

# AGING GRACEFULLY

By Dr. Sharon L. Fitelson

Aging gracefully means different things to different people. No matter what age or state of health you are in, you can always improve. If you are in your 20's or 30's with no symptoms of dis-ease you have a good start. Many 40-50 year olds are starting to call their aches and pains "old age". As a physician practicing for 22 years now, I have seen many people in their 60's and 70's feel better than some of the 30 year olds. Overall, biological age and chronological age are two different entities and we should not count on our youth to carry us through without being proactive about our health.

If feeling good, enjoying health, not being sick and aging gracefully are of interest to you please read on. In the 70's and 80's the buzz was all about early detection of disease. Years later what we have learned as the statistics are staggering for heart disease, cancer, and diabetes, is that prevention is the key. We should reduce the risks with lifestyle and activities that promote our health like exercise and diet. The American Heart Association, American Institute of Cancer, American Medical Association and now even the President of the United States are issuing guidelines for us to follow.

It is important to note that health is not an absolute state of being. We are all somewhere on a continuum from health to disease and it varies from day to day as well as in different periods of our lives as we continually regenerate ourselves. We cannot measure our health only on the basis of how we feel, and feeling good is very important. How can we be "fine" one day and the next day have a heart attack or return from a routine exam of a Pap smear and have cancerous cells? We utilize important examinations as markers of our health and they are helpful on a routine basis such as pap smears, blood and urine tests, colonoscopy exams, EKGs, Saliva and Hair Analyses, Mammograms, and Bone Mineral Density tests to name the most common. Even the tests can miss something, or a problem can show up later. Once again let us look to see what we can do for ourselves.

What is this process we call aging? Physiologically speaking, aging is oxidation at the cellular level. Consider the analogy that a fire burning will always leave the residue of ash and smoke. In each of our bodies' 64 trillion cells we have a fire burning fuel which is our metabolism, driven by the thyroid gland, and assisted by hormones, minerals and enzymes, to name a few. The waste products from these processes are called free radicals and are toxic to our bodies if not neutralized. These free radicals are missing an electron and they steal from healthy molecules in our body, creating oxidative damage. The oxidative damage can occur on a cell wall or a DNA strand and affect our overall health. Everyday every cell takes tens of thousands of oxidative hits.

Day after day, year after year, this cumulative stress adds up. When free radicals damage the DNA strands, the blueprint for regenerating our healthy cells is altered. Over time this is the aging process. If we do not combat free radical accumulation, or create too many with unhealthy habits such as smoking, drinking, extreme stress, accumulated toxins from medicines, radiation, chemicals and even over exercising, we will age faster,

suffer more injuries and succumb to more diseases. All of this adds up to enhanced aging. We cannot stop aging, yet we want to age more gracefully by minimizing the deleterious effects of oxidation unrestrained.

Lifestyle can intentionally be geared to minimizing the deleterious effects of the aging process. If one is aware, prioritizes and then takes action, much can be accomplished before dis-ease appears. If already in a state of dis-ease, the body can and will adapt to new demands. Nutrition, exercise, and stress reduction are the key components that we have some control over. Also choosing various healing disciplines to support the proper balance of health will also help to balance us.

Nutrition, the cornerstone of health, is a broad and diverse subject that I will condense to the basics. You are what you eat could not be a truer statement. Relative to aging gracefully, we want to fill our bodies with low fat protein, good omega 3 fatty acids from nuts and seeds, olive oil and cold water fish like salmon mackerel and tuna, and a bountiful amount of fresh, raw, vine ripened fruits and vegetables daily. Organic fruits and vegetables are an excellent source of nutrient dense foods that provide us with antioxidants, enzymes, phytochemicals, minerals, vitamins and fiber, all of which can strengthen our immune systems and reduce the risk of degenerative diseases like heart, cancer and diabetes.

Every different color fruit and vegetable has 10,000 antioxidants working in synergy with the other fiber, minerals, enzymes, and phytochemicals to combat the build up of free radicals which directly affect our health/disease. If taken together in synergy as they naturally occur in whole foods, they are most effective, potentiating each other. I personally do not recommend vitamin pills and antioxidant supplements as they are isolated, fractionated from the whole food source, and often times man made in a laboratory. They cannot provide the tens of thousands of antioxidants gotten from a whole apple or banana itself. Now even the American Heart Association and the American Institute of Cancer are recommending that we eat at least 5-9 servings of each per day, not vitamin pills.

Enzymes are also necessary for maintaining health and preventing disease. Enzymes are amino acids that are necessary for every metabolic function in each specific reaction that takes place in our body. We are born with a certain amount which dwindle with age and we get some from our foods. The enzyme rich foods are raw meat, raw milk, and uncooked fruits and vegetables. When you heat a food with enzymes in them past 118 degrees the enzymes are destroyed. We often do not eat raw milk or meat due to parasites and or bacteria that can contaminate them. What is left is to eat the fruits and vegetables, uncooked as often as possible.

Fiber, both soluble and insoluble is found in grains, nuts, seed, fruits and vegetables, and it is very important for our overall health. Fiber is known to help keep the bowels moving. Also fiber mixes with fats in our arteries and helps to keep it from sticking to the arterial walls and creating plaque which will eventually lead to heart disease. Fiber will also lower blood sugar and cholesterol and has been often recommended for

diabetics. Overall you can see how this will help with reducing the risk of colorectal cancers, heart disease, and diabetes.

