Your guide to healthy living
A holistic approach to a healthy mind and body
The four national Age Concerns in the UK have joined together with Help the Aged to form new national charities dedicated to improving the lives of older people.

This guide is not a comprehensive statement of the law in this subject and Age Concern and Help the Aged cannot give individual legal or financial advice. The information in this guide is relevant in England and Wales. Different arrangements apply in Northern Ireland and Scotland. Some rules may have changed since the publication of this guide. If you have any queries which this guide does not answer, seek further advice from one of the organisations suggested.

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Introduction

It is never too late to think about adopting a healthier lifestyle. This may mean changes to your diet, being more active or modifying your drinking and smoking. Small changes can make a big difference to your health – making you feel better, giving you more energy, helping you to sleep more soundly.

People who are the least active stand to gain most by becoming a little more active, more often. Activities that provide an opportunity to meet people socially or play a more active role in your local community can also help to give you a sense of achievement and purpose.

It is important not to forget those parts of your body that are crucial to keeping active – your feet, eyes and ears.

This guide highlights changes you might like to consider and the benefits of doing so. Making changes is not easy but improvements in your health and well-being should be well worth the effort.

Throughout this guide you will find suggestions for organisations that can give further information and advice about your options. Their contact details can be found in the ‘Useful organisations’ section.

► pages 16–19 Contact details for local organisations can usually be found in your local phone book. If you have difficulty finding them, your local Age Concern should be able to help. ►page 16

The information given in this guide is applicable in England and Wales. Different arrangements apply in Northern Ireland and Scotland. Readers in those countries are advised to contact their national Age Concern organisations for further information. ►page 16
Staying active

Keeping active helps us to feel more energetic. Specific benefits include helping to:

- manage high blood pressure and angina
- keep weight under control
- maintain regular bowel movements
- stimulate a poor appetite
- strengthen muscles and bones
- alleviate discomfort if you have arthritis or Parkinson’s.

Regular exercise increases production of brain chemicals that lift your mood and make you feel happy so it can also be a good way to deal with stress and anxiety.

Developing and maintaining stamina, strength, flexibility and balance are particularly important as you get older:

- stamina helps you walk any distance, swim, mow the lawn
- strength helps you climb stairs, carry shopping, rise from a chair, open a container
- flexibility helps you bend down, get in and out of a car, wash your hair, remove a sweater
- balance helps you walk and climb steps confidently, stand from a sitting position, respond quickly if you trip.

Any amount of extra activity makes a difference. Aim to build up to around 30 minutes of moderate activity on five or more days a week. It does not have to be in one go – two sessions of 15 minutes or three sessions of 10 minutes are just as good. Moderate activity will leave you feeling warm and a little breathless.
Different activities bring different benefits, so try to vary your activities. The value of some typical activities and exercise classes are outlined below.

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You do not have to be moving around to benefit. There are exercises you can do while sitting or holding on to the back of a chair or in the swimming pool.

Special exercise programmes can help people with arthritis, osteoporosis and Parkinson’s.

Decide what you would like to try and find out more. Your local Age Concern may organise a range of activities and will know what else is available. Try your library or leisure centre too. Volunteer driver or community transport schemes may be able to help if you need transport. Contact your GP, practice nurse or support group if you have a medical condition. They can suggest suitable activities and may know of special exercises or classes.
Healthy eating

No food contains all you need to stay healthy, so the golden rule is eat a variety of foods each day. Eating healthily does not mean cutting out foods you enjoy but you might do well to eat some foods less often and/or in smaller portions.

Eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables each day

Research suggests people who eat plenty of fruit and vegetables are less likely to develop heart disease, certain cancers and eye diseases. To help you reach the target of five, think of all the fresh, frozen, canned or dried fruit and vegetables you like and can afford. Choose five different coloured ones to have with or between meals.

Eat fish at least twice a week

You should aim to have one portion of white fish such as haddock and another of oily fish such as salmon, mackerel or sardines. Oily fish are rich in vitamin D and a type of fat shown to reduce the risk of a heart attack. Grill, poach or bake fish rather than fry it.

I hardly ever ate fruit. When I felt hungry between meals I’d have a biscuit or some chocolate. Since I started trying to eat my five portions of fruit and veg a day, I have a banana most days and really enjoy those ready-to-eat apricots with my breakfast cereal. I’ve lost a few pounds too and feel much better.
Eat fewer salty foods
Salt is essential for health but eating too much increases your risk of high blood pressure and strokes. Check the labels on foods such as: processed meats, savoury snacks, biscuits, cheese, bacon, some soups and ready meals – 75% of the salt we eat is in food when we buy it. Even if you are fond of salt think before you sprinkle it on your meal.

