

Glenn's Strategies for Well-Being: Are you sick or just aging?

Written by Valecia Weeks, CPT, LMT
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Pharmaceutical companies in the United States spend a huge, huge amount of money annually on commercial advertising. Many drug companies have found that they can readily and easily increase their revenue streams by appealing directly to the consumer through American prescription drug commercials. Rather than rely solely on physicians recommending one med over another, these companies are reaching out directly to the end use consumer through American prescription drug commercials.

As we all know, most people see a commercial, and are quickly convinced that they must need the advertised medication for their “condition.”

Unfortunately, this is, in many cases, the result of us having no understanding of what happens when the body ages.

Normal signs of aging are generally the same for everyone, though they don't necessarily develop at a particular age. You can expect to notice and adjust to, many gradual changes as you age. Certain physical changes are fairly predictable. Most people start needing reading glasses between ages 40 and 50, and many have some hearing loss later in life.

As people age, bones tend to become less dense. Thus, bones become weaker and more likely to break. In women, loss of bone density speeds up after menopause.

Bones become less dense partly because the amount of calcium they contain decreases. Part of the reason is that less calcium is absorbed in the digestive tract and levels of vitamin D

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(which helps the body use calcium) decrease slightly. Calcium is the main mineral that gives bones strength. Certain bones are weakened more than others. Those most affected include the end of the thighbone (femur) at the hip, the ends of the arm bones at the wrist, and the bones of the spine.

Ligaments, which bind joints together, tend to become less elastic as people age, making joints feel tight or stiff. This change results from chemical changes in the proteins that make up the ligaments. Consequently, most people become less flexible as they age. Ligaments also will tend to tear more easily, and when they tear, they heal more slowly.

Aging affects the digestive system in several ways. Food is emptied from the stomach more slowly, and the stomach cannot hold as much food because it is less elastic. But in most people, these changes are too slight to be noticed.

Certain changes in the digestive system do cause problems in some people. The digestive tract may produce less lactase, an enzyme the body needs to digest milk. As a result, older people are more likely to develop intolerance of dairy products. In some people, this slowing may contribute to constipation.

The liver also changes. It tends to become smaller, and less blood flows through it. As a result, the liver may be slightly less able to help rid the body of drugs and other substances. And the effects of drugs last longer.

As people age, the kidneys tend to become smaller, and less blood flows through them. Beginning at about age 30, the kidneys begin to filter blood less well. As years pass, they may remove waste products from the blood less well. They may also excrete too much water, making dehydration more likely.

The urinary tract changes in several ways that may make controlling urination more difficult. The maximum amount of urine that the bladder can hold decreases. As you get older you may be less able to delay urination after the first sense of a need to urinate. The bladder muscles weaken. As a result, more urine is left in the bladder after urination is finished. These changes are one reason that urinary incontinence (the uncontrollable loss of urine) becomes more common as people age.

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As women age, the urethra (which carries urine out of the body) shortens and its lining becomes thinner. The muscle that controls the passage of urine through the urethra (urinary sphincter) is less able to close tightly and prevent leakage. These changes may result from the decrease in the estrogen level that occurs with menopause.

As men age, the prostate gland tends to enlarge. In many men, it enlarges enough to partly block the passage of urine.

As people age, the heart and blood vessels change in many ways. The walls of the heart become stiffer, and the heart fills with blood more slowly.

In aging men, owing to the decreasing testosterone levels, there is a reduced interest for intimacy and diminished drive for any form of sexual activities. Similarly, in aging women, owing to the reduced estrogen levels, there is a phenomenal change in their behavior, needs, and desires for intimacy after menopause.

The walls of the arteries become thicker and less elastic. The arteries become less able to respond to changes in the amount of blood pumped through them. Thus, blood pressure is higher in older people than in younger people.

Despite these changes, a normal older heart functions well. At rest, the differences between young and old hearts are small. The differences become apparent only when more work is required of the heart, as occurs when a person exercises vigorously or becomes sick. An older heart cannot increase how fast it beats as quickly or as much as a younger heart. Regular exercise can reduce many of the effects of aging on the heart and blood vessels.

The muscles used in breathing, such as the diaphragm, tend to weaken. Also, slightly less oxygen is absorbed from air that is breathed in. In people who do not smoke or have a lung disorder, the muscles of breathing and the lungs continue to function well enough to meet the needs of the body during ordinary daily activities. But these changes may make exercising vigorously (for example, running or biking energetically) more difficult. The lungs become less able to fight infection, in part because the cells that sweep debris out of the airways are less

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able to do so. Cough, which also helps clear the lungs, tends to be weaker.

Most vital organs gradually become less efficient with age. Your metabolism gradually slows, which means that your body needs less food energy than before. The kidneys also become less able to keep your body hydrated. This makes exercise, water intake, and a well-balanced diet increasingly important over time. An active body that gets plenty of oxygen, water, and nutrients is more likely to function efficiently for a longer period of time.

As my Grandpapa, John Roberts, would say, "this only happens if you live long enough".

Take good care of yourself and live the best life possible!

The information included in this column is for educational purposes only. It is not intended nor implied to be a substitute for professional medical advice. The reader should always consult his or her healthcare provider to determine the appropriateness of the information for their own situation or if they have any questions regarding a medical condition or treatment plan.

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