eating:

1. Chew each mouthful until it's a smooth consistency before swallowing as this makes digestion most efficient (this actually applies to everyone).
2. Soups and stews, or smoothies and shakes are packed full of nutrients but are easier to digest. Slow cooking can be an easy way to make dishes without much food preparation (use packs of pre-chopped veg for ease if raw food preparation is difficult). Aim to eat around eight to ten different portions of fruit and veg per day.
3. Drink small sips of water regularly throughout the day to prevent loss of appetite and support brain health. Smaller portions may be more appealing - ensure they are colourful and tasty.
4. Choosing a pretty plate to serve it on can add to a positive dining experience. Batch cook and keep an extra portion or two back to freeze for later as an easy, time-efficient way to support older relatives.
5. Dining out, where there is a choice of dishes and interesting company may also

encourage more of an appetite. If lack of taste and smell is an issue, it could be time to try Thai (or other spicier cuisines!).

When it comes to lifestyle - here's what you need to know, decade by decade:

In your **fifties**, it's time to be pro-active, look to address any health problems or niggles and even reverse some of the effects of any bad living to date! Losing excess weight, getting tested so you know your numbers, taking regular exercise and eating a predominantly plant-based diet may help to add years to your life. Cultural trips can help, too - one study conducted among over - 50's found that those who went on outings to the theatre, museums, concerts or exhibitions regularly reduced their risk of dying prematurely by one third! This was thought to be due to cognitive stimulation and interaction with others (13).

Looking to the **sixties**, keeping your brain active is key. Keep learning rather than stagnating due to a boring routine and think positively – research has found that optimists are much more likely to live longer (14). They think it could be due to the fact that those who look on the bright side are more able to recover from stressful situations, or it could be that they are overall fitter and less likely to smoke, which all contribute to [positive mental wellbeing](#).

For the **over-seventies**, keeping bones and muscles strong is important. Less activity can make these weaker, with the NHS recommending two and a half hours of moderate exercise per week for this age group (taken in spells of ten minutes or more) (15). Walking, dancing, exercising in water, gardening or cycling are all good aerobic ways to work out, and should be combined with other activities which help to build muscle including pilates, yoga or tai chi - these can also help to reduce muscle stiffness and promote balance. It's also worth remembering that around 60% of men and 75% of women in their seventies will live at least another ten years (16).

Into the **eighties** and beyond, stomach acid secretions have reduced, so it's worth

having vitamin B12 levels tested to find out if supplementation is necessary (less digestive acid reduces uptake of this vitamin). The body's ability to produce vitamin D from the sun also reduces as we age, as discussed previously, so consult a GP or a BANT-registered nutritional therapist regarding supplement use. Eating several smaller meals throughout the day may be more appealing than a larger breakfast, lunch and dinner (17). Loneliness or change may be an issue; wearing a hearing aid can help to stay connected with others and has been linked to reduced levels of cognitive decline.

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Sally Parr is a nutritional therapist (BA, DiplON, mBANT, rCNHC), who is passionate about helping people to achieve their wellbeing goals with delicious food ideas combined with achievable lifestyle advice. She runs clinics in Edinburgh and London. A journalist and editor, she writes for the national press.... [Read more](#)



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