

Chapter 8

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Growing Older



Today more and more people are living longer. Cleaner living conditions, vaccinations, and better nutrition help prevent many diseases, and modern medicines cure others.

But the benefit of a longer life is accompanied by new challenges. As we reach our later years, our bodies start declining. While most health problems of older people are not caused by age, the changes aging causes in the body can make health problems more serious or more difficult to treat.

Our body's strength reduces with age. Tasks that used to feel simple begin to feel more difficult. You may start requiring assistance in day-to-day life. Many older people must care for themselves because younger family members move away from their communities to earn a living.

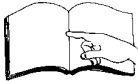
Older women are more likely to face these problems than older men, because women are more likely to be alone, poor, vulnerable, and lack access to health services. So in this chapter we describe how older women can take care of their health, treat common health problems of aging, and work to improve the difficult conditions under which many older women live.

► *Let us make communities where the young and the old listen to and respect each other.*

The End of Menstrual Periods (Menopause)



hormones



problems of the womb, 380
depression, 419
breast cancer, 382

Anyone who has a menstrual cycle will go through menopause, which is when menstrual bleeding stops. Usually this happens in someone's 40s or early 50s. It may happen fairly quickly over a year or so, or more slowly over several years. Some people go through menopause easily, others have more discomforts.

This is a time of emotional, physical, and social changes. You may feel a sense of relief because menopause means the end of periods. It also means that you cannot give birth any more. It is natural to feel sadness for this loss of possibility

Signs:

- Your menstrual cycle changes. Your period may shorten by 2 or 3 days, or it may last longer than usual, perhaps 2 to 3 weeks. You may not have your period for a few months, after which it may return with a heavier flow.
- At times you suddenly may feel very hot or sweaty (called having "hot flashes"). This can wake you up at night.
- Your vagina becomes smaller and less wet.
- You may urinate more often.
- Your desire for sexual activity may change.
- You may have trouble sleeping.
- You may feel sad, tearful, or irritable for no reason.

These signs happen because the *ovaries* stop making the hormones *estrogen* and *progesterone*. Signs will go away as your body gets used to less estrogen.

How you feel about the end of your menstrual bleeding may also depend on how your community treats older women. Are they respected and listened to, or ignored and valued less when they are no longer raising children?

What to do during menopause

Menopause is a normal part of life. Most women will be able to feel better by following some of the suggestions on the next page.

For people who menstruate, menopause marks the beginning of a new phase for their body. By paying attention to the changes in our physical and social needs, we can achieve good health as we age.

In the past, doctors recommended medicines containing estrogen and progesterone to relieve the most severe symptoms of menopause. This is called "Hormone Replacement Therapy" (HRT). Unfortunately, HRT has been shown to increase the risk of breast cancer, heart disease, blood clots, and stroke. It is healthier to avoid using hormone medicines this way.

To feel better during menopause:

Notice how different things—foods, activities, where you sit—affect you as you age. Small changes can make a big difference.



- Dress in loose clothes and layers that you can take off easily when you begin to sweat during a hot flash.

- Drink cool water regularly.

- If you have hot flashes more after eating hot or spicy foods or drinks, see what happens if you avoid those foods and drinks.



- Avoid drinking too much coffee, black tea, or cola. They contain *caffeine*, which can make you feel tense and sleep poorly.



- Move every day in ways that make your heart beat faster. This can improve sleep problems and your mood. Walking every day helps keep bones strong.

- Some yoga poses can help balance emotions. Try resting in a relaxing pose with support from a folded blanket or pillow.



Breathe deeply and relax for 10 minutes.



- If you drink alcohol, drink only small amounts. Alcohol can increase bleeding and hot flashes.

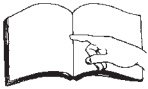
- Quit smoking or chewing tobacco. It can cause unusual bleeding and make problems with weak bones much worse (see page 133).



- It may help to tell your family about the changes you are going through and how they make you feel or to talk with others going through menopause.

- Ask a midwife or someone who has already gone through menopause about traditional remedies that might help.