Drink plenty of fluid, around 6–8 cups each day
This does not have to be water. Tea, coffee, fruit juice or squash will do. It is particularly important to drink plenty in hot weather.

Do I need bran to prevent constipation?
Bran should only be used as a last resort. Consider first whether you have enough wholegrain cereals and fruit in your diet? Are you drinking enough? Physical activity helps keep bowels moving so could you be more active?

Do I need vitamin supplements?
You should get all the vitamins you need by eating a healthy diet. But you may need extra vitamin D if you are rarely out in the sun or cover your skin for cultural reasons as vitamin D comes mainly from the action of sunshine on your skin rather than from food.

Ask at your GP practice if you would like more information about healthy eating or go to one of the organisations or websites listed in the ‘Useful organisations’ section.  ▶ pages 16–19
Sensible drinking

Most adults enjoy a drink. A celebratory drink is a traditional way to mark a family occasion or milestone in our lives.

However, it is not advisable to use alcohol to lift your mood – in the long term it only increases feelings of depression. If you find yourself regularly having a drink to help you cope, speak to your GP.

Alcohol in moderation is associated with a lower risk of heart disease in men and women. However, similar benefits come from adopting other lifestyle changes mentioned in this guide so there is not an amount of alcohol you should aim to consume.

Government guidance is to drink in moderation, which is defined as:

- not more than 3–4 units in 24 hours if you are a man
- not more than 2–3 units in 24 hours if you are a woman.

Both a pint of beer (4% alcohol) and a (175ml) standard glass of wine (13% alcohol) have 2.3 units.

Remember, you should avoid alcohol when taking certain medicines. So always read leaflets that come with prescription medicines, over-the-counter medicines or herbal medicines. If in doubt ask your pharmacist.

If you are worried about your own or another person’s drinking, speak to your GP or practice nurse, or contact one of the organisations listed in the ‘Useful organisations’ section. ► pages 16–19
Smoking

Most people know how unhealthy smoking is but because they enjoy it, find it difficult to give up.

The encouraging news is that older smokers who decide to give up have been shown to be more successful at staying away from smoking than younger people.

Even after many years of smoking, older people can expect the following benefits if they give up:

- able to breathe easier
- generally feel better
- existing heart and lung problems less likely to become serious
- less likely to have a stroke, heart or lung problems
- recover more quickly after an operation
- more likely to live longer.

The first step is to convince yourself that you would like to be a non-smoker by identifying why being a non-smoker would be right for you. Your GP practice can give you support on a one-to-one or group basis. Nicotine replacement therapy may be available on prescription. Contact your GP practice for details or call the NHS smoking helpline. ►page 18
Healthy bones

Bone health is largely influenced by our genes but throughout life is affected by lifestyle too. Bones benefit from regular activity, a healthy diet with plenty of calcium-rich foods such as reduced-fat dairy products, not smoking and only drinking in moderation.

Osteoporosis is a condition affecting men and women that arises because bones become porous and less strong as a natural part of ageing. It commonly affects bones in the spine, wrist and hip, and can lead to a broken bone following a fall or chronic pain if bones in the spine collapse.

You are more at risk of osteoporosis if you:

● are female and had an early menopause or hysterectomy
● have a female relative who broke a hip, particularly after only a minor fall
● have taken corticosteroid medication for a long time
● are underweight or have suffered from an eating disorder
● have been a smoker or drink heavily
● have a condition such as Crohn’s or coeliac disease
● have a medical condition that means you are immobile for a long time.

Speak to your GP if you think you might be at risk or contact the National Osteoporosis Society for more information. ► page 18
Foot care

It is not until you have a problem with your feet that you appreciate how vital they are to your well-being and ability to get out and about.

Basic daily foot care should include:

- washing in warm soapy water (but do not soak your feet too long – it destroys their natural oils causing dry skin)
- drying carefully, particularly between the toes
- applying moisturiser but not between the toes
- lightly applying foot powder.

What you put on your feet is important too. Wear clean socks each day. Do not wear the same shoes every day and always choose ones that support your feet but are not too tight. Wearing natural materials such as leather, wool and cotton will allow your feet to breathe.

