

ENSURING HEALTH & WELLBEING AS YOU AGE

A workforce diverse in age offers numerous benefits - from an increased skillset and range of experience brought by the older worker, to improved employee retention rates.

With the ageing population predicted to almost double by 2050 (with a third of all workers now aged 50 or over), we should consider the health and overall quality of life of this valuable resource.

It is important we look after our health and wellbeing as we age. This helps us maintain our functional ability and minimises the risks associated with many age-related health conditions and diseases.

Sensory changes: hearing loss is a common problem experienced by the ageing population. It can cause difficulties with:

- Following or understanding conversation (as words can be misheard or missed)
- Hearing everyday sounds such as traffic, the television or alarms.

Additionally, hearing loss can impact on an individual's emotional wellbeing: with hearing loss, communication can become more challenging and individuals often worry about what the future may hold.

Approximately one third of people aged between 65 and 74 have some level of hearing loss, rising to half of people aged 75 and over. There are a variety of reasons why we may experience hearing loss. It is, therefore, important to seek medical advice as soon as possible if you think you have hearing loss, so any treatable causes can be addressed.

Age-related hearing loss occurs gradually over a period of time. It can be difficult to recognise as we tend to adapt to changes we experience. It usually occurs in both ears at equal levels and can also result in a reduced tolerance to loud noises.

If you experience sudden hearing loss, this may be a medical emergency, so you should seek medical attention immediately.

You can protect your hearing by:

- Wearing ear protection, such as earplugs, when exposed to loud noises
- Routinely ensure your ears are clear of wax. Where fully blocked, use a home irrigation kit or olive oil to soften the wax and gently wash it out (do not use ear buds as this can push the wax deeper into the ear)
- Having a hearing test if you notice any changes
- Stopping smoking – yes, smoking makes us more likely to experience hearing loss.

It is important to consider the impact of any hearing loss within the workplace. If you notice that you begin to have difficulties hearing, speak to your manager as soon as possible. Some other helpful tips include:

- Let people know about your hearing loss and ask them to face you, speak slowly and clearly and at an increased volume (but not too loud!)
- Ask your colleagues to repeat themselves if you have not heard something
- Find a quiet place to communicate
- Be mindful of body language and facial expressions. Watching somebody's mouth as they speak can often be helpful.



Visual changes can be distressing and impact on our emotional wellbeing. Their causes can vary from glaucoma, age-related macular degeneration and diabetes-related visual changes (retinopathy).

Similar to hearing loss, age-related visual changes often occur gradually. People most commonly notice a gradual deterioration in their close or long-distance vision. You may notice you are having difficulty recognising familiar faces or completing tasks, such as reading. You may experience 'floaters' in your visual field or have watery eyes.

People over the age of 60 are eligible for free eye checks every two years (every year if you have a diagnosis of diabetes or a family history of glaucoma). Contact your local optician to see if they provide free eye tests and to arrange an appointment.

Helpful for maintaining eye health:

- Have a diet with lots of green leafy vegetables and food rich in omega-3 (such as oily fish and nuts/seeds)
- Wear sunglasses in bright sunlight
- Stop smoking.

Tips to help within the workplace if you experience visual changes:

- Speak to your manager and make them aware, so that they can offer support if needed
- Use bright lighting
- Use large print documents (there are also large print clocks, watches, telephones... the list goes on). You could also consider using a magnifier
- Use the accessibility functions on your computer, e.g. adjusting the font size, brightness, contrast or appearance of your mouse pointer.



Mobility: older people with better mobility report a higher quality of life when compared to those with mobility restrictions (Shafrin et al, 2017). As we age, it is important to maintain the health of our bones, joints and muscles. This helps reduce the risk of decreased mobility impacting on our ability to participate in the activities we enjoy.

A loss of mobility can affect our health in many ways, not only physically but also emotionally. In addition, people with reduced mobility are at a greater risk of falls resulting in injury or disability, hospital admissions and an increased requirement for pain relief (Musich, et al 2017).

The most common cause of mobility difficulties as we age is osteoarthritis, a condition causing joint pain and inflammation. Symptoms are caused by wear and tear of the joints. They often include pain and stiffness, with some restricted limb movement. Sometimes, individuals will also experience swelling and tenderness of the joint and a popping or grinding sound on movement.

If you have any concerns about your mobility, pain or stiffness in your joints, speak to your GP as soon as possible. They can then determine if additional support may be appropriate and available to you. Additionally, maintaining a healthy weight, eating a balanced diet and getting plenty of exercise can all help you stay mobile as you age.

Restricted mobility can impact on us within the workplace in many ways. However, there are numerous adjustments that may help mitigate this such as:

- Temporary adjustments to your role
- Training
- Equipment provision.

If you are experiencing mobility difficulties, which are impacting on you at work, speak to your manager straight away, so they can offer support if needed.

Respiratory: ageing affects the health of our respiratory systems. We see a natural decline in lung function over time, due to a weakening of the respiratory muscles and a reduction in our lungs' defence mechanisms. Ordinarily, we don't notice any specific symptoms, although we may notice a decrease in our ability to undertake certain tasks over time.

Whilst changes in our respiratory system occur naturally and gradually as we age, if you develop a persistent cough that does not improve over time or notice significant or sudden changes in your breathing, speak to your GP straight away. This may be an indication of an underlying health condition.

