Many of your beliefs about aging may be based on myths. What are the facts about aging?

If you are like most people, even older ones, you may not understand aging very well.

Here are some common myths about aging. You probably have heard some of them repeated as truths.

Myth: Aging starts when people are about 30.

You age continuously from the time of conception. The rate at which you age is affected by heredity, physical health, nutrition, mental health, and other unknown factors. Scientists now believe that human beings have a "biological clock" that limits our life span to about 130 years, even if all illnesses and other stresses are removed.

Myth: A substantial share of the elderly are in nursing homes.

Only about 5 percent—one in twenty—of the people over age 65 live in nursing homes or other institutions. Like the other 95 percent, chances are you will spend most of your older years living in the community. Further, only 14 percent of the community-living elderly have physical conditions that limit their mobility. Fully 80 percent of the elderly are capable of moving about their communities if adequate transportation is available. So you can look forward to being an active community dweller well into advanced age.

Myth: Most people decline intellectually when they get older.

Barring major illness, you can keep your mind to be alert and active as you age. In fact, older people do as well as their younger people on tests of vocabulary, verbal comprehension, and arithmetic. These are skills you use throughout life and they do not fade with age.

You can learn throughout life. As you age, you may prefer to learn at your own pace and may take somewhat longer to learn than when you were younger. But you can, and should, still learn new things. Like other parts of your body, your brain's ability to function remains best when it is used regularly. Adult education classes, reading, volunteering, clubs, second careers, political activities—these are just some of the ways you can use and expand your mind throughout your life.

Myth: Old people feel useless and unneeded.

Probably you will not feel useless or unneeded when you are old. Although only about 10 percent of people over 65 work for pay, the great majority have interests that keep them involved and active. Many volunteers in their community and thus provide valuable labor. Others work at personal hobbies and leisure activities in music, art, crafts, politics, and education. In a recent study, 5 percent of people under 65 complained about not feeling needed, while only 7 percent of people over 65 said they felt unneeded. So you can look forward to a change in your activities with retirement, but you can find interests and activities that are valuable to you and others.

Myth: Most older people are ignored by their families.

Most older adults do not live with their children. This does not mean, however, that your children will desert you. About 80 percent of older adults have children and live independently, but near at least one child. Contact is frequent and in terms of exchange of family services, both generations give and receive. Most young families cannot afford to support older parents financially, but there are mutual exchanges of work, affection, and concern.

The most comfortable relationships exist in families in which both generations love and yet respect the rights of the other. As an older parent, you need to recognize that adult children have a right to lead their own lives and raise their children in their own way. At the same time, if you are an adult with living parents, you should recognize that your parents are individuals with rights, needs, limitations, and desires that need to be respected.

Myth: Most older people eventually will be senile.

Like most older people, the odds favor your not becoming senile. Medically speaking, senility is called organic brain syndrome. Its main symptom is disorientation. That is, a person may not know exactly where he is, who he is, or what time it is. If these symptoms appear, a physician should be consulted immediately. Sometimes the cause can be corrected. Only about 2 percent of the people between 60 and 70 have symptoms of organic brain syndrome. While this percentage increases with very old people, only about 5 percent of all people over age 60 have symptoms of organic brain syndrome.

Myth: When older people can't remember little things, it is the beginning of senility.

Some changes in your ability to recall recent events is common in advanced age. Researchers now believe that older people may have trouble with recalling what they have learned, especially more recent events. This may be because "old memories" stored in the brain interfere with recall of the new information. Think of your brain as a library in which you are looking for a particular book. If it is a young library with only a few books, then the one you seek will be easy to find. But if it is an older library and full of many thousands of books, finding a particular one may take longer. But it's still there if you take the time to look for it.

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Myth: Most old people are not interested in sex.

Sexuality is present all through your life and a sexual relationship can and should have as deep a meaning for you when you are older as it did when you were young. Too often, sexual activity for older adults is seen as unnecessary, impossible, or just not “nice.” The greatest limits to sexual activity in aging are misinformation and negative stereotypes. Research reveals that human sexual response may be slowed by the aging process but it certainly is not ended. As an older person you will need and want the affection, warmth, and support that close, loving relationships provide. There is no age limit on our need to love and be loved.

Myth: Because of Social Security, Medicare, and other government programs, most old people are financially secure.

If you are like most older people you will not be "well-off" when you are old. In fact, the 1970 national census showed about half the elderly couples in Oregon had annual incomes less than $5,000. And half the elderly single individuals had incomes below $2,000. For the most part, the single individuals were widowed women living alone. Though there have been some increases in these incomes, inflation has offset any advantage to the consumer.

Further, in 1974, government medical insurance paid less than 50% of the average older person’s medical costs. Older Americans paid out of their own pockets an average of $237 for medical care. This is nearly twice the out-of-pocket medical care expenditures of Americans under 65.

Nutrition, transportation, senior centers, housekeeper, and home health care are some of the services being started to serve seniors. These services, however, reach only a limited number of seniors and must be continued and expanded if older adults are to live comfortably in the community.

Myth: Most men die a couple of years after retirement and most women die a year or two later.

You can expect to spend 1/5 to 1/3 of your entire life span in retirement. At 65, average life expectancy is 13 more years for men and 17 more years for women. Because of this difference in male-female life expectancies and the tendency of men to marry women younger than themselves, married women can expect to spend several years as widows. Of course, these averages may not apply to you directly, but they do give a picture of long and potentially active older adult years.

Myth: Old age is a time of rapid downhill slide in physical capabilities and health.

As you age, you are more likely to suffer from chronic illness. For most older adults, however, these illnesses are controllable and need not rule out activities and interests.

Normal physical changes in hearing and vision begin in your twenties and progress slowly through adulthood. You adapt to these over time and often do not notice any sudden, major change. Furthermore, eyeglasses and increased lighting in homes usually can relieve many of these aging changes. Properly fitted hearing aids and the willingness to learn to use them can help the hard of hearing person.

Proper nutrition, dental care, exercise, and rest, throughout your life, will have a definite impact on your health status as you age. It’s never too early or too late to start caring for your health.

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Myth: Old people can't adapt to changes in their lives.

You adapt to changes throughout your life. In old age, the demands on you to adapt are still there and, perhaps, they are greater than before. Reduced income, retirement, loss of friends and loved ones, and changes in physical capabilities demand change. Yet the great majority of older people adapt very well to advancing age.

The facts paint a bright picture of aging and older people.

Older adults can be active, alert, interested, and interesting.

There will be changes to make and some difficult situations to face, but usually these don’t have to limit you severely.

Just remember, with age, more remains the same—mental ability, personality, interests—than changes.

Published and distributed in furtherance of the Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914, by the Cooperative Extension Services of Oregon State University, Joseph R. Cox, director; Washington State University, J. O. Young, director; the University of Idaho, James L. Graves, director; and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, cooperating.