

CHAPTER 13

Growing older with a disability



Growing older can be a time when you gain more respect in your family and community. However, it can also be a time when you become more vulnerable to poverty, mistreatment, and health problems. Whether or not you have a disability, you will experience many changes as you grow older.

As your body ages, you will probably have to change the way you do many things. Some activities will have to stop because you can no longer do them. You may develop health problems or disabilities you did not have when you were younger. Some women may start using a cane or wheelchair to get around because they do not walk as well any more. Some may start to need glasses or use a hearing aid.

Whether you were disabled as a child or became disabled later in life, this chapter has information on how some disabilities can develop or change and how you can care for your health as you age.

Health problems caused by aging

Women often do not think about themselves as growing older until their children are grown or until their bodies start to change. You may also notice that your body gets tired more often, that you are not as strong as you used to be, or that it is not as easy for you to move about.

The better you understand the changes that can happen as women grow older, the easier it will be for you to know if changes in your body are part of aging or are caused by your disability. For information on taking care of your body, see page 85. Here are problems women with some disabilities may have as they get older:

When I grew up I was always referred to as disabled. Now I'm just seen as an old woman with a stick.



Weaker or painful muscles and joints

If your disability means that part of your body does not work as well as another part, over time you have probably overused the part that works better to make up for the part that does not work as well. For example:

- if one of your legs is paralyzed, you probably use the 'good leg' more than someone who has use of both legs, and the joints may become weak from overuse.
- if you use a wheelchair or crutches for a long time, the joints in your hands, arms, and shoulders can become painful from overuse and start to wear out.
- if you are a very small woman (dwarf), you may find you start to get pains in your shoulders, knees, and hips from all the reaching and climbing you have done over the years.



If you are using a wheelchair or spending more time in bed, it is very important to move around and change positions as much as you can to prevent pressure sores (see page 116).

For women who use wheelchairs

Women who use wheelchairs usually get less exercise as they age. Ask other people to help you stand or use a standing frame so you can put weight on the bones in your legs. Also try to keep the bones in your arms strong by lifting things. For more exercise ideas, see pages 88 to 95.

Post-polio syndrome

If you had polio earlier in your life, you may start to have severe weakness, tiredness, pain, and trouble breathing many years after the polio virus has gone. This means you must be very careful when you exercise. Using your muscles too much may damage them and make your weakness worse. Instead, do gentle stretching and movement to help keep your body from getting stiff.

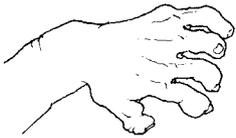
Walking and balance

If you use an artificial leg (prosthesis), you may need to get it adjusted because it may not fit as well any more, especially if you do not move about or exercise as much as you used to and your muscles get weaker and softer.

If you are used to walking with no aids, you may need to start using a cane, crutches, or a wheelchair. Many women wait a long time before deciding to use aids that will help them. But starting to use a stick or wheelchair early can protect you from falls and injuries, and help you move about more easily. The better you can get around, the more you can take part in the life of your community.

Arthritis

Arthritis is a painful swelling and stiffness of the joints. It affects many people and can make many daily tasks painful or more difficult. If the arthritis is in the hands, it can cause special problems for people with some disabilities. For example:



deformity of the hand from leprosy and arthritis

- If you are blind and use your hands to 'see' or to read things by touch, you may not be able to do this as well.
- If you are deaf, you may not be able to use sign language as well.
- If you use a catheter to pass urine, or a bowel program to pass stool, it may be more difficult for you to do this by yourself.
- If you have leprosy (Hansen's disease) and your hands are already affected, arthritis will make using your hands even more difficult.



Skin problems

Your skin will become thinner as you get older, and you may find that you bruise more easily. This happens to most women.

- If you sit or lie down for most of the day, thinner skin means you can get pressure sores more easily (see page 114).
- If you use artificial legs or arms, check your skin more often where it touches the prosthetic to make sure it does not become red and irritated.
- If you have leprosy (Hansen's disease), check your skin every day. Thinner skin will make it easier for you to get sores and infections.
- If you have a spinal cord injury or a paralysis and have no feeling in your skin, ask someone to check your skin every day to prevent pressure sores, especially in areas you cannot see, such as your back (see page 117).

Eyesight and hearing

Many older people cannot see as well as when they were young. If you are deaf, it will be difficult for you to understand if someone is speaking to you in sign language or if you are used to lip-reading.

If you have leprosy, aging may cause an inflammation in your eyes that can cause blindness if it is not treated.

If you are blind and also start to lose your hearing, communicating and moving around safely will be more difficult.

Ask your family to make changes that will help you see, hear and move around more easily. For example, if you do not see as well, try to make the house lighter inside by painting the walls white, or getting a brighter light bulb. Mark steps and doorways with different colors so you can see them better and not trip or bump into them.

If your hearing gets worse, ask people to sit facing you when talking and to speak clearly but not shout. Turn off radios or televisions when speaking so you can hear better.



Weak bones (osteoporosis)

After your monthly bleeding stops, your body starts to make less of the hormone estrogen (see page 72) and your bones may become weaker. Weak bones break more easily and heal slowly. If your balance is affected by aging, or if you have epilepsy seizures or cerebral palsy you have a greater risk of falling and breaking weakened bones. You can prevent weak bones by:

- eating foods rich in calcium (see page 86), with foods that have vitamin C, such as fruits and yellow-colored vegetables.
- doing regular exercise that puts weight on your bones (see pages 88 to 90).



Mental confusion

Some older people have difficulty remembering things or have difficulty concentrating. For most people, this is not a serious problem. But some people develop more serious problems with memory or thinking (Alzheimer's disease, dementia, senility) and eventually become so confused they no longer recognize friends and family members. They can become very frightened and confused by everyday things they used to know well.

An older person with Down syndrome may become confused more easily and may start to have epileptic seizures.

Find new ways to do things

The changes that come with growing older may mean you will need to find new ways to do things and to get other people to help you. And you may need to use more aids, like a hearing aid, a walking stick, or a wheelchair. As you feel your body begin to change, start now to find the best way to do things. Knowing what to expect can help you take better care of your body and continue to remain as healthy as possible as you grow older.

Seek assistance

If you find it is getting harder to do certain things, such as eating, bathing, dressing, or getting up from lying down, show or explain to friends, family members, caregivers, and to others you trust how they can help you. You might also arrange to have a relative or friend come to live with you. For her assistance, the person will get a place to live.

If you find you are forgetting things, it may help to make a list of the things you want to do each day, and cross them off when they are done. Or each day talk with your family members about things you want to do that day so they can remind you of them.



Depression

(extreme sadness or feeling nothing at all)

Some people start to feel unhappy and depressed as they grow older. This is often because of loneliness, changes in health, or not being able to do as much as they used to. Some women with disabilities who suffer from low self-esteem may feel even more lonely and depressed as they grow older.

Some of the signs of depression are:

- feeling sad most of the time
- difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much
- difficulty thinking clearly
- loss of interest in pleasurable activities, eating, or sex
- physical problems, such as headaches or intestinal problems, that are not caused by illness
- slow speech and movement
- lack of energy for daily activities
- thinking about death or suicide



What to do to help prevent depression

Try to stay as active as possible, to exercise, and to eat well. Above all, try not to be alone too much. Help take care of younger children in your community. Meet with other older women with disabilities to talk and to pass time together. If you are often feeling sad or are unable to sleep, talk to someone in your family you trust or with a health worker. For more information about mental health, see Chapter 3.

When monthly bleeding stops (menopause)

Usually monthly bleeding stops gradually over 1 or 2 years, most often between 45 and 55 years old. This happens because your ovaries stop making eggs, and your body makes less of the hormones estrogen and progesterone. Women with Down syndrome often stop their monthly bleeding earlier than other women.

Signs

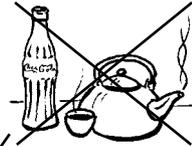
- Your monthly bleeding changes and you may bleed more often for a while. Or you may stop bleeding for a few months and then bleed again.
- At times you may suddenly feel very hot or sweaty ('hot flashes').
- Your vagina may become less wet and smaller.
- Your feelings change easily.

These signs will start to go away as your body gets used to less estrogen.

If you have discomfort during the end of monthly bleeding (menopause)

If you are feeling uncomfortable, try the following:

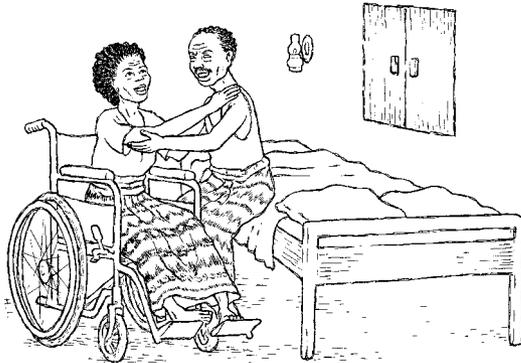
- Dress in clothes that are loose, comfortable, and made of cotton. If possible wear clothes you can take off easily when you begin to sweat.
- Avoid hot or spicy foods or drinks. They can cause hot flashes.
- Get regular exercise.
- Do not drink much coffee, tea, or soft drinks (pop, soda, cola). They contain caffeine, which can make you feel nervous and prevent you from sleeping.
- If you drink alcohol, drink only small amounts. Alcohol can increase bleeding and hot flashes.
- Stop smoking, sniffing, or chewing tobacco. It can cause unusual bleeding and make problems with weak bones much worse.
- Explain to your family that your feelings may change easily. It may also help to discuss how you feel with other women who are also going through menopause.
- Ask about the use of traditional remedies in your community. Often women who have already been through menopause will know ways to help you feel better.



