

Q&A: Aging and changing

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DEAR MAYO CLINIC: I am 56 and have noticed a few things are changing as I get older. I know as I age there will be more changes in my body and mind, but can you provide insights on what are some common things that I can expect?

ANSWER: Throughout life, your body is constantly changing, and there are some surprising changes that can occur within your body and mind. As you age, some of those changes become more obvious, like wrinkles or forgetfulness. Learning what to expect as you get older can help alleviate some anxiety with aging.

Below are some common questions from patients about aging:

I used to be 6 feet tall. Now I am 5 feet, 11 inches tall. Why am I shrinking?

When looking at height loss, some changes are normal, and some are not. You have 24 bones, or vertebrae, in your spine with discs in between each vertebra. These discs begin to lose strength and thin as you age. This thinning process causes you to start to shrink.

The bone remodeling process becomes more disordered after age 25. This causes you to break

down your bones faster than you rebuild them.

You can help prevent bone breakdown to a substantial degree through weight-bearing exercise, such as walking, jogging, aerobics or resistance training, and through a [healthy diet](#) rich in calcium and vitamins. Also, speak to your primary [health care provider](#) about appropriate screening for your risk of osteoporosis. Though screening recommendations differ, most organizations suggest screening universally at 65 for women and 75 for men. However, other [risk factors](#), such as premature menopause, fractures and hormone deficiency, can warrant earlier testing.

I leak urine when I laugh. What can I do?

Urinary incontinence, or urinary leakage, is a common problem, especially for older women. This issue can result from many causes, including pregnancy, childbirth, menopause, overactive bladder muscles, weakened pelvic muscles and nerve damage. The right treatment will require a proper diagnosis. Making the right diagnosis will include a full history of symptoms; a [physical exam](#); urine testing; and possibly more advanced studies, such as urodynamic testing, or ultrasound and X-ray imaging.

Treatments are helpful, and they include behavioral modifications, dietary changes, pelvic muscle strengthening, medications and surgery. Incontinence or voiding difficulties in men can be a sign of an enlarged prostate or prostate cancer. Generally, I would recommend talking with your health care provider about these symptoms.

Why am I in the bathroom again?

Nocturia, or getting up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom, is a common problem for many people. About one-third of men over 30 make at least two trips to the bathroom after they've gone to bed. This is usually caused by benign prostatic hyperplasia, or BPH, which is an enlarged prostate.

However, there are other causes, including medications; alcohol; caffeine; nighttime drinking and dietary habits; diabetes; heart conditions; and sleep disorders, such as [sleep apnea](#).

Treatment for nocturia requires a proper diagnosis by your health care provider. This visit will involve a history, an exam and simple laboratory testing to start. Treatments include behavioral modifications, dietary changes, medications or [surgical intervention](#).

Why do I have so many wrinkles?

Wrinkles are a natural part of aging that can be caused by several factors. Some common factors can include stress and [sun exposure](#)—both of which break down the elastin fibers and collagen in skin. Exposure to air pollutants and tobacco smoke also can play a significant role.

As you age, skin becomes less elastic, and the natural oil production in skin decreases, causing it to dry out. You start to lose the fat in the deeper layers of your skin, and the crevices and lines become more prominent. Wrinkles are also genetic.

You can slow the effects on the skin by using sunscreen; wearing protective clothing, including hats; using moisturizers; eliminating smoking; and eating a diet full of natural antioxidants found in fruits and vegetables.

If you are interested in treatment beyond these tips, talk to your health care provider or a dermatologist who can suggest more specific cosmetic options.

Every day I seem to lose my reading glasses. Why can't I remember the simplest things anymore?

Just like your joints, muscles and skin, your brain ages, too. While it may seem like your glasses are misplacing themselves, your brain is simply having a harder time with recall. You may notice that you forget names or can't remember a loved one's birthday. You also may find it takes longer to learn new things. All of these are usually signs of normal aging.

Just as staying physically fit is important as you

age, so, too, is keeping your mind active. You're encouraged to keep active physically, mentally and socially to the best of your ability.

Certainly, there are other causes of memory loss, including medication interactions; vitamin deficiencies; metabolic conditions, such as a thyroid disorder; depression; anxiety; or ongoing infections. If you or your loved ones have noticed that memory is a problem for you, you're encouraged to talk with your health care provider to determine if it is normal aging or something more significant.

Aging can be challenging, so continue to maintain regular touch points with your health care provider so you can address any concerns in a timely fashion. Being prepared for the future will make it easier for you to enjoy your upcoming birthdays.

— Dr. Steven Perkins, Family Medicine, Mayo Clinic Health System, La Crosse, Wisconsin

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