

Family Fundamentals

News from the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

Aging: How to tell what's normal

I'm in my early 60s and, unlike some of my peers (it seems), I'm starting to feel my age. How do I know what's normal and what's not?

The oldest baby boomers, born in 1946, will celebrate their 69th birthdays this year, and certainly anyone can expect to experience changes physically, socially and emotionally as they age. But the idea of what constitutes "normal aging" and what distinguishes that from disease or decline is continually evolving.

For example, the National Institute on Aging reports that the stereotypical notion that it might be normal for older people to become cranky, depressed or withdrawn is not borne out by research. In fact, adults' personalities generally don't change much after age 30. A sudden change in personality at any age should be cause for concern and a visit to the doctor.

The effects of aging vary greatly from person to person. You don't mention what specifically you're worried about, but the National Institutes of Health SeniorHealth website (nihseniorhealth.gov) offers information on a wide variety of topics, including:

- **Risk of falling.** Risks associated with falling do increase with age, but that doesn't mean falling is an inevitable part of getting older. One in three people age 65 or older fall each year. Though most falls are minor, 10 percent result in serious injury. Older adults can reduce their risk in a number of ways, including doing strength training and keeping physically active, reviewing their medications with a health professional, and wearing safe footwear.
- **Changes in sleep patterns.** As we age, our sleep tends to be less restful — we sleep less deeply and wake up more often during the night. But



photo: iStock

older adults still need just as much sleep (seven to nine hours a night) as younger adults. Experts aren't certain why older adults tend to have problems with sleep. It could be because of lower levels of melatonin, a hormone that helps us sleep, or it could be because of medical or even psychiatric problems. Lack of sleep can lead to other problems, so if you're having issues, be sure to discuss them with your doctor.

- **Arthritis.** Arthritis, or more specifically, osteoarthritis, is one of the most common causes of physical disability among older adults. It causes stiffness and pain, mild to severe, in the joints, including hands, knees, hips and the spine. Symptoms can be reduced with regular exercise, weight control, massage or other alternative therapies, medication, or surgery. In all cases, talk with your doctor about what might be best for you.
- **Forgetfulness.** Mild problems with memory actually can be due to normal changes in the brain that occur with aging, while health or emotional issues can exacerbate the problem. To keep your memory sharp, make "to do" lists and spend more time planning. Getting enough exercise and limiting alcohol also helps. Again, talk with your doctor about your concerns to see if an evaluation with a specialist might be warranted.

January 2015

By Martha Filipic
614-292-9833
filipic.3@osu.edu

Dear Subscriber: This column was reviewed by Carmen Irving, Healthy Relationships program specialist with Ohio State University Extension.

Family Fundamentals is a monthly column on family issues. It is a service of the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences and its outreach and research arms, Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Family Fundamentals, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1043, or filipic.3@osu.edu.

College Communications
2021 Coffey Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1043
614-292-2011

208 Research Services Building
1680 Madison Ave.
Wooster, OH 44691-4096
330-263-3780

© 2015, The Ohio State University

CFAES provides research and related educational programs to clientele on a nondiscriminatory basis. For more information: go.osu.edu/cfaesdiversity.