There are so many different diets and eating strategies on the market these days that it is difficult to know what is best for you. I do not subscribe to any one plan as each person has different health concerns and goals. Overall, eating low on the food chain with as much fresh and raw food is good. The proper balance of fat, carbohydrates, and protein is important and this I specifically tailor for each individual. Drinking one half of your body weight in ounces of filtered water is highly recommended. Do not wait until you are thirsty to drink but make it a habit to carry water around with you at all times. Do not get hungry and eat small meals and snacks. Listen to your body, observe how you feel, and consult with someone who can help you if you have questions, or are not feeling good.

Exercise is another key component of longevity and wellness. To avoid injury and get the most out of an exercise program, it should be tailored to your physical and emotional needs. It needs to fit into your daily regime and become a regular habit. 21 days and it becomes a habit!! I stress moderate exercise rather than very difficult programs because if the physical demands are too intense for you there will be increased oxidative stress, injury, arthritis and premature aging. More is not necessarily better and the increases in demand need to be incremental.

Cardiovascular fitness is imperative and if you only have a little time or energy, start here. Remember death from heart disease accounts for more than 50% of all men and women. I recommend at least 30 minutes of walking per day, depending on your level of fitness. Weight bearing exercise done for at least 30 minutes at a continuous pace will enhance health by building bone strength, stimulating endorphins (chemicals in the brain that make you feel good), increasing circulation and strengthening the heart to name a few. Over 30 minutes and you will burn fat as well. Walking is the gentlest of all and walking fast will definitely create a good workout. Other exercises that will provide good cardio are swimming, stationary biking, stair machines, elliptical trainers, running and certain video tapes with continuous exercise on it. If you have not been working out you should consult a physician or trainer for the perfect plan of action that is tailored to your health.

Stretching is important to maintain flexibility of the joints and muscles, and to enhance health by keeping the circulation of blood and lymphatic moving. I recommend daily stretching after exercise, a hot bath or shower/hot tub. Stretching done when the muscles are warm will actually allow the resting length of the muscle to elongate more permanently. Do not bounce, exhale during the stretch, and stretch gently into the tension so as not to cause much pain. Yoga is an excellent discipline that actually tones muscles while stretching them. Yoga breathing can provide deep relaxation and stress reduction as well. Almost all of my patients who start Yoga seem to need less Chiropractic pain relief treatments, and tune-ups are more effective.

Strengthening muscles helps to keep our endurance and stamina up, burn more fat, and minimize injury, especially of the back and neck. Strengthening can be accomplished with rubber tubing, Swiss gym balls, floor exercises, free weights, machines, Yoga and Pilates to name but a few ways. As we age our muscle cells naturally are replaced with fat cells and flabbiness occurs. Strengthening builds muscle cells that actually burn fat! Not only can looking good be the motivator, but also decreasing the fat will lead to less stress on our hearts and our joints. It is imperative to start with a coach or a Physician trained in kinesiology and body mechanics who knows your body and will work up a plan and show you how to implement it. Most of my new patients come from work out injuries, so beware!

All of the best exercise and good eating will be to little avail if you are not managing and reducing your stress levels. Stress that persists for a while, more than just a bad day, is a process that will slowly deplete and then exhaust our adrenal glands. These glands are very powerful and they maintain our immune system, regulate blood sugar, and balance our minerals by secreting hormones. A good diet, reasonable and regular exercise and having fun will all nourish these glands and keep them healthy.

There are three phases of stress, which are actually a process and not a disease. Phase I is the alarm reaction wherein the adrenal medulla creates an outpouring of hormones to create an inflammatory process. If the body is successful it overcomes the injury and/ or stress and it returns to normal. Phase II is the resistance stage. At this point it secretes anti-inflammatory hormones which take energy from the glycogen reserves. The body attempts to adapt to the ongoing stress and is unsuccessful; thereby weakening, getting tired and suffering from recurring lowered immunity such as colds, flu's and sinus infections. Phase III is the exhaustion stage in which the body noticeably breaks down, not being able to adapt. At this point more severe disease can begin to appear like cancer, diabetes, heart disease and so on.

It is important to take care and handle as much stress as you can so it doesn't get out of hand. Change life situations that make you unhappy. If that is not possible try to change your relationship to the stress. Get professional help, express yourself, and take action. Look at your life. Are you having fun? You must schedule your fun and relaxation as you do your work. Are you balanced between your family, work, fun, and spiritual life? Balance is crucial and it is different for everyone. Life is now, not a dress rehearsal. Do not wait for the day when, for retirement, but create a great life in the moment. That's all we have.

The good news is that our bodies are flexible and they adapt to new demands. We can start to exercise, eat well, and have fun with balance in our lives and our body will start to heal itself. We all have innate intelligence, which essentially helps our body to heal. It's not too late to start. With focused intentionality, good resources, and persistence, health will be restored or maintained. We can be hiking in our 80's, playing golf at 90, and enjoying life at 100!! Minimize dis-ease, live life to it's fullest and age gracefully. Get a coach if you have to, just start now.