

Aged Vigor

Why do we believe that after one passes age sixty-five, one will start going “down hill”? One’s energy, stamina, mental alertness will automatically deteriorate. While there is some truth to that, the senior years need not be so difficult. Now I am in my sixtieth year, it is amazing that I am writing about this. When I was twenty-five, age sixty seemed like centuries away. Now that I am at the door of the decade of the sixties and looking straight into the face of the seventies, and still feeling pretty good, it still seems so unreal. I am still hoping that when I start to climb the mountain of the eighties, I will be vigorous mentally and physically. Is that unrealistic?

MYTHS ABOUT AGING

In my research I came across a few myths about aging. This really made me feel so good because others are telling me that my grey hair is a sign of “old age”. Here are three myths of aging as presented in the December 2005 issue of the Harvard Men’s Health Watch.

“MYTH: Aging means declining health and/or disability. There are some diseases that become more common as we age. However, getting older does not automatically mean poor health or that you will be confined to a walker or wheelchair. Plenty of older adults enjoy vigorous health, often better than many younger people. Preventive measures like healthy eating, exercising, and managing stress can help reduce the risk of chronic disease or injuries later in life.

MYTH: Memory loss is an inevitable part of aging. As you age, you may eventually notice you don’t remember things as easily as in the past, or memories may start to take a little longer to retrieve. However, significant memory loss is not an inevitable result of aging. Brain training and new learning can occur at any age and there are many things you can do to keep your memory sharp. The sooner you start, the sooner you’ll reap the benefits.

MYTH: You can’t teach an old dog new tricks. One of the more damaging myths of aging is that after a certain age, you just won’t be able to try anything new or contribute anymore. The opposite is true. Middle aged and older adults are just as capable of learning new things and thriving in new environments, plus they have the wisdom that comes with life experience. If you believe in and have confidence in yourself, you are setting up a positive environment for change no matter what your age.”

After reading this, it is clear to me that how to take care of yourself and your mental outlook can determine how vigorous you will be between age sixty-five and one hundred. Dan Burden in his book “Blue Zones” writes about people living beyond their one hundredth birthday and still having a vigorous life. They work, play outdoors in the sunlight, write, lift weights, walk, run, etc.

WE ARE MADE TO MOVE

Research indicates that diet and exercise are what really matter most for living a long, healthy, vigorous life. Almost twenty years ago (1996), there was a research at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School on bed rest and healthy living. Five healthy men volunteered for the research. What were the men to do? Here is the report of the research. “All they had to do was spend three weeks of their summer vacation resting in bed. That’s all. They were to do nothing, just rest. But when they got out of bed at the end of the trial, it probably didn’t seem so good. Testing the men before and after exercise, the researchers found devastating changes that included faster resting heart rates, higher systolic blood pressures, a drop in the heart’s maximum pumping

capacity, a rise in body fat, and a fall in muscle strength. In just three weeks, these 20-year-olds developed many physiologic characteristics of men twice their age. Fortunately, the scientists didn't stop there. Instead, they put the men on an 8-week exercise program. Exercise did more than reverse the deterioration brought on by bed rest, since some measurements were better than ever after the training. The Dallas study was a dramatic demonstration of the harmful consequences of bed rest. It's a lesson that has been learned yet again in the era of space travel, and it has helped change medical practice by encouraging an early return to physical activity after illness or surgery. And by revisiting the question 30 years later, the Texas researchers have also been able to investigate the interaction between exercise and aging."

What's the point? The human body is made to move, and to move throughout the span of life. Age is not an inhibitor for regaining youthful energy. Research has indicated that osteoporosis can be reversed at any age, even in the nineties. Plaque in the arteries can disappear. Muscle mass can increase at any age. It has been known of men in their seventies lifting weights for the first time and looking thirty years younger. How is this possible? Diet, exercise, and a positive outlook on life are key.

"In one of two startling studies, by Dr. Maria Fiatarone, Dr. William J. Evans and others at the Tufts University Research Center, nine women and men, ages 87 to 101, strengthened their arms and legs by exercising with resistance weights, which, as part of a controllable system of pulleys and cables, are safer than free weights. In eight weeks, they increased the strength in the front thigh muscles by an average of almost 175 percent. Dr. Abraham Datch, a 101-year-old retired dentist, increased his strength by 200 percent over what it was at age 95." Wow!

HOW TO DO IT?

Here are a few tips on how to be old and vigorous as presented by the Harvard Men's Health Watch.

- Avoid tobacco in all its forms.
- Eat properly. Reduce your consumption of saturated fat, trans fatty acids, and cholesterol. The omega-3s and monounsaturated fats in fish, nuts, olive oil, and possibly canola oil are desirable in moderation. Eat lots of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and nonfat dairy products. Favor complex carbohydrates and high-fiber foods, but reduce your consumption of simple sugars. Get about 15% of your calories from protein. Cut back on salt and processed foods. Keep your caloric consumption down and stay as lean as possible.
- Consider simple supplements such as a daily multivitamin and low-dose aspirin (81 mg a day).
- Keep your mind active and stimulated. Mental exercise is an important complement to physical exercise.
- Build strong social networks. People are good medicine at any age.
- Get regular medical care. Good medicine is good medicine.
- A balanced program is best. That's why Cicero proclaimed, "Exercise and temperance will preserve something of our youthful vigor, even into old age."

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