

# Take charge of your health today. Be informed. Be involved.

## Healthy Aging

The May "Take Charge of Your Health Today" page focuses on healthy aging. But the information provided is not only for seniors. Healthy aging is important for all of us. This month's commentary features a conversation between Jennifer R. Jones, MPH, community engagement coordinator with the University of Pittsburgh Clinical and Translational Science Institute (CTSI), and Esther L. Bush, president and CEO of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh.

**JJ:** Good afternoon, Ms. Bush. Isn't it exciting that it's starting to feel like spring?

**EB:** Yes, Jennifer; I'm so glad to see sunshine! We need it after a long winter. I see that we're talking about healthy aging today. But first I want to talk a little bit about our "Take Charge" pages. We just had a partnership meeting last week, and I cannot speak enough about this unique partnership. To some, bringing together a newspaper, an African American advocacy organization, an academic research institution and a hospital system may prove difficult. But each partner—the Courier, the Urban League, Pitt CTSI and UPMC—is so com-

mitted to this. We work hard to provide the community with up-to-date, easily digestible health and research information. I'm glad to be a part of this page. For all of you who read this page each month, thank you.

**JJ:** I agree, Ms. Bush. It's not only informative but also a fun way to disseminate research information. About healthy aging, do you think the saying "age is just a number" is true?

**EB:** I really do, and I'll tell you why. Aging is a natural part of life. I've embraced it. We need to focus on how we feel—not the age we are. And we certainly shouldn't use age as an excuse for not trying to live a healthy life. I bet there



ESTHER BUSH

are some 80-year-olds who are healthier than 40-year-olds. What I learned from reading this month's health overview is the importance of prevention. I like what Drs. Newman and Albert clearly stated—that it's never too late to make a change that can improve your health.

**JJ:** So true. At Pitt Public Health, we focus on prevention—empowering people to lower their health risk behaviors. The "10 Keys"™ to Healthy Aging, as highlighted in the section below, are important to remember as we age. There are many parts of our health that we don't have control over, but the 10 Keys remind us of the many ways we can age well.

**EB:** I'd encourage everyone to cut out the Keys and hang them on your refrigerator as a daily reminder. I'm also excited about the MOVE UP research study that will be held here at the Urban League. It seems to be a great, free program for older adults to learn how to live a healthier life.

**JJ:** It certainly is! For anyone who has never participated in research, but may have wanted to, this could be a positive fit. The research team at Pitt is informative, easy to talk to and will answer any questions. It was also great to partner this month with the Aging Institute. It has important information for both seniors and caregivers.

**EB:** There is a wealth of resources we have available here in Pittsburgh. We just need to take advantage of them!

**JJ:** As always, thank you so much for your time, Ms. Bush. Our June featured topic is "Sexuality and Stigma." I'm looking forward to our thought provoking conversation.

For more information about the "Take Charge" page or to ask any questions, e-mail [partners@hs.pitt.edu](mailto:partners@hs.pitt.edu).

## 'It's never too late to better your health'

More adults than ever are enjoying a long life. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the United States had 44.7 million persons 65 or older in 2013—about 13 percent of the population. The aging population will grow rapidly over the next few decades, with more people 85 and over than ever. Though old age has been thought of as a time of illness or disability, illness and disability should not be considered normal parts of aging. Healthy old age is possible, especially if people work with a health care provider to take care of their health.

Old age can be a time of great opportunity. When in good health, people can add quality, along with quantity, to their years. There are health challenges that are specific to old age—the risk of certain cancers is greater, and people are more likely to have high blood pressure and diabetes. They are more likely to fall and have fractures, arthritis and dementia, to name a few. Older African Americans have higher rates of diabetes, prostate cancer and kidney disease, among other health problems. But African Americans have a lower risk of fractures and falls, hearing loss and peripheral nerve disease. Researchers are trying to figure out why there are these differences. However, research has shown that older adults who work at having a healthy lifestyle do experience significant health improvements.

To help lower aging risk factors, researchers at the University of Pittsburgh have developed the "10 Keys"™ to Healthy Aging, a broad health behavior-change program based on research about old age and health. "These address the most common preventable health risks for older people," says one of the developers of the "10 Keys,"™ Anne B. Newman, MD, MPH, Katherine M. Detre Professor of Population Health Sciences and chair, Department of Epidemiology, Pitt Public Health; professor of medicine, School of Medicine; and director of Pitt's Center for Aging and Population Health. "Health improvements are possible at any age," she says.

The Center for Aging and Population Health uses the "10 Keys"™ to Healthy Aging to urge adults to:

**1. Lower systolic blood pressure (the top number in blood pressure readings)**—High blood pressure is a risk factor for stroke. If people stop smoking, drink alcohol in moderation, reduce salt in their



diets, maintain a reasonable weight and get their blood pressure checked, they can control this risk factor.

**2. Stop smoking**—Smoking increases the risk for heart disease, stroke, cancer and breathing disorders. It is never too late to stop smoking. A health care provider can give you resources to help you quit.

**3. Get appropriate cancer screenings**—Screening is important because it may detect something before any symptoms arise. Discuss your personal risks for cancer with your health care provider. Schedule timely screenings.

**4. Get vaccinations regularly**—All adults over age 50 are encouraged to get influenza, pneumonia and zoster vaccinations.

