



## Myths and Facts about Aging

Herbert G. Lingren

There are probably more myths about older people and aging than there are about any other stage of people's lives. These myths are perpetuated by television programs, magazines, newspapers, and all parts of our society. For example, the phrase "You can't teach an old dog new tricks" is a myth that hangs on in spite of our seeing older people working, going to college, and participating in many other demanding activities.

What do you really know about the life-styles of older people? About aging and its effects? The following 25 statements will test your knowledge of aging, of older people and what they can and cannot do. Answer "true" or "false" for each statement.

1. The majority of people over 65 are senile (disoriented or demented).
2. All five senses tend to decline in old age.
3. Most older people have no interest in, or capacity for, sex.
4. Lung capacity tends to decline in old age.
5. The majority of older people feel miserable much of the time.
6. Physical strength tends to decline in old age.
7. At least 10 percent of the aged are living in long-stay institutions (nursing homes, mental hospitals).
8. Drivers over 65 have fewer accidents per person than drivers under age 65.
9. Most older workers cannot work as effectively or efficiently as younger workers.
10. About 80 percent of the aged are healthy enough to carry out all normal daily activities.
11. Most old people are set in their ways and unable to change.
12. Old people usually take longer to learn something new.
13. As we get older, we have more illnesses, which is part of the aging process and should be expected.
14. The reaction time of most older people tends to be slower than the reaction time of younger people.
15. In general, most older people are pretty much alike.
16. "If you don't use it, you lose it."
17. Most older people are isolated and lonely.
18. Older workers have fewer accidents at work than younger workers.
19. Nearly 20 percent of the U.S. population is over age 65.
20. The majority of persons over 65 have at least one chronic ailment.
21. The majority of older people have incomes below the poverty level (as defined by the federal government).
22. The majority of older people are working, or would like to have some kind of work to do (including housework and volunteering).
23. People tend to become more religious as they age.
24. Most frail, elderly men are cared for by their spouses, and most frail, elderly women are cared for by their daughters or daughters-in-law.
25. The health and socioeconomic status of older people (compared to younger people) ten years from now will probably be lower than they are now.

In scoring this quiz, all of the odd-numbered statements are false, and all the even-numbered statements are true.

When our perceptions of the older person are much worse than reality, our prejudices are revealed. This is ageism, a stereotyping of older persons that makes it difficult to see them as they actually are. Ageism isolates the older generation socially, and perpetuates our own fear of aging.

### **Some facts about aging and the stage of life called late adulthood**

Aging is not a disease. Primary aging results from an inborn genetic clock in combination with life-style. Secondary aging is caused by trauma and disease.

\*First published as Hawaii Institute for Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources HITHR Brief 099; reissued Nov. 2006.

The functional efficiency of body organs gradually declines after age 30. There is a slight annual decrease in speed, strength, endurance, reaction time, and agility. Perhaps most importantly, the immune system becomes less resistant to disease.

Apparent changes in the skin, hair, and body shape that began earlier in adulthood continue. In addition, most older people are somewhat shorter, weigh less, and walk more stiffly.

Vision and hearing are almost always impaired by late adulthood. To the point that nine out of 10 of the elderly need glasses, and one out of three would benefit from a hearing aid.

Illness should not be an expected, and thus an accepted, companion during the later years. Unfortunately, many older persons overlook problems that need medical attention because they believe their symptoms are just part of growing old.

Thinking processes become slower and less sharp once a person reaches late adulthood. One reason is that less information reaches the brain as vision and hearing become less sensitive.

Dementia, whether it occurs in late adulthood or earlier, is characterized by memory loss—at first minor lapses, then more serious forgetfulness, and finally such extreme losses that recognition of one's closest family members fades. Only about 10 percent of older adults have senile dementia or irreversible organic brain deterioration. Barring disease, the brain continues to function well into late old age.

Short-term memory shows notable decline with age. Long-term memory, however, appears to decline very little. Once information is securely placed in the memory bank, it tends to stay there.

Most chronic ailments for which treatment is available are manageable in older adults. Eighty percent of persons over age 85 can carry out all daily activities. Acute diseases can be successfully treated and even cured.

Older workers work more efficiently, miss less work because of illness, and are on time more often than younger workers.

Overall, the elderly are more diverse in life-style, income, and personality than adults at earlier periods of life.

More people are retiring at earlier ages, fewer are below the poverty line, and, by the year 2000, they may be relatively better off than their children.

About 80 percent of elderly married women and 20 percent of elderly married men must adjust to being

widowed at some point in late adulthood, usually before age 75. Men are more likely to experience health problems as widowers, but are more likely to remarry. Women are more likely to have financial difficulties and to be comforted by friends who are also widows.

Remarriage in late adulthood is usually a happy event, helping both spouses feel younger, less lonely, happier, and sexier than they did before. Sexual interest can be high, although response time can be slower and satisfaction is likely to be closely related to satisfaction in the relationship.

A small minority of the elderly are frail, too feeble or ill to care for themselves. The frail are likely to be poor, over 80, female, and widowed.

When older persons are unable to care for themselves, they are usually cared for by a close relative—typically their spouse, daughter, or daughter-in-law. Only 5 percent of persons over age 65 are in nursing homes, and only 20 percent of those over 85 require such care.

Older people do not become “more” of anything as they age: they just become more like themselves as they were in middle age. If they were not physically active in their younger days, they will not likely become joggers at age 70. While they may not become more religious, religious concerns and spiritual awareness may increase in old age.

You may hear that older people are stubborn and set in their ways. Many find great comfort and support in things, people, and places that are familiar and safe. They may hesitate to try new things for fear of making a mistake and looking foolish. Certain habits, such as eating particular foods, have worked well until now, and people are reluctant to try anything different in case it causes problems.

The strongest predictors of high life-satisfaction in later life are a perception that one's life is purposeful and a positive evaluation of one's mental and physical health.

A wellness life-style can slow the effects of aging and may even slow the aging process itself. Diet, exercise, substance-free habits, intellectual activity, meaningful social relationships, and a sense of purpose can prolong vitality and prevent or postpone disability.

We must continue to fight the myths of ageism and become knowledgeable about this stage of life called late adulthood. This period of our lives could be the most satisfying of all.