Taking Care of Your Health



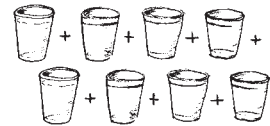
eating for good health, 165
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Just as our bodies change during puberty, they also change when our childbearing years end. Menopause and aging cause changes in bone strength, muscle and joint strength and flexibility, and overall well-being. Taking small steps for your body, emotions, and mind can improve your physical and mental health during later years.

Eat well. As an older person, you still need nutritious food to keep your body strong and to fight disease. More of some kinds of foods are needed. Because older bodies make less estrogen, it helps to eat foods high in plant estrogens, such as soy beans, tofu (bean curd), lentils, and other beans. Because bones lose strength with age, it helps to eat foods high in calcium, a mineral that strengthens bones.

Sometimes older people don't enjoy eating as much as they used to. This may be caused by changes in taste and smell, which make eating less pleasurable. Or slower digestion, common with aging, can make a person feel full after eating just a little. But this does not mean that older people need less nutritious food. Older people may need support to continue to eat well and eat a variety of healthy foods.

Drink a lot of liquids. Along with nutritious food, your body also needs more water. Older people often drink less to avoid having to use the bathroom during the night. An older person may also lose their sense of thirst. Make sure to drink 8 glasses or cups (2 liters) of water every day to avoid dehydration.

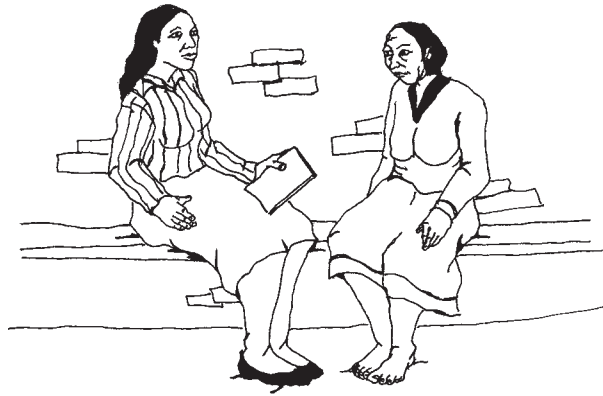


Stay physically active. Everyday activities, such as walking, playing with grandchildren, going to the market, cooking, and farming can all help keep a woman's muscles and bones strong, and prevent stiff joints. Daily physical activity also helps prevent heart disease, diabetes, depression, and memory difficulties. Regularly doing yoga, t'ai chi, or dancing can keep you physically active and improve emotional health as well.

Treat illness early. Being older does not have to include having many health problems. If an older person does not feel well, they may have a treatable illness, one that has nothing to do with age. See a health worker.

Connect with others. Most people are healthier and happier when they are involved in meaningful activities. Your older years can provide time to work on community projects that increase security and trust among neighbors.

Here is one example:



► *Try to see a health worker if you feel ill and cannot treat the problem yourself.*



Louise Waithira Nganga is a coffee farmer in Kandara Town, in Kenya. In 1991, as a member of an organization planting trees in Kenya, she met a group of women farmers who complained about a coffee factory upstream. The fertilizers and chemicals the factory used to make coffee were getting into the river, and the women's cows were getting sick and dying from drinking the dirty water.

Soon many of the women began meeting to talk with Louise. They became aware of how the river also affected their families' health. They decided to put pressure on the district officers to force the factory to keep waste out of the river.

Louise, however, always insisted that rights and responsibilities go together. So she also helped the women realize how their own habits affected other people down the river. For example, when they cleaned their fertilizing machines or washed their clothes in the river, it was harmful for the health of the people downstream. As Louise said, "We must first be responsible ourselves so that we may, in clear conscience, demand our rights."

In 1993, Louise and her women farmers created an organization called Rural Women's Sanitation. Whenever the river is in danger from polluting factories, Louise is able to organize as many as 100 women, who "pay a visit" to the local authorities and inform them of the problem. Besides taking care of the river, the group is building latrines and demanding that local governments reclaim public wells that have been taken over by private owners.

Louise has stopped planting trees, but has no regrets. "There were more pressing problems that were part of Kandara soil itself." She tells her fellow women, "God will not come to Earth to solve your problems. The government cannot know what your problems are. Only you can make sure they get solved."