**5. Regulate blood glucose (the amount of sugar in the blood)**—When people are diabetic, sugar builds up in the blood, which can cause damage. Diabetes increases the risk for heart disease and stroke, kidney disease, blindness, nervous system disorders and dental disease. A simple blood test will tell if your glucose level is too high. The goal is to maintain a fasting blood glucose level below 100 mg/dl. Diabetes can be controlled or prevented.

**6. Lower LDL ("bad") cholesterol**—Too much cholesterol in the blood causes it to build up in the walls of arteries. This build-up narrows blood flow through arteries to the heart, which can cause heart disease and stroke. Sometimes medication is needed to help lower LDL cholesterol. Being

physically active, eating healthy foods and keeping a healthy weight can also help reduce cholesterol levels.

**7. Be physically active**—Being physically active does not mean you have to belong to a gym or exercise one hour every day of the week. Be as active as you can be given time, family, work and health constraints. But a brisk, 30-minute walk on most days of the week is recommended. Always talk to a health care provider if you are starting a physical activity routine. It is never too late to be physically active!

**8. Maintain healthy bones, joints and muscles**—Keeping bodies healthy helps us stay active and protects against injuries. Bone loss, osteoarthritis and muscle weakness increases the risk for disability, pain, loss of independence and death.

**9. Maintain social contact**—Staying connected with people helps our brains work better, helps memory and prevents isolation. Find a way to talk to someone every day.

**10. Combat depression**—Depression is not a normal sign of aging. If you, or someone you care for or spend a lot of time with, are showing signs of depression, talk to your health care provider.

Dr. Newman says to use these guidelines in conversation with a health care provider. "We encourage people to use the Keys even if their health is good overall," she says. "And take blood pressure and cholesterol medications if prescribed. They can be extremely helpful."

Dr. Newman and colleagues think old age is a time to be celebrated—not dreaded.

"It's an exciting time for aging," says Steven M. Albert, PhD, MSc, professor and chair, Department of Behavioral and Community Health Sciences, Pitt Public Health, and one of the creators of the "10 Keys"™. "Researchers have discovered ways that might slow the process of aging and ways to control certain risk factors."

Dr. Albert says that people who have not focused on their health should not feel that they have lost an opportunity, either. "The older people get, the greater the benefits of prevention are," he says. "Simply being aware of your blood pressure, cholesterol levels and being up-to-date on cancer screenings can make a difference in how well people feel in old age."

"Wellness can start today," he says. "It's never too late to better your health."

## 5 Reasons to call the Aging Institute

Life expectancy in the United States continues to rise. Adults are now living into their 80s and 90s. Older adults are choosing to stay at home or live with a loved one because of many factors. Some of the reasons include the rising costs of medical care and living alone.

Seniors and caregivers may have unanswered questions about finances, home-based care options, Medicare and more. The Aging Institute of UPMC Senior Services and the University of Pittsburgh is a great resource for seniors, professionals and caregivers. They provide information and advice on many topics related to aging.

If any of the following apply to you, the Aging Institute may be able to help.

**1. You're a primary caregiver for an elderly relative.** Being the primary caregiver for a loved one comes with many challenges. New caregivers may have to take on tasks they have never done before. The Aging Institute can provide essential information. The more information people have, the easier it is to transition into and maintain their roles as primary caregivers. This could lower the feeling over being overwhelmed by new responsibilities.

**2. You're a professional who wants to prepare yourself for the challenges of treating an aging population.**

The Aging Institute helps physicians by offering special programs and seminars. The Seed Grant Program assists with new and novel research in aging-related topics. This program advocates for physicians regarding age-related

legislation. It also offers guest lectures by experts in geriatric research and care.

**3. You're a student who wants to break into the field and learn more about geriatrics.**

The Aging Institute is a partner with the Division of Geriatric Medicine at the University of Pittsburgh Department of Medicine. They all work together to provide support for education and training programs for professionals and students.

**4. You're an advocate for seniors and would like to get involved.**

The Aging Institute partners with community organizations to aid in their missions to provide information and resources to seniors and their caregivers. They are always looking for more local businesses and professionals to join its cause.

**5. You're an older adult who is exploring options for future care.**

Being prepared for how you will handle your future care makes for a much smoother transition. You can find information on living at home, in-home nursing care, senior living facilities, financial aid, Medicare and more. UPMC Senior Communities regularly offers free events aimed at helping seniors stay informed and gain insight into common concerns.

The Aging Institute has something for everyone when it comes to geriatrics. More information is available at [Aging.UPMC.com](http://Aging.UPMC.com). You can also call the help and referral line at 1-866-430-8742.

## Research Opportunity for Seniors



Do you have goals to lose weight and move more easily? If so, you may want to join others, ages 60-75, in a study aimed to improve health, function and lifestyle.

MOVE UP is a 32-session (about one year) behavioral weight loss intervention program. It focuses on the "10 Keys"™ to Healthy Aging, healthy eating, physical activity and behavior modification techniques. The purpose is to help study participants improve their overall health, physical functioning and fitness, with an additional focus on weight loss.

MOVE UP is currently looking for participants for a program to be held at the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh (downtown). There are also other opportunities to join MOVE UP programs throughout Allegheny County.

Call research staff at Pitt today to see if you are eligible. The phone number is 412-383-1303. You can also e-mail Jennifer Jones, MPH, at [jjr25@pitt.edu](mailto:jjr25@pitt.edu).

## AGING INSTITUTE

of UPMC Senior Services and the University of Pittsburgh