

Patient Talk!



The International Council of Nurses
Informed Patient Project

Healthy Ageing

We all know that ageing is a fact of life. Not as well known, perhaps, is that the number of older adults worldwide is increasing rapidly. Each month nearly one million people turn 60 years of age. In fact, by the middle of this century there will be more older than younger people in the world, a first.¹ Women make up the majority of the oldest old and elderly widowed, outliving men in almost every country.

Why the increase?

A variety of factors have contributed to the growing population of older people. Generally, a rapid decline in fertility has been coupled with increased life expectancy, in part the result of advanced technology, medications, better nutrition, and healthier lifestyles.

What the increase means

One thing is for certain. A growing population of older adults will place increased demand on a range of health services. These services include health promotion, illness prevention, rehabilitation, acute and chronic care, and end-of-life care. Meanwhile, the supply of health professionals needed to meet the increased demand will be strained. This is partly because many health professionals will themselves become part of the older-adult population.

Although life expectancy has been increasing, a growing population of older adults remains a population at risk of health problems. The most common chronic conditions affecting older adults worldwide are cardiovascular disease (such as stroke), cancer, diabetes, Alzheimer's disease, osteoporosis, impaired sight and hearing, osteoarthritis, lung disease, and psychiatric disorders – most commonly depression and dementia.

In developing countries, malaria is a major cause of impairment or disability. Both acute and chronic diseases are made worse by the presence of persistent poverty.

Healthy ageing

No matter what your current age, you probably hope for a healthy old age rather than one marked by illness or disability. But what exactly do we mean by 'healthy'?

Nursing research indicates that older individuals often describe health as a 'state of mind'. When talking about health, for example, they often emphasize psychological attributes, social relationships and attitude toward life, rather than physical state alone. Likewise, many health professionals consider older individuals to be healthy provided they are socially and intellectually active or can function for themselves within a given social setting. This view applies even for those living with chronic illness.

What you can do

Optimising physical health is a good first step on the road to healthy ageing, one that will help you remain independent for as long as possible. Equally as important is being engaged in life and keeping an active mind. Perhaps you have already adopted some or all of the following habits for healthy ageing:

- ✓ Eat a balanced, nutritious diet.
- ✓ Keep physically active.
- ✓ Don't smoke.
- ✓ Practise fall prevention.
- ✓ Consult your nurse or physician for regular monitoring and regarding any health concerns you may have.
- ✓ Challenge your mind daily.
- ✓ Maintain a meaningful social network.

What nurses are doing

Nurses play a pivotal role in providing health services to older adults. These services involve everything from caring for the frail, sick and dying, to being patient advocates, counsellors and educators in health maintenance and disease prevention.

Through the International Council of Nurses and member national nurses' associations, nurses are also increasingly involved in broad debates on global ageing. Working with older adults and their families, they are informing policy-making and the allocation of resources within the health and social sectors. The goal is better decision-making – for today and for tomorrow.

It is projected that by 2020...

- the world's population will include more than 1,000-million people aged 60 years and older, with more than 700 million of these in developing countries;
- Japan's population will be the oldest in the world, with 31% over 60 years of age, followed by Italy, Greece and Switzerland;
- the ten countries with the largest populations of older people will include five from the developing world: China, India, Indonesia, Brazil and Pakistan;
- the population of older persons from developing countries will increase nearly 240% from the 1980 level.

ⁱ Deutsche Welle. World Assembly on Ageing II : Growing Towards a Demographic Disaster. 10 April 2002, www.globalaging.org/waa2/articles/demogdisaster.htm.