Sexual Relations

► *There is no reason based on age alone that we cannot enjoy sex for as long as we live.*



sexual pleasure, 186

infections of the vagina, 265

infections of the urine system, 366

► *Do not use petroleum gel or oils that contain perfumes to increase wetness in the vagina. These can cause irritation.*



dry sex

For some women, menopause means freedom from childbearing and the sexual demands of marriage. Other women become more relaxed about sex because they no longer fear an unwanted pregnancy. Most older people, though, continue to need love and affection.



As you grow older, some of the changes in your body may affect your experience during sex:

- You may take longer to become sexually aroused. This happens to all people as they age, regardless of gender.
- Your vagina may be more dry, which can make penetration during sex uncomfortable. Dryness can also make it easier to get an infection of the vagina or the urine system, and also HIV.

What to do:

- Do not try to make the vagina dry before sex.
- Try to take more time during sex, so your vagina can get naturally wet. You can also use spit (saliva), oils made from vegetables (corn oil, olive oil), or other lubricants like K-Y Jelly during sex.

IMPORTANT *Do not use oils for wetness if you use a condom. Oil will weaken the condom and it may break.*

- To prevent urine problems, pass urine as soon as possible after sex to flush out germs.

Protecting yourself against pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs)

Penis-in-vagina sex might still cause pregnancy until your menstrual periods have stopped for one full year. To prevent unwanted pregnancy, continue to use a family planning method during that time (see page 197).

If you are using a *hormonal method of family planning* (see pages 207 to 215), stop using it around the age of 50 to see if you are still having periods. Use another method of family planning until you have no periods for one whole year (12 months).

Unless you know for sure that you and your partner do not have an STI, including HIV, be sure to use a condom each time you have sex—even if you can no longer become pregnant.



The following pages describe some of the more common health problems as we age. For other problems, like gallbladder problems, heart trouble, *stroke*, *thyroid gland* problems, sores on the legs from poor blood flow, and difficulty sleeping, see **Where There Is No Doctor** or another general medical book. For information on *diabetes*, see page 174.

ANEMIA

Although many people think that anemia is a problem only of the young, it also affects many older people—most often because of poor nutrition or heavy menstrual bleeding.

HEAVY OR IRREGULAR MENSTRUAL BLEEDING

Between the ages of 40 and 50, many people have changes in their menstrual cycles. Some have heavier bleeding, or bleeding that lasts longer.

Heavy menstrual bleeding that continues for months or years can cause anemia.

The most common causes of heavy or longer-lasting menstrual bleeding are:

- hormone changes
- growths in the womb (*fibroids* or *polyps*)

Treatment:

- Eat foods every day that are rich in iron, or take iron pills.
- Take 5 to 10 mg medroxyprogesterone acetate once a day for 5 to 10 days. If bleeding has not stopped at the end of 10 days, see a health worker.
- Try to see a health worker for heavy bleeding that lasts more than 3 months, for bleeding in the middle of your menstrual cycle (halfway between 2 menstrual periods), or for bleeding that happens 12 months or more after menopause. A trained health worker will need to provide care. They may do a biopsy and send the tissue to a laboratory to be checked for cancer.

If you have had pain and heavy menstrual bleeding for years, see Chapter 24, “Cancer and Growths.”

BREAST LUMPS

You may find lumps in your breasts. Most breast lumps are not dangerous, but some can be a sign of cancer (see page 382). The best way to find lumps in your breasts is to examine your breasts yourself (see page 162).



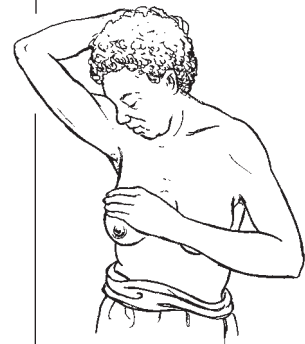
Common Health Problems with Aging



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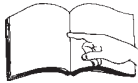
foods with iron, 167
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► All these signs can also be caused by other diseases. For more information, see **Where There Is No Doctor** or another general medical book.



blood pressure



eating for good health, 165



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HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE

Blood pressure higher than 140/90 can cause many problems, like heart disease, kidney disease, and strokes.

