

Living Longer, Living Healthier



Average life expectancy is on the rise. According to a recent study based on figures from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, within 40 years Americans could be seeing average life spans of 93 years for women and 86 years for men — up nearly 10 years from today's life expectancy.

Seniors who have reached retirement age need to understand the implications of these findings. Says CNN.com, the United States is "just not built as a society that can handle more people over a certain age." The implications are far-reaching for the public health system and will place huge demands on Medicare and health-care spending in general.

Perhaps the easiest answer to some of the complications surrounding a longer life span is to simply remain healthy. Professionals and caregivers who work with seniors have increasing opportunities to help maintain and even improve the wellness of seniors into their later years.

Health and nutrition

It goes without saying that proper nutrition is essential to long-term health. However, all too often, seniors can experience interrelated or external factors that affect their food intake. For example, they might experience difficulty chewing because of dental problems, have trouble shopping, experience a loss of appetite due to certain medications, or simply lack the motivation to prepare healthy meals for themselves. But good nutrition is crucial to senior health: Malnutrition is a very real threat. Wellness providers (as well as family members) who work with seniors should always be on the lookout for signs of nutrition problems, including fatigue, depression, weak immune response, anemia and muscle weakness. To combat malnutrition, be sure to encourage a varied diet of vegetables, fruits, whole grains and fiber — a diet that limits solid fats, oils and high-sugar foods. Limit saturated fat and trans fats. And, of course, encourage the intake of plenty of water.

Exercise is also vitally important — even rejuvenating — in a person's later years. Many chronic health problems can be improved by even moderate amounts of exercise. Physical activity also makes bones and muscles stronger. And regular exercise benefits the brain. Studies show that people who exercise regularly have better decision-making skills than those who don't. It's not only trainers, physical therapists and other fitness professionals that can offer seniors advice about staying active; caregivers of all kinds should seize the opportunity.

Safety in the home

Many seniors live in older homes that might have become more difficult to live in or maintain over the years. Home modifications — changes made to adapt living spaces to meet the needs of people with physical limitations — can prevent as many as half of all home accidents among seniors. Assisting aging-in-place seniors with these kinds of accessibility and safety adaptations is a job that many caregivers and professionals can tackle.

Help the senior evaluate his or her home by asking key questions. For example:

- Should a ramp replace the stairs or steps inside or outside the home?
- Is the bathtub or shower easy to access?
- Do the doorways accommodate a walker or wheelchair?
- Are all appliances and utensils conveniently located?
- Are the faucets easy to use?
- Are the cabinet doorknobs easy to use?

Changes based on the answers to these questions can increase the safety of the home and, therefore, contribute to the homeowner's health and longevity. For more information about home modifications, access the National Directory of Home Modification and Repair Resources

(<http://www.homemods.org/directory/index.shtml>).

A new era of communication

Naturally, older adults are more likely than young people to experience chronic disease associated with disability, diminished quality of life, and increased costs for health care and long-term care. But research shows that aging doesn't necessarily have to lead to poor health. Several public health strategies — such as promoting clinical preventive services and innovating new care-giving strategies — can help seniors remain independent longer, improve their quality of life, and delay the need for long-term care.

Communication is essential: Health-care professionals (primary care physicians, pharmacists, specialists) need to communicate not just with their patients, but with one another. If you are assisting with the care of a senior, please be sure that the medical care professionals in charge of your loved one's care are communicating with each other.

Seniors who aren't computer-savvy can simply remember to take business cards from each doctor they see, write the date and pertinent visit information on the card, and keep the cards in a safe, easy-to-access location so that all health information can be accessed quickly.

But the computer adds a breadth of usability. Two other excellent ways to share individual and online health records are [Google Health](#) and [Microsoft HealthVault](#). Both free services let users store and manage health information in a central location. They're great ways to keep doctors informed, streamline your health care experience and keep track of all records. Best of all, the user's information is accessible from anywhere.

A certified senior advisor can also provide record-keeping tools that can be used for later reference regarding important information such as key phone numbers, insurance policy information, professionals who work with the senior on matters of health, finance, tax, legal, etc.

Help seniors stay healthy longer

Seniors have more years ahead of them than ever before. The professionals who care for them can assist with planning and become a useful resource to enable the senior to plan ahead, allow those years to be fruitful, healthy and less burdensome at a time when they might not be as sharp and alert as they were in their younger years.

Lynn Schmidt is a Certified Senior Advisor (CSA) which has provided her with advanced knowledge and practice tools in the areas of key health issues as well as financial and social issues that are important to seniors. Lynn is eager to serve the tax, financial and family concerns of seniors at the highest level possible. When you work with a professional who has added the CSA designation to his or her achievements, you know you're working with someone who has invested the time and effort into learning about the things that are important to **you** or **your loved one**. For more information, please visit our website at www.LyncoFinancial.net