Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Wise and well: smart choices for healthy aging



While few people relish the thought of getting older, aging doesn't mean you have to give up the things you love, toss your good looks out the window or sign up for a slew of health problems. Although good genes do play a role, the key to healthy aging is a healthy lifestyle. To take responsibility for your own well-being and help your body and mind age well:

Get moving. Staying active is the key to a healthy aging process. Aim for at least 30 minutes of activity a day and make sure your exercise program includes endurance, flexibility and strength activities. Look for opportunities to fit exercise into your every day life—choose to take the stairs, park your car in the furthest parking spot and walk during your lunch hour. Pick activities that you can stick to as you get older like swimming, biking, yoga and walking. Making exercise a part of your lifestyle will help you beat stress, lower your blood pressure, maintain a healthy weight and prevent many age-related diseases. Just make sure you check with your doctor before starting a new exercise program.

Defy it with diet. As you age you need fewer calories to keep your energy up. Plus hormonal changes can make you more prone to storing fat and chip away at your bone density. More than ever, you are what you eat. Foods high in saturated and trans fats and sugar can clog your arteries, increase your risk of heart disease and affect your cholesterol levels. Choose nutrient-rich foods like vegetables, fruits, fish and nuts and avoid processed food. Also, the older you get, the more your kidneys have to work to keep you hydrated. Help them out by drinking lots of water.

Refrain and restrain. Common vices like smoking and drinking can severely affect your aging process. Beyond the loss of taste and smell, bad breath, stained teeth and fingernails and wrinkled skin, smoking increases your risk for cancer, heart disease, stroke and a long list of other health issues. Butting out permanently can yield benefits quickly. Not only will you improve your lung capacity within days but within a year, you'll have halved your chances of a smoking-related heart attack.

When it comes to alcohol, follow the "everything in moderation rule." While light to moderate drinking may offer some health benefits, there is still much debate about this—especially since there are other studies out there that link alcohol to certain cancers as well as liver, pancreatic and cardiovascular diseases. A good rule of thumb is to keep your consumption to a minimum. And if you don't drink at all, don't start.

Make connections. Surrounding yourself with family and friends can actually make you healthier. Maintaining strong social ties has been proven to improve your physical and mental well-being. Social isolation on the other hand, is linked to depression, disability and chronic diseases. Join groups, volunteer your time, get involved with the community and include as much social activity in your life as possible. Doing so can help your older self continue to feel young at heart.

Keep sharp. Just as you exercise to keep your body fit, you need give your brain a regular work out. Challenge your mind by learning new skills, reading everyday, experiencing different cultures and developing your hobbies. You'll fuel your creativity, stay interested in life and keep your mind sharp.

Get lots of sleep. No matter how old you are, you need lots of quality sleep to allow your body to rest, recharge and repair. But, unfortunately sleeping problems like insomnia, sleep apnea and restlessness become more common as you get older. To help you get your seven to eight hours a night, follow a regular schedule, get enough sunlight during the day, exercise in the morning, avoid naps and limit your caffeine intake—especially in the late afternoon.

Be proactive. Find a health care professional that you like and trust. Keep up to date on your medical exams and preventative screenings and be sure to ask your doctor any questions you have about your health. This will help you catch small problems before they become big issues and keep you conscious about your overall well-being.

Stay positive. Studies have shown that people with positive attitudes live longer, healthier and happier lives. Instead of focusing on your youth slipping away, celebrate everything you've achieved. Look to your wisdom, rewarding friendships, beautiful family and long career. Cultural attitudes about aging are changing and older people can and do see themselves as attractive, smart and at the prime of their life. Remember: it's your time to focus on yourself, your health and your ultimate happiness.

Although aging is a biological certainty, it doesn't mean you're destined for a steady physical decline. Even if your lifestyle isn't the picture of health now, it's never too late to change. By adopting a healthy lifestyle that includes regular physical activity, a good diet, lots of family and friends, adequate rest and a positive outlook you can continue to age gracefully and look great for years to come.

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