In the past, doctors recommended that women take medicines called hormone replacement therapy (HRT) to help manage changes and discomfort during menopause. Unfortunately, HRT has been shown to increase women's risk of breast cancer, heart disease, blood clots, and stroke. It is better to avoid using these medicines.

Sexual relations after the end of monthly bleeding

For some women, menopause means freedom from the sexual demands of a relationship. Other women become more interested in sex, perhaps because they no longer fear an unwanted pregnancy. All women, though, continue to need love and affection.



There is no reason you cannot enjoy sex for as long as you live.

As you grow older, some of the changes in your body may affect your sexual relations. You may take longer to become excited during sex (this also happens to men). And because your body no longer makes as much of the hormone estrogen, your vagina may be more dry. This can make sex with a man uncomfortable, or more easily lead to infections of the vagina or the urine system.

Also, the skin inside your vagina will also get thinner, so make sure to take more time before having sex so your vagina can make its own natural wetness. You can also use spit (saliva), vegetable oils (corn oil, olive oil), or water-based lubricants.

If you are having sex with a man and it is difficult for him to get his penis hard (erection), try to learn what he likes. Touching him may help make him excited.

IMPORTANT

- Do not use oils for lubrication if you are using condoms. Oil will weaken the condom and it may break.
- Do not use petroleum jelly (*Vaseline*) or oils that contain perfumes to increase wetness in the vagina. These can cause irritation.
- Do not use anything in your vagina to make it dry. This can also cause irritation in the vagina, which can make it easier to get HIV or other infections (see page 169).
- To prevent urine problems, pass urine before having sexual intercourse and as soon as possible afterward. This will help flush germs out of the urethra that may otherwise get into the bladder and cause an infection.

Protect yourself against pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs)

You can still become pregnant until your monthly bleeding has stopped for one full year. To prevent unwanted pregnancy, you should continue to use a family planning method until you have no monthly bleeding for one whole year (12 months) (see page 188).

If you are using a hormonal method of family planning (the pill, injections, or implants), stop using it around the age of 50. Use another method of family planning without hormones until 12 months have passed since your last monthly bleeding.

Unless you are certain neither you nor your partner has an STI, including HIV/AIDS, be sure to use a condom each time you have sex with a man—even if you can no longer become pregnant.

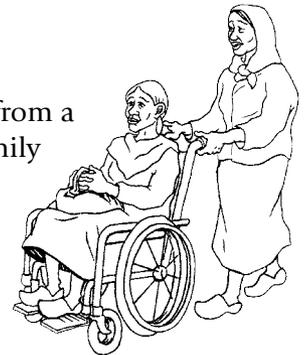


Live an active life

Try to live your life as actively as you can. With assistance, either from a person or with an aid, you can take a more active part in your family and community and do more things you enjoy. Move around the community and keep yourself mentally and physically active.

You can help to keep your mind active by reading or by playing games with other people. Card games, games with stones (Mancala), games with words (Scrabble), chess, or other games popular in your community give you an opportunity to enjoy yourself and to talk and be with other people. Help young people learn to read, understand the history of their community, or with their school work.

You have a lifetime of wisdom and experience. Working together with families, caregivers, and other elders in the community, older women with disabilities can be very powerful.



Time to learn new things

Imelda from the Pallisa district in Uganda is 67 years old. Recently she joined a universal primary education program and went back to school. Now she can write and speak English. The students at school like her and call her Grandmum.



Working for change

Even though your disability may get worse as you grow older, find activities you can do to continue to be an active participant in your community. With your wealth of experience, you can do many things to improve conditions for women with disabilities.

What older disabled women can do

- Many governments provide monthly income (pensions), housing, and health care for older persons with disabilities. If our government does not, we can work with other women with disabilities, and with our mothers, sisters, daughters, and neighbors to change these laws. This kind of change takes time.



By working together we can meet with leaders in our community to request services for older disabled women, such as less costly housing.

- We can form groups of disabled women who live together to lower living expenses and to help each other. A blind woman, for instance, can be the ears for a deaf woman, and a deaf woman the eyes for a blind woman.

We can talk with health workers about the health needs of older women with disabilities, and about how to make health centers accessible.



- We have rich life experiences, and we can share this information with young disabled women and girls. We can probably help them with problems they are having because we had the same problems when we were younger.

