Aging's Changing Face

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Baby boomers have turned 60, an age once associated with early bird dinner specials and slow driving in the fast lane.

But today, age 60 looks like Geraldo Rivera, Mick Jagger and Lauren Hutton, all of whom are in their seventh decade.

More and more, how we grow old is a personal choice. Older folks are going back to school in their 50s, starting businesses in their 60s, training for triathlons in their 70s and, yes, having sex in their 80s.

This is a good thing, according to researchers who have found that negative stereotypes about aging can actually shorten your life. A 2002 Yale University study in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* found that people who have a positive perception of aging tend to live seven and a half years longer than those who don't. The difference may be the result of a better response to stress or even just the will to live, according to the study.

**What Brain Drain?**

Research has found that memory studies can intimidate elderly subjects into performing poorly. Older subjects score higher on memory tests if they aren't explicitly told that the study is about memory and aging, according to a study by researchers at North Carolina State University in Raleigh.

We are swayed by our own expectations. The research, reported in the *Journal of Gerontology*, found that elderly subjects scored 20 to 30 percent worse on memory tests after reading a pessimistic newspaper account about aging and memory than those who read a cheerful article about growing older.

People who have an upbeat outlook on aging are also more likely to take control and responsibility for their health. Curbing lifestyle diseases caused by obesity, lack of exercise, smoking and chronic stress is perhaps the biggest hurdle in the aging game. Nearly 55 percent of Americans are overweight and some 22 percent are obese, according to the National Institutes of Health. The rates are even higher for Americans over age 50. These are startling numbers when one considers the impact this will have on future rates of heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure and arthritis. Arthritis alone plagues half of all Americans over age 64.

"People of all ages are always looking for a magic bullet," says Fox Wetle, Ph.D., assistant dean of the Brown School of Medicine in Rhode Island. Wetle says that while there is no easy way out,
exercise may be the "magic shotgun."

Troubling health trends—such as obesity—notwithstanding, new research shows a bright future for those of us entering midlife. Many symptoms long associated with aging are actually signs of disease, according to more current studies.

Between the ages of 30 and 90, the brain loses about 10 percent of its volume. Forgetfulness isn't an automatic result, however. Scientists have found that loss of brain cells due to aging isn't as steep as once thought. In fact, they now believe memory problems aren't a natural part of growing older. Studies have shown that people with bad memories as older adults probably had the same deficiency when they were younger. But later in life, we may attribute it to aging.

Crossword puzzles, practicing the piano and playing chess exercise the brain, counteracting these natural changes. Exercise helps cognitive function too, studies show.

I Want Your Sex

Older people are still amorous with surprising frequency, according to a study presented at the annual meeting of the American Urological Association.

More than 4,000 people between the ages of 40 and 80 were polled in the U.S., Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Around 30 percent of men aged 70 to 80 reported having sex five times in the past month, although only 8 percent of women reported doing so. Most women said the lack of sex was due to the absence of a partner. Indeed, the study found women were more likely to be widowed.

Still, sexual dysfunction was an issue for both sexes, with some 40 percent of men reporting problems such as erectile dysfunction.

Exercise is an antidote for that too, perhaps even more so than pills, according to a two-year study from the Cologne University Medical Center in Germany.

Researchers studied men with circulatory problems and prescribed either an exercise program, the prescription drug Viagra or a placebo. The exercise group, which focused on working pelvis and leg muscles, reported 80 percent better erections, while Viagra resulted in a 74 percent increase in sexual arousal.

But it's not just sex that matters. Social support makes both men and women less vulnerable to health problems, according to a study at the University of California at Irvine. People ages 58 to 90 who described themselves as lonely were particularly at risk.

"It's really important to have confidantes and social support for general health," says Wetle. "We all need something to look forward to that will get us up in the morning."

Highlights:

Science is reshaping the way we think about the older body, memory, and sex drive.

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