Signs of dangerously high blood pressure:

- frequent headaches
- dizziness
- ringing sound in the ears

If you visit a health worker for any reason, try to have your blood pressure checked at the same time.



IMPORTANT High blood pressure at first causes no signs. It should be lowered before danger signs develop. If you know you are at risk for high blood pressure, or are concerned that you have high blood pressure, get your blood pressure checked regularly.

Treatment and prevention:

- Do some physical activity, like a brisk walk, every day.
- Avoid foods with a lot of fat, sugar, or salt.
- If you smoke or chew tobacco, try to quit.
- Reduce stress and practice deep breathing (see pages 422 to 424).

For very high blood pressure, you may need to take medicine.

PROBLEMS PASSING URINE AND STOOL

As you grow older, you may have problems with leaking urine or difficulty passing stool. These may be embarrassing to speak about, but health workers commonly talk about them with older people. Do not suffer alone. See a health worker.

Urine problems are often caused by a weakness in the muscles in the bladder and around the urethra (urine tube). The “squeezing exercise” helps strengthen some of these muscles.

Older people may also have difficulty passing stool because digestion slows as we age. It helps to drink a lot of liquids, to eat foods with a lot of fiber (such as whole grain breads or vegetables), and to exercise. Also, to help push the stool out during a bowel movement, you can put 2 fingers into your vagina and push toward your back.

FALLEN WOMB (PROLAPSED UTERUS)

Sometimes, as a person gets older, the muscles that hold up the womb become weak. The womb falls down into the vagina. Part of it may even stick out between the folds of the vulva. In very bad cases, the whole womb can be pushed out of the body when the person passes stool, coughs, or lifts something heavy.

A fallen womb is usually caused by injury during childbirth—especially if someone has had many babies or babies born close together. Pushing too early during labor, or if the birth attendant pushes on the belly from the outside, can also cause prolapse. But both aging and lifting heavy things can make it worse. The signs often appear after menopause, when muscles become weaker.

Signs:

- You need to pass urine often, or it is difficult to pass urine, or urine leaks out of your body.
- You have pain in your lower back.
- You feel as though something is coming out of your vagina.
- All of the above signs disappear when you lie down.

Treatment:

The “squeezing exercise” can make the muscles around the womb and vagina stronger. If you have been doing this exercise every day for 3 or 4 months and it does not help, talk to a health worker. You may need a vaginal pessary, a piece of rubber shaped like a ring, that you put high up in the vagina to keep the womb in place. If this does not work, you may need an operation.

If pessaries are not available where you live, ask older women in your community what they use for this problem.

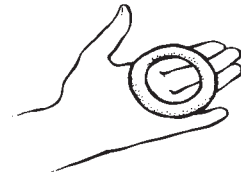
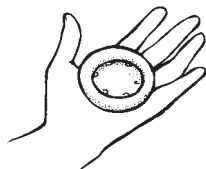
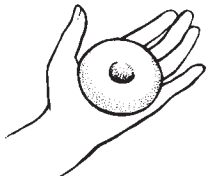


preventing
fallen womb



squeezing exercise

Kinds of Vaginal Pessaries



SWOLLEN VEINS IN THE LEGS (VARICOSE VEINS)

Varicose veins are veins that are swollen and sometimes painful. They are more likely in older age, if the person had many pregnancies, if the person is overweight, or if they sit or stand in one place for long amounts of time.

Treatment:

There is no medicine for varicose veins, but the following can help:

- Try to walk or move your legs at least 20 minutes every day.
- Try not to spend much time standing or sitting with your feet down, or with your legs crossed.
- If you have to sit or stand for a long time, try to take breaks to lie down with your feet above the level of your heart. Do this as often as possible during the day.
- When you have to stand for a long time, try to walk in place.
- Sleep with your feet up on pillows or on a bundle of cloth.
- To help hold in the veins, use elastic stockings, elastic bandages, or cloth that is not wrapped too tightly. Be sure to take them off at night.