It is important to get to know your feet. Contact your GP if they become painful, feel noticeably hot or cold or there is a change in their colour. If you have corns, bunions, an ingrowing toenail or other common foot problems report these to your practice nurse too.

Cutting toenails regularly and straight across prevents ingrowing toenails. If your sight is not good or bending down is difficult, this can be a problem, particularly as simple nail cutting is rarely an NHS service.

Report any foot problems to your GP. Contact your local Age Concern if you need help with nail cutting. They may offer a service themselves or know where help is available. ➤ page 16
Do the following to keep your eyes healthy.

- Have your eyes checked every 12 months if you are aged 70 or over, every two years if under 70. Checks allow changes in vision to be corrected. They can also pick up problems such as cataracts, glaucoma and age-related macular degeneration (AMD) early on, which may prevent further sight loss.

- Protect your eyes from the sun, particularly if you are near water or snow – they can be damaged by UV rays. Always wear sunglasses on a sunny day.

- Stop smoking – smoking has been linked to development of AMD and cataracts.

- Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables – they contain vitamins A, C and E that are thought to protect against AMD.

Even with the right glasses you may still find it hard to see things clearly. Day-to-day tasks can be made easier by good lighting and using low-vision aids or other equipment. Your local social services department may be able to help with equipment and/or other services.

Have regular eye checks. Contact the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) or Macular Disease Society for more information about eye health and the services they offer partially sighted and blind people. ▶ page 18
Hearing

Hearing loss is common in older people. You may need the TV louder or find you cannot always tune into conversations, particularly in a crowd. It may be accompanied by tinnitus: often described as a ringing sound in the ear or head. This can be worrying but there are many ways to manage it.

See your GP who will check your ears and may refer you for a hearing test. If you need a hearing aid, it is free on the NHS. Contact RNID for more information.

I feel so much happier and more confident since I got my NHS hearing aid. Before I had it I had almost become a hermit. I didn’t want to go out as I knew I wouldn’t know what was going on. I’m back at the Women’s Institute now and have joined a local walking group.

Sight and hearing difficulties

You may have difficulties to varying degrees with both sight and hearing but there is much that can be done to help you enjoy a better quality of life.

Whether you have a sight or hearing difficulty or both, contact social services and explain how your day-to-day life is affected. They may have a specialist team who could help. Contact Sense, a support group dedicated to helping individuals with sight and hearing difficulties, and their families.
After Ron’s wife died he found it hard to take an interest in anything on his own…

- When my wife, Joan, was alive we used to play bowls every week. But since she died last year I haven’t wanted to go. They kept asking me but it just wouldn’t be the same. In fact I don’t seem to have the same interest in many things we used to do together – the garden, car boot sales.

- When I went for my blood pressure check, I was chatting with the practice nurse and telling her how I was feeling. We talked about Joan. She said I wasn’t unusual to find it difficult to go back to places and activities Joan and I had always gone to together. My blood pressure was still OK but I’d put a bit of weight on since last time. She suggested I was missing the exercise and perhaps the company too, so why not try something different?

- I’d been a good swimmer in my time and there was a poster in the surgery about the over-50s swimming club. I rang John, the organiser, and it was the best thing I could have done. They’re a really nice group, my swimming has improved, I have more energy and life seems better every day.
Depression

Depression can affect people of all ages. Warning signs that could indicate you are depressed include:

- loss of self confidence and feeling down
- feeling anxious all the time
- difficulty getting to sleep or waking earlier than usual
- not being able to enjoy the things you usually enjoy
- avoiding people, even those you are close to
- being unable to concentrate
- physical aches and pains, sometimes with the fear you are seriously ill.

If you have felt some of these symptoms on most days for more than two weeks, you should seek help.

There are many different ways to treat depression and it can be overcome. As mentioned on pages 4–5, some people find that exercise has helped.

It is important to speak to your GP and explain your symptoms. Your GP may suggest counselling or a self-help group rather than medication. There can be a great relief in speaking with others who understand.

Social contact

Meeting friends and enjoying hobbies and other activities makes life fulfilling and helps us to feel good about ourselves and life in general. If you find you are not able to do the things you used to, you may be wondering how to develop new interests.

