Healthy living
Maintaining a healthy body and mind
Age UK is the new force combining Age Concern and Help the Aged. With almost 120 years of combined history to draw on, we are bringing together our talents, services and solutions to do more to enrich the lives of people in later life.

The Age UK family includes Age Cymru, