

Keeping the Golden Years Golden

By Ryan Harrison, MA

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Aging is a normal and natural part of life. And despite the message implied by the myriad of stay-young-forever supplements and skin regimens available today, it *is* possible to appreciate the process of growing older and wiser.

Rose-colored bifocals aside, however, there certainly are some problems that are common in the elderly. Among other possible health issues, dementia disorders, high blood pressure and high cholesterol, incontinence, and arthritis can severely affect a person's enjoyment of what are supposed to be the "golden years." Though, for the most part, prevention is the best medicine where each of these is concerned, thankfully, each of these can also be treated naturally.

A No-Brainer

Every part of the human body ages, including the brain. An estimated 18 million people around the globe suffer with some form of dementia, such as Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases. Researchers suggest this number could jump to 34 million in less than 20 years. In large part, the standard "western" diet may be to blame.

About two-thirds of the human brain is composed of fatty tissues, and the kinds of dietary fats that you eat directly affect the cells that make up your brain. Any nutritionist worth his weight in grey matter will tell you that not all fats are equally nutritive to the brain. Processed and fast foods high in saturated and trans fats are not what your brain needs and may actually lead to its inflammation, causing any number of health issues.

On the other hand, essential fatty acids (EFAs) – called "essential" because you cannot live without them and your body does not produce them on its own – have recently gained some much-deserved notoriety. Omega-3 EFAs are highly important in nourishing the brain and providing it with the materials it needs to build brain cells. Supplementing with omega-3s is a great way to slow down the aging of the brain and promote better mental acuity.

Research suggests that certain activities, such as learning a language or musical instrument, or working at crossword puzzles, can help keep the mind in top condition. You can boost your results, however, with some well-aimed supplements including Ginkgo biloba. Taken in liquid or capsule form, Ginkgo biloba extract acts as an antioxidant and increases blood flow to the brain, helping to stabilize and, in some cases, improve mental functioning and social behavior.

The Healthy Heart

Each time the heart pumps blood through the arteries, the blood presses up against the walls of the blood vessels. If this pressure is abnormally high, you've got high blood pressure, also called hypertension. When blood pressure is up, the heart has to work harder to pump an adequate

amount of blood throughout the body. As a result, circulation is compromised producing a negative effect in the brain, heart and kidneys.

It's not uncommon for the elderly to suffer from hypertension, because blood pressure increases with age as the arteries become stiffer. The stiffer arteries become, of course, the higher the blood pressure. Conventional treatments thin the blood with medications that can produce a range of side-effects. Fortunately, there are quite a few steps that can be taken to help bring down blood pressure naturally.

Of course, there's the standard answer: eating a healthy diet low in salt and high in fiber, whole foods and fruits and vegetables. Beyond this, there are some supplemental considerations. For example, deficiencies in calcium, magnesium and potassium have been linked to high blood pressure. Garlic, taken raw or in pill form, has a blood-thinning effect and is effective in lowering blood pressure. And herbal preparations of bilberry and bitter orange help keep arteries flexible and lower blood pressure while strengthening the heartbeat.

Conquering Cholesterol

Cholesterol is a fatty, waxy substance that occurs naturally in the body. In fact, some cholesterol is actually necessary for good health. When elevated blood levels of low-density lipoproteins (LDLs – the “bad” cholesterol) are detected, however, doctors start to worry.

Elevated LDLs are considered a contributor to plaque build up in arteries, narrowing them so that blood flow to the brain, kidneys, genitals, heart and extremities is impeded. Their counterpart, high-density lipoproteins (HDL's – the “good” cholesterol), can actually take cholesterol out of arteries and back to the liver. In short, the higher your HDL compared to your LDL levels, the lower your risk of heart disease.

Natural approaches to lowering cholesterol levels include following a healthy diet. Avoiding fried foods and limiting your intake of salt, meat, and foods high in saturated fats is a must. Eating plenty of vitamin- and mineral-rich fresh, organic fruits and vegetables and especially green leafy vegetables will also make a difference.

In terms of supplements, if you're currently suffering from high cholesterol, there are several things that can help. The star supplement – omega-3s – helps remove excess cholesterol from the blood. Probably the best known vitamin in the world, vitamin C can have surprising effects, as well. Not only does it keep artery walls intact, it also encourages higher HDL levels and can restore integrity to damaged blood vessels. Other supplements to consider include garlic, which can lower total cholesterol by 9-12 per cent, and ginseng, which lowers total cholesterol, LDL and triglycerides.

When It's Hard to Hold It

Easily one of the most embarrassing issues that plague older adults, incontinence is the inability to control the body's urinary functions. Sometimes, the problem is serious enough that adults have to wear diaper-like undergarments specifically designed to absorb wetness and prevent any

leakage or spotting on clothes. Most people ignore incontinence and consider it an inevitable result of aging, but it isn't. In fact, most incontinence can be managed or treated.

There can be many different causes of incontinence, which can be determined by checking with your physician. Among several others, possible causes range from urinary tract infections and constipation to congestive heart failure or prostate problems in males. In seniors with dementia disorders, it may simply be a problem of communication; recognizing the need to urinate is one of the last neurological sensations to be lost in mentally confused people, who may not realize how to communicate what they are feeling.

There are some general rules to follow which can help incontinence, such as avoiding diuretics and losing weight. Lesser known are the effects of the herb cardamom, which is used in Ayurvedic and traditional Chinese medicine to stop urinary incontinence in both men and women. However, the best results come from doing pelvic floor muscle exercises called "Kegels" (named after the doctor who invented them). These exercises, which can be done undetected anywhere and just about any time, can strengthen the muscles involved in urination and help prevent leakage. If doing Kegels is not an option, mild vaginal or anal electrical stimulation is a therapy that can induce contraction of the bladder and supportive muscles to improve tone and function. Speak to your doctor if this is something that you'd like to investigate further.

Just for the Joints

There are several types of arthritis, but all of them involve the painful inflammation of the joints, leading to stiffness, swelling, and restricted mobility. The most common types affecting the elderly are *osteoarthritis* (caused by cartilage between bones wearing down), and *rheumatoid arthritis* (an autoimmune disorder in which the body attacks the membranes that secrete the fluid necessary for smooth joint operation).

Natural treatments can help reduce inflammation and boost the body's ability to heal. If you're overweight, one of the best ways to reduce pain is to shed unnecessary pounds. Activities such as swimming and water aerobics pack a double punch by helping you to lose weight and restoring joint mobility.

You can also fight arthritic inflammation with stinging nettle tea. Rich in vitamins A and C as well as the minerals potassium, calcium, sulfur and magnesium, this tea can be used daily. Horsetail, high in tissue-strengthening silica, can also be made into a tea that will provide minerals that rebuild bones and tissue. And don't forget your omega-3s! Vital to the body's cells, they are also used to make prostaglandins, hormone-like chemicals that contribute to the regulation of inflammatory responses in the body. To gain the benefits of omega-3s, find a good supplement or eat fish such as mackerel, salmon, sardines and herring regularly.

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Sidebar Suggestion

What You Need to Know

Aging doesn't have to be synonymous with ailing health or a cabinet full of prescription medications. Following these simple guidelines* may help to improve your wellbeing and comfort as you stretch into your "golden years."

Omega-3 essential fatty acids: Useful for fighting deteriorating mental processes, heart disease, cholesterol and arthritis. Eat "oily" fish such as herring, salmon and sardines, or find a good omega-3 supplement and take between 1,000 – 9,000 mg daily.

Ginkgo biloba: Improves brain functioning, and is beneficial for improving circulation. Take up to 40 mg of the extract three times a day with meals.

Garlic: Detoxifies the body, lowers blood pressure and increases circulation. Also aids in cases of arthritis and circulatory problems. If fresh, eat one to five cloves daily. Otherwise, find a good garlic oil capsule and take 10-20 grams daily.

Bilberry: Keeps blood vessels flexible and strengthens connective tissue. Useful for inflammation and has anti-aging and anticarcinogenic effects. Take two 500 mg capsules twice a day.

Bitter Orange: Helps with weight loss and may be helpful in treating high blood pressure by strengthening the heart beat. Take 20 drops of the tincture three times daily.

Ginseng: Increases cognitive ability, fights high blood pressure and high cholesterol, and helps treat impotence. Take 1-9 grams daily as a stimulant. For tonic effects, 250-500 mg is sufficient.

Cardamom: Treats urinary incontinence as well as indigestion, gas, and other digestive system upsets. Make a tea by using thirty crushed seeds per cup water; drink a cup of this tea up to 5 times daily.

Stinging nettle tea: Eases arthritic pain, relieves asthma symptoms and can be used as a general tonic. Make the tea by pouring 1 cup of boiling water over 1 tbsp of nettles; steep for 10 minutes and drink 3 cups daily.

Horsetail: Useful for treating urinary incontinence and arthritic inflammation. Make a tea using 2-4 grams of dried herb per cup of water. Otherwise, take three 350-500 mg capsules three times a day.

* Always check with your physician before using any herbal remedy or nutritional supplement as some may interfere with prescription medications or be contraindicated for your particular medical condition(s).