Contact your local Age Concern for details of local activities and groups. ► page 16
Useful organisations

Age Concern
For more information and details for your local Age Concern in England, please call the Age Concern Information Line on 0800 00 99 66 (free call) or visit www.ageconcern.org.uk

In Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales, contact:

Age Concern Northern Ireland
Tel: 028 9032 5055
Website: www.ageconcernni.org

Scottish Helpline for Older People (Age Concern Scotland)
Tel: 0845 125 9732
Websites:
www.olderpeoplescotland.org.uk
www.ageconcernscotland.org.uk

Age Concern Cymru
Tel: 029 2043 1555
Website: www.accymru.org.uk

Help the Aged
Help the Aged produces a range of free advice leaflets and information sheets for older people. These are available from the Information Resources Team or can be downloaded from the website.
Tel: 020 7278 1114
Website: www.hta.org.uk

Alcohol Concern
National organisation offering information and support about alcohol abuse and local services.
Drinkline: 0800 917 8282 (free call)
Website: www.alcoholconcern.org.uk
Arthritis Care
National organisation offering information and support for people with arthritis.
Tel: 0808 800 4050 (free call)
Website: www.arthritiscare.org.uk

British Heart Foundation
National organisation offering information and support for individuals with heart disease, including advice on how to get more active.
Heart helpline: 0300 330 3311
Website: www.bhf.org.uk/30aday

Depression Alliance
A national organisation providing information and a network of 60 local support groups for people affected by depression.
Information pack request line: 0845 123 23 20
Website: www.depressionalliance.org

Food Standards Agency
Independent government department concerned with the safety of food and providing impartial advice on healthy eating. Call 0845 606 0667 to request a copy of *The Good Life* – the Food Standards Agency’s healthy eating leaflet for the over 50s.
General enquiries: 020 7276 8829
Websites:
www.eatwell.gov.uk
www.salt.gov.uk
www.5aday.nhs.uk
Macular Disease Society
National organisation dedicated to helping people with age-related macular degeneration.
Tel: 0845 241 2041
Website: www.maculardisease.org

National Osteoporosis Society
National organisation offering information and support on prevention and treatment of osteoporosis.
Helpline: 0845 450 0230
Website: www.nos.org.uk

NHS smoking helpline
For information on stopping smoking and details of support.
Helpline: 0800 022 4332 (free call)
Textphone: 0845 169 0171
Website: http://smokefree.nhs.uk

Parkinson’s Disease Society
National organisation offering information and support to people with Parkinson’s disease and their families.
Helpline: 0808 800 0303 (free call)
Website: www.parkinsons.org.uk

Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)
National organisation offering information and support for blindness and visual impairment.
Helpline: 0303 123 9999
Website: www.rnib.org.uk
Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID)
National charity offering information and support for deaf and hard-of-hearing people.
19–23 Featherstone Street
London EC1Y 8SL
Information line: 0808 808 0123 (free call)
Information line textphone: 0808 808 9000 (free call)
Tinnitus helpline: 0808 808 6666 (free call)
Tinnitus helpline textphone: 0808 808 0007 (free call)
Text message: 07800 000360
Website: www.rnid.org.uk

Sense
National organisation offering information and support to those with dual sensory impairment (deafblindness).
101 Pentonville Road
London N1 9LG
Tel: 0845 127 0060
Text message: 0845 127 0062
Website: www.sense.org.uk

please support us
Age Concern is the largest provider of services to older people in the UK after the NHS. We make a difference to the lives of thousands of older people through local resources such as our befriending schemes, day centres and lunch clubs and through our national freephone helpline – the Age Concern Information Line.

If you would like to support our work by making a donation please call Supporter Services on 020 8765 7527 (Monday to Friday 9.15am–5pm) or visit www.ageconcern.org.uk
Thank you.
What should I do now?

If you would like more information on the issues covered in this guide, to order other guides or obtain this guide in a more accessible format, please call the Age Concern Information Line on 0800 00 99 66 (free call) or visit www.ageconcern.org.uk/information

The following Age Concern information guides may also be useful:

- Going into hospital
- What to expect as you get older
- Your health services.

Age Concern publishes a range of books on issues relevant to older people. Browse our online bookshop at www.ageconcern.org.uk/bookshop

Contact details for your local Age Concern may be in the box below. If not, call the Age Concern Information Line on 0800 00 99 66 (free call).

Age Concern is a federation of registered charities. Age Concern England (charity number 261794) has merged with Help the Aged (charity number 272786) to form Age UK, a charitable company limited by guarantee and registered in England: registered office address 207–221 Pentonville Road, London, N1 9UZ, company number 6825798, registered charity number 1128267. Age Concern and Help the Aged are brands of Age UK. The three national Age Concerns in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales have also merged with Help the Aged in these nations to form three registered charities: Age Scotland, Age NI, Age Cymru.