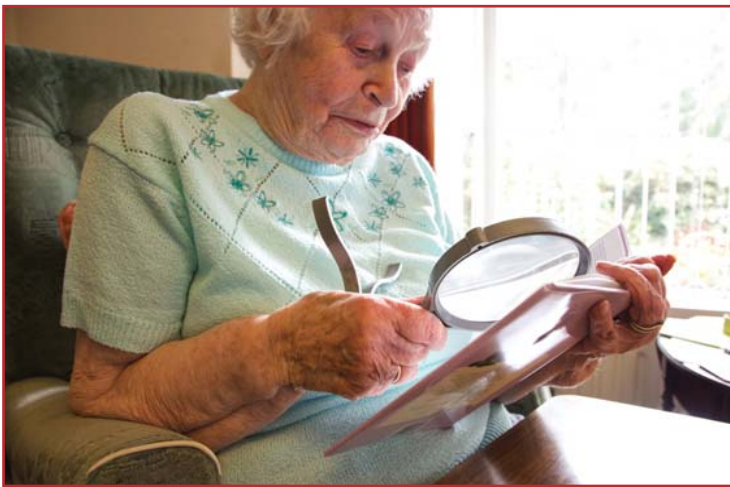




Supporting Loved Ones Who Have Sensory Loss



How do changes in the way we see, hear, smell, taste and touch affect our lives as we grow older?

This year, a group of experts from the University of Chicago conducted research that was the first to use validated tests for measuring age-related decline in all five senses. The study, published in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, examined 3,000 people between the ages of 57 and 85, and found that 94 percent of these older adults had some loss of at least one of the five senses. Of these, 22 percent had a “substantial loss in two or more senses.”

Which sensory loss would you guess is most common? Taste, say the researchers. 74 percent of the study participants had a decreased ability to taste. Loss of taste results from various health disorders, medications, or a common age-related decrease in the number of taste buds on our tongue. Loss of taste makes it more difficult for seniors to eat a nutritious diet.

Almost 70 percent of people in the study had a “fair” or “poor” sense of touch. Reduced sense of touch results from various conditions that cause decreased blood flow to the nerve endings, making it more difficult to detect temperature, pressure and texture. This raises the risk of falling, burns and other injuries.

22 percent of study participants had a decreased sense of smell. Loss of smell can be caused by infection or changes in the brain; most often, it’s due to an age-related decrease in the odor-detecting nerves in our nose. Diminished smell also decreases the appetite, and makes it harder to detect hazards, such as a gas leak or spoiled food.

20 percent of the older adults had only “fair” or “poor” vision, even while wearing glasses or contact lenses. Many conditions can impair our eyesight as we grow older. The most common are age-related macular degeneration, cataracts, glaucoma and diabetic retinopathy. Vision loss can drastically reduce independence for seniors, so it’s very important to be under the care of an ophthalmologist.

The tests showed that 18 percent of the participants had “fair” or “poor” hearing, even with hearing aids. As we grow older, changes in the structure of the ear make it harder to hear and to tell sounds apart. Tinnitus (ringing in the ear) and inner-ear-related balance problems are also common. Hearing loss can lead to isolation and cognitive decline, and seniors should take advantage of modern technologies that can improve hearing or compensate for its loss.

The researchers also pointed out that a decrease in

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more than one sense can greatly multiply the impact. Said the study author, professor Jayant Pinto, “We know that sensory impairment is common and is often a harbinger of serious health problems, such as cognitive decline or falls, as well as more subtle ones like burns, caused by loss of touch sensitivity, food poisoning that goes undetected because of loss of smell and taste, and smoke inhalation, from loss of smell.” The team also reported, “Losing more than one sense might explain why older adults report having a poorer quality of life and face challenges in interacting with other people and the world around them.”

If senior loved ones have sensory loss, what can you do to support their well-being?

First, learn all you can about your loved one’s particular sensory challenges. Understanding what your loved one is coping with improves communication and helps you help them. Read background information. Ask the doctor to explain your loved one’s particular situation (if it’s OK with your loved one). Watch videos that demonstrate the effects of vision or hearing loss, and check out empathy-building presentations using equipment that simulates the challenges of performing everyday tasks with diminished senses.

Second, be sure your loved one is under the care of the right specialists. Some sensory loss actually can be slowed or reversed.

For example, a person’s hearing loss might be due to wax in the ear; decreased taste and smell could be caused by chronic respiratory infection. And a Harvard economist reports that cataract surgery is responsible for a dramatic reduction in the overall rate of disability in older Americans — comparable to improved cardiac care! Rehabilitation specialists provide technologies that can compensate for sensory loss, such as eyeglasses, magnifiers and screen readers for people with vision loss, and hearing aids and other technologies for people who are hard of hearing. Nutritionists can create



an eating plan to compensate for changes in taste and smell. Overall health care is important, as well — for example, to help manage diabetes, a common cause of impairment to vision and touch.

Third, take steps to keep your loved one safe. Driving is a big issue when a loved one has sensory impairment; it can be a difficult conversation, but this might be the time to look into alternative transportation. For seniors with vision loss, it’s so important to remove fall hazards in the home and improve lighting (talk to a specialist about the right kind of lighting — more isn’t necessarily better). Smoke and gas alarms make the home safer for seniors with a diminished sense of smell. Alarms that use flashing lights or vibrations instead of noise alert people with hearing loss to fire or other emergencies.

Fourth, learn how to better interact with your loved one in this “new normal.” You can vastly improve your loved one’s ability to hear and understand you by speaking clearly. If your loved one is visually impaired, you’ll want to let them take the lead in how much help you offer and how best to communicate. (Here are tips from the American Foundation for the Blind.)

Fifth, help your loved one remain active and socially engaged. As sensory loss progresses, it’s all too easy for seniors to withdraw from life. You can help! Arrange for transportation if your loved one can no longer drive. Learn about venues that are equipped with hearing loops and other supportive technologies for people with hearing loss. Encourage your loved one to attend an adaptive exercise class and a support group for people with similar challenges.

A holiday resolution

This year at family gatherings, make it a high priority to keep these loved ones feeling included. How can you do that? To start with, you can serve as an educator. Studies show that the main reason people avoid interacting with people who have vision or hearing impairment isn’t bigotry; instead, it’s because they are uncomfortable and unsure about what to do. Share what you’ve learned, and encourage your loved one to be open about things that are helpful.

See more information online at <http://rphmessenger.com>.

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Did You Get Your Flu Shot Yet?



Each year, the National Council on Aging (NCOA) offers some great resources to promote flu vaccination in older adults. For the third year, they've teamed up with award-winning actress Judith Light to raise awareness that getting an influenza ("flu") vaccination is one of the things you can do to help maintain your health. The 2016 Flu + You campaign is a collaboration between NCOA and Sanofi Pasteur to educate older adults and their loved ones about the seriousness of the flu, the importance of getting an annual flu vaccination, and flu vaccine options.

Light, starring in a new Off-Broadway show this fall and the upcoming third season of Amazon's *Transparent*, is encouraging people 65 years of age and older, like her, to help protect themselves by committing to an annual flu vaccination and encouraging loved ones to do the same.

The flu is a contagious respiratory illness that can be severe and life-threatening, especially for older adults. As people age, the immune system weakens, which can put older adults at risk for flu-related complications. In fact, people 65 years of age and older were impacted by an estimated 8.3 million illnesses, 4.7 million medical visits, and 758,000 flu hospitalizations during the 2014 – 2015 flu season.

"Annual flu vaccination is one of the things you can do to help maintain your health; the flu can be life-threatening and severe, and we should all take steps to help protect ourselves each year," said Light. "If you are an adult 65 years of age and older, speak to your health care provider about your flu vaccine options, as there is a higher-dose vaccine developed specifically for our age group."

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), an annual vaccination is the single best way to help prevent the flu and is

recommended for everyone six months of age and older, with rare exceptions. The higher-dose flu vaccine was developed specifically to address the age-related weakening of the immune system, and adults 65 and older are urged to talk to their health care provider about their options.

"Based on CDC statistics, vaccination helped prevent an estimated 638,000 illnesses and 357,000 medical visits associated with influenza in adults 65 years of age and older during the 2014 – 2015 flu season," said Kathleen Cameron, MPH, Senior Director, National Council on Aging. "We want this number to continue growing. That's why we're excited to be collaborating again with Judith Light to raise awareness about the importance of annual flu vaccination."

NCOA invites individuals to visit the Flu + You website (www.ncoa.org/Flu) to find educational materials about the flu to be viewed, shared, downloaded, and printed.

NCOA (www.ncoa.org) is a respected national leader and trusted partner to help people aged 60+ meet the challenges of aging. Its vision is a just and caring society in which each of us, as we age, lives with dignity, purpose, and security. And its goal is to improve the health and economic security of 10 million older adults by 2020.

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Aging & Caregiving in the News

Information, updates and interesting tidbits from across the country and around the world.

In this issue:

- Are seniors really grouchier?

Online:

- When buttons and zippers affect quality of life.
- A hidden hazard of pill organizers.

Are Seniors Really Grouchier?

“You kids get off my lawn!” has become a shorthand phrase reflecting the belief that older adults are crabby and bitter. But are seniors really unhappier than younger folks? Recent research from the University of California San Diego School of Medicine suggest that this belief is just a stereotype. According to Dr. Dilip Jeste, professor of neurosciences and psychiatry, although we obviously experience a decline in physical health as we grow older, our mental

health may on average be much better than it was during our 20s and 30s. Jeste’s study found that older adults had “higher satisfaction with life,

and low levels of perceived stress, anxiety and depression.” What’s behind this sunnier attitude? Jeste notes that through the years, we hone our coping skills for dealing with stressful events. We learn, he says, “not to sweat the little things” — and things that once seemed like big things now seem less significant. Seniors also are “more skilled at emotional regulation and complex social decision-making” — in short, those qualities commonly thought of as wisdom.

Source: Real Properties in association with IlluminAge Communication Partners; copyright 2016 IlluminAge.

