

# Getting older? Yes! Becoming senile? No!



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“If I had known I was going to live this long, I would have taken more care of myself!” Behind this common light-hearted comment lies a more serious sentiment. Everyone wants to lead a long, healthy and happy life, but no one wants to get old. The unspoken dread amongst many people on the wrong side of fifty is the fear of being infirm, physically or mentally, - or heaven forbid, both - when old age is reached. The horror of dreaded diseases like cancer, heart disease and Alzheimer’s intrude more and more, and the inevitable loss of independence, respect and dignity stares us in the face. .

What happens to us as we get older? A great deal, and most of it unwelcome. One feature of old age is that our metabolism slows down resulting in a reduction in the level of heat and moistness. This is obvious as older people feel colder and also suffer from conditions of dryness such as osteoporosis and constipation. This means that any measures taken to oppose or soften the effects of ageing have to acknowledge this, both by restoring the qualities of heat and moisture, and by avoiding activities that diminish them.

Tibb adopts a two-pronged approach in assisting the elderly. First, it advises on improving the elderly person’s lifestyle; second, it supports his or her inner doctor, or physis.

Regarding the first part, or improving the lifestyle factors: We now know that disturbances to these probably underlie the onset and progress of many, if not most, chronic illnesses, from diabetes to cancer, and from Alzheimer’s to heart disease.

The main lifestyle factor is the food and drink we consume. For starters, we can ensure this is nutritious and suitable for the elderly. Bear in mind, however, that changing eating and drinking habits, especially in the elderly, are doomed to failure if the new regime includes foods that are unattractive, dry, bulky or difficult to chew, swallow and digest. Getting into the habit of eating regularly, with small portions, also helps, as this ensures a steady flow of energy.

The elderly can help themselves a lot by drinking more water (tap water is OK in most parts of South Africa), or if preferred, beverages like tea and coffee, because chronic dehydration is another common and troublesome feature of ageing. Maintaining a reasonable body weight also helps. Extra kilos can badly affect normal daily mobility, leading to increasing isolation and depression. If overweight, the elderly person who loses a few kilos will feel more energetic, and if diabetic will have fewer symptoms. General health will improve noticeably.

Another major lifestyle factor is physical movement and rest. An elderly person should try to get regular but realistic exercise. This is becoming more and more important, as the risks of dread diseases like cancer and arthritis in the later years are reduced by regular exercise. It can also inhibit the loss of body muscle that invariably accompanies ageing. Next, good quality sleep, a welcome bonus with advancing years, should be encouraged by adopting a range of simple steps. Contrary to popular opinion, older people need just as much sleep as the younger. Short afternoon catnaps can be a real boon, as they top deficient night sleep, improve alertness, and boost brain activity. And they do not interfere with normal sleep. Calming routines like warm baths or showers, and light reading before bedtime also help.

On the emotional health front, it is critically important to nourish family and social relationships. Without this, optimal wellness will be difficult if not impossible to achieve. Activities like volunteering and doing community work, enrolling in an adult education course, or joining a book club or gym help enormously. Dealing with any emotional turmoil such as anger, anxiety and depression, although easier said than done, will help the elderly enjoy life more. This may need intervention from a healthcare practitioner.

The second part of the Tibb approach is doing more to support physis. This is our body's natural, built-in, ability to heal itself. It is the prime defence against cancer and infection. As with most things, this powerful force gets weaker and slower with age. It can be supported by boosting the body's metabolism with simple measures, such as eating only quality nutrients and taking simple vitamin supplements. Herbal medicines, especially tonics, should also be a regular occupant in the elderly person's medicine chest. They act to restore harmony to the ageing body, and so are effective in many disorders such as problems with digestion and breathing, diabetes, joint pains and disturbed sleep. They protect key organs like the liver and heart, and help blood circulation.

Physis in the elderly can also be fostered by simple 'hands-on-therapies', like massage, hydrotherapy and aromatherapy, and by the occasional fasting period. These are good investments in health for the elderly.

Overall, there are many activities that the elderly can adopt for a healthier, more active, meaningful and happier life. We cannot prevent becoming old, but we can certainly delay becoming decrepit or senile. The last part of the journey of life may be along a one-way street, but it need not be all downhill. As Sophocles, a wise ancient Greek philosopher noted: 'no one loves life as those who are growing old'. The only real obstacle to achieving a better quality of life is lack of personal motivation. But that is another issue ...