



Healthy aging

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If there is one thing all people have in common, it is aging. Defined by some as “a progressive functional

decline, or a gradual deterioration of physiological function,” aging is one of the most complex biological processes we deal with... or not. To quote author MFK Fisher: “The aging process is a part of most of our lives, and it remains one we try to ignore until it seems to pounce upon us. We evade all its signals.”

British Columbia has one of the most rapidly aging populations in Canada, and by 2031, almost a quarter of British Columbians will be over the age of 65. And since this demographic group is so well represented in the healthcare system — accounting for, in 2002, half of PharmaCare expenditures; 37% of all hospitalization; and 55% of hospital inpatient days — it makes sense to have a strategy for maximizing the health of seniors.

While some seniors are prone to chronic disease, disability, and loss of independence, many others are avoiding the very same health problems and enjoying a quality of life that contributes to their happiness, their family and their community. The difference? Healthy aging.

Research has shown that a healthy lifestyle is more influential than genetic factors in helping seniors avoid the deterioration traditionally associated with aging. It turns out that only about a third of aging can be explained by biology and genetic endowment. Unfortunately, many British Columbian seniors engage in multiple lifestyle behaviours that are harmful to their health. Over time, these behaviours prove to be very negative in aging.

Encouraging a healthy lifestyle can prevent or minimize frailty and poor health we experience in old age. The “healthy aging” concept links to five areas crucial to being, or becoming a healthy senior.

Healthy eating is the starting point. A healthy diet such as recommended by Canada’s Food Guide ensures proper nutrition and sound eating choices. Diet plays a key role in preventing chronic disease and maintaining good health.

Injury prevention is also important. Unintentional injuries such as falls result in serious consequences for seniors. They can lead to long-term disability and loss of function, loss of independence and hospitalization.

It is well established that regular physical activity brings benefits for anyone at any age. On the other hand, inactivity is associated with all sorts of health problems. For seniors, it contributes to bone and muscle strength and improved heart and lung fitness.

Tobacco cessation is as important for seniors as it is for every other age, maybe more so. Tobacco use is associated with eight of the top 14 causes of death in adults over 65.

The fifth and final key to health aging is social connectedness. Social supports and interaction contribute to a higher quality of life, enhanced mental and physical well-being; isolation is linked to depression, disability and premature death.

“Healthy senior” may have been an oxymoron in the past, but today, more and more of our aging population enjoys life to the fullest, remaining active in their communities and connecting with friends, family and others. In other words, enjoying the quality of life they have earned.

Many seniors... are enjoying a quality of life that contributes to their happiness, their family and their community.