Additionally, if you experience symptoms, which impact your day-to-day life or bother you in any way, speak to your GP for support.

You can help protect your lung health by:

- Stopping smoking
- Maintaining physical fitness
- Managing your weight
- Ensuring you have your flu and pneumonia vaccines, if offered.

If you are experiencing difficulties within the workplace in relation to your breathing, speak to your manager straight away. They may be able to offer support, such as temporary workplace adjustments.

Cardiovascular: as we age, our heart ages with us and we are at an increased risk of heart disease. This is often due to a build-up of fatty deposits on the walls of the arteries over many years.

Stiffening or hardening of the larger arteries (arteriosclerosis) causes high blood pressure. This puts us at greater risk of plaque build-up on the walls of the arteries (atherosclerosis), which limits the flow of oxygenated blood and increases our risk of heart disease. If this plaque develops in the coronary arteries, we are at greater risk of having a heart attack or developing angina.

The term “heart disease” also includes:

- Conditions such as arrhythmias (changes in our heart beat due to electrical signal changes)
- Changes in the heart valves resulting in a disrupted blood flow
- Increases in size of heart chambers with thickening of chamber walls so blood capacity and flow is restricted.

Atrial fibrillation is a condition in which the electrical impulses in the top heart chambers fire chaotically. This causes us to experience irregular and/or fast heartbeat(s). It can occur spontaneously and last for a very short period of time or may be more persistent. Although it is not life threatening, it can be distressing.

Treatment may be required to minimise the risk of blood clots in the heart, which can be dangerous. If a blood clots travels to the brain, it can cause a stroke.

Heart disease is a major cause of disability and reduced quality of life in our ageing population. It is therefore important that we make our heart health a priority. Ways to improve and maintain heart health include:

- Reducing cholesterol
- Managing blood pressure
- Stopping smoking
- Maintaining a healthy weight by eating a balanced diet
- Engaging in regular physical activity.



Neurological: the most commonly heard of neurological disorder associated with ageing is dementia. However, dementia is actually the term used to describe a number of different disorders affecting the brain; there are different types of dementia.

Common signs of neurological difficulties can include:

- Memory problems
- Difficulty processing information
- Communication difficulties
- Changes in mood and behaviour.

Due to the nature of these symptoms, often, it is those closest to us who recognise the first signs of neurological difficulties.

If you notice any of these changes or if somebody close to you expresses concern, see your GP as soon as possible.

Similar symptoms are commonly caused by other, short-term health conditions, which are easily addressed with appropriate treatment.

With the ageing workforce population, dementia is affecting more people within the workplace. Support is available if needed so please speak out if you experience difficulties.



So, what can we do to age well? Ageing starts when we are young. Living a healthy lifestyle whilst we are younger can greatly influence the way we age and our health when we are older. However, it is never too late to start!

Whilst medical support should always be sought for health conditions or concerning symptoms, there are plenty of self-management techniques we can engage with to keep ourselves fit and healthy as we age.

Physical activity is perhaps the most important aspect of healthy ageing. It not only helps to increase life expectancy but it also helps improve our quality of life.

Exercise is widely understood to be an effective way of preventing or reducing the risk of many age-related health conditions such as:

- Arthritis
- High blood pressure
- Heart disease
- Type 2 diabetes in people of all ages.

However, did you know, it can also help delay the onset of dementia? (Febbraio, 2017).

A combination of balance, strength and flexibility exercise is ideal. It can help prevent falls, which can lead to injury and disability, muscle loss and stiffness. Additionally, activity such as cardio exercise is ideal for improving heart and lung health.

A well-balanced diet including plenty of fibre from fruits and vegetables, wholefoods/grains and healthy fats from oily fish and nuts can help us maintain good health as we age.

Reducing our intake of salt and trans/saturated fats is also recommended. Remember, these are often hidden in processed foods, so dig out those recipe books and enjoy cooking from scratch!

Another dietary tip includes increasing water intake. We should aim for a minimum of 1.5 litres per day. Reducing caffeine can help us stay hydrated as caffeine is a natural diuretic.

Additionally, drinking alcohol in moderation can help improve general health and sleep.

Stress management can also be key to maintaining good health. Stress is a natural reaction to life experiences. We will all experience stress to some extent at different times in our lives. This can be a good thing, motivating us to do the things we need to do.

However, when stress becomes severe or chronic, it can have an impact on both our physical and mental health. This can cause symptoms such as frequent headaches, difficulty sleeping, changes in our thoughts, feeling and behaviours and rises in our blood pressure.

For more information about:

- Stress and emotional wellbeing: <https://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/>
- Common age-related health conditions: <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice/health-wellbeing/conditions-illnesses/>
- Dementia within the workplace: <https://www.dementiauk.org/get-support/dementia-at-work/>
- Maintaining a healthy diet and physical fitness: <https://www.nutrition.org.uk/nutritionscience/life/older-adults.html>
<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/exercise-as-you-get-older/>
- Support and information to help us age in a healthy way: <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice/>
<https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/health>
<https://www.england.nhs.uk/ourwork/clinical-policy/older-people/healthy-ageing-caring/>