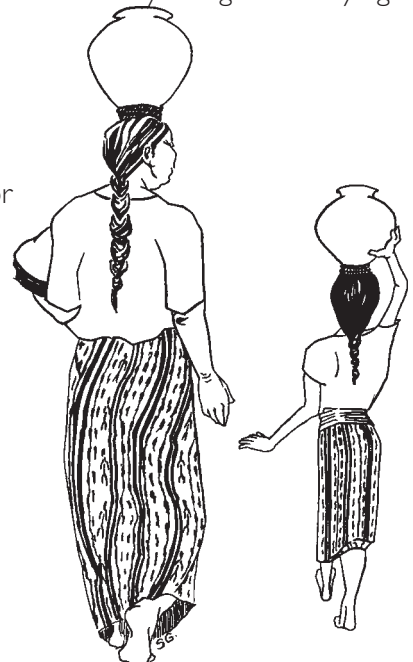
This woman is keeping her leg up as she sews.

BACK PAIN

Back pain is often caused by a lifetime of heavy lifting and carrying.

It can often be helped by:

- Exercising every day to strengthen and stretch the muscles in the back. Organizing people to dance or exercise together can be fun.
- Asking younger members of your family to help you, if you must continue to do hard work.



back exercises

JOINT PAIN (ARTHRITIS)

You may have joint pain caused by arthritis. Usually it cannot be cured completely, but the following treatment may help.

Treatment:

- Rest the part of your body that hurts.
- Soak cloths in hot water and place them on the painful areas. Be careful not to burn your skin. (Some people with joint pain lose their sense of feeling in the skin on the painful areas.)
- Keep your joints moving by gently rubbing and stretching them every day.
- Take a mild pain medicine. Aspirin helps relieve pain. The dose for arthritis is higher than it is for other pain. Take 900 mg 4 times a day (but no more than 4 g per day) with food or a large glass of water. Ibuprofen also works well. Take 400 mg 4 to 6 times a day.

IMPORTANT *If your ears start to ring or you start to bruise easily, take less aspirin. Also, if you are having a lot of bleeding from your vagina, you should not take aspirin.*

WEAK BONES (OSTEOPOROSIS)

After menopause, your body makes less estrogen, and this weakens your bones. Weak bones break easily and heal slowly.

How you eat and move your body can make a difference.

Strengthen your bones by:

- exercising daily for 20 to 30 minutes. Try yoga or walking.
- eating foods rich in calcium.
- avoiding alcohol

To prevent falls, injury, and broken bones:

- Avoid walking on slippery or wet ground.
- Use handrails wherever possible.
- Use a cane when needed.
- Keep your feet warm and dry in the winter. Damp, cold air can make your pain worse and lead to accidents or inactivity.



exercises to prevent contractures



medicines for pain

➤ *Weak bones are a major cause of disability for older women.*



calcium-rich foods

➤ *Both exercise and calcium make the bones stronger.*

PROBLEMS WITH SEEING AND HEARING

As we get older, many of us are not able to see and hear as well as we used to. Problems with seeing or hearing make accidents more likely and make it more difficult to work outside the home and take part in community life.

Problems with seeing



After the age of 40, changes inside your eyes can cause problems in seeing close objects clearly. Eyeglasses will help.

Watch out for signs of too much pressure from fluid in the eye (glaucoma). This can damage the inside of the eye and lead to blindness. *Acute* glaucoma starts suddenly, with severe headache or pain in the eye. The eye will also feel hard to the touch. *Chronic* glaucoma usually is not painful, but a person will begin to notice they cannot see as well and can only see straight ahead. If possible, get your eyes checked at a health center for these problems. For more information, see **Where There Is No Doctor** or another general medical book.

Problems with hearing

Many people over the age of 50 have hearing loss. A person who cannot hear well may be left out of conversations and social activities.

If you notice that you are losing your hearing here are some things you can do:



- Sit facing the person you are talking to.
- Ask family members and friends to speak slowly and clearly. But tell them not to shout. Shouting can make words even more difficult to understand.
- Turn off radios or televisions when participating in conversations.
- Ask a health worker if your hearing loss can be treated with medicines or surgery or by using a hearing aid.

ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

Older women may become anxious or depressed because their role in the family and community has changed, because they feel alone or worried about the future, or because they have painful health problems. For more information on anxiety and depression, see Chapter 27, "Mental Health."

MENTAL CONFUSION (DEMENTIA)

Some older people have difficulty remembering things and thinking clearly. If these problems become severe, it is called *dementia*.

Signs:

- difficulty remembering or concentrating, or getting lost in the middle of a conversation.
- repeating the same thing over and over. The person will not remember having said the same thing before.
- difficulty remembering how to do daily tasks, such as dressing or preparing food.
- behavior changes. The person may become irritable, angry, or afraid, or do sudden, unexpected things.

These signs are caused by changes in the brain. They usually develop over a long period of time. If the signs begin suddenly, there may be other causes, such as too much medicine in the body (toxicity), a serious infection, *malnutrition*, severe dehydration, a bladder or kidney infection, or depression. The confusion will often go away if these problems are treated.

Treatment:

There is no cure for dementia. Caring for someone with dementia can be very hard on family members. It helps to share the responsibility of caregiving. Get support from people outside the family when possible.

To help a person with dementia, try to:

- make their surroundings as safe as possible.
- keep daily routines regular.
- keep some familiar objects around the house.
- talk in a calm, slow voice. Give the person plenty of time to answer.
- set clear limits without a lot of choices. Ask questions that can be answered "yes" or "no."



mental health



Do not argue with someone who has dementia about things they forget.

Working for Change

In many places, family members traditionally live together and younger people care for the elders. But now, many people work away from their communities, often traveling far from their homes to earn money to support their families. Older people often have to care for themselves.

Older women are more likely than men to live alone. They usually live longer and often marry older men. In some places, women whose partners have died have lower status than married women. When an older woman lives in a community that does not value elders, she—as well as her family, or even her health worker—may feel that her health problems are not worthy of treatment. Services to treat her problems may not exist.

When older women are also very poor, the problems they face are much worse. They may not have the money to pay for health care and medicines, to buy healthy foods, or to pay for a safe place to live.



Income earning projects. Older people can improve their situation by finding ways to earn money to support themselves and each other by:

- raising animals, such as chickens, goats, or cows, and then selling the eggs, milk, cheese, or meat.
- making bread or other food to sell.
- making traditional crafts or sewing things to sell.

Six widows living in a small community in El Salvador decided they wanted to earn some money by raising chickens to sell for meat. None of them had ever raised chickens before, but they asked a group that supports cooperatives to help show them how.

After a local community association loaned them money, the group started to work. At night the women took turns sleeping in the chicken coop to keep animals and people from stealing the chickens. At dawn the women rose to kill and clean chickens. Every day the women walked for miles to other communities to sell the chickens, carrying them in baskets on their heads.

Men from their community—and even a specialist who worked with an agency—all told them their project would not be successful. But the women earned enough money to cover their costs, buy new chickens, and pay themselves each about \$45 a month. Although it was not much money, it was more than any of them had ever earned before. And they gained respect in their community because they had a successful business. As one of them said, “We never imagined that we could run our own business. Now look at us. We are the bosses!”

Community services. By working together, older people can encourage their communities to:

- create less costly housing for older women or form groups that live together to cut down on living expenses.
- include older people in nutrition programs.
- train health workers in the health needs of older women.

Older women can teach others. Older women are often the main keepers of traditional healing practices. To preserve these practices and remind others that older women have important skills, they can teach these practices to their children and grandchildren. They can also help health workers learn traditional healing practices, so that health workers can use the best methods of both traditional and modern medicine.



Changing government policies and laws. Many governments provide monthly income (pensions), housing, and health care to older people. If your government does not, or neglects women, work together with others to change these laws. This kind of change takes time. But even if you do not see the changes yourself, you will know you have worked toward a better life for your community.

► Older women have much wisdom and experience. Working together can make them very powerful.

Accepting death

Every culture has a system of beliefs about death and ideas about life after death. These ideas, beliefs, and traditions may comfort a person facing death. But people facing death also need support, kindness, and honesty from their loved ones.

You can help a dying person most by listening to their feelings and needs. If a person wants to die at home—surrounded by the people they love—rather than in a hospital, try to respect those wishes. If they want to talk about death, try to be honest. Anyone who is dying usually knows it, partly by how their body feels, and partly by how the people around them act. Let the person talk openly about any fears they have and about the joys and sorrows of their life. When death comes, it may be more easily accepted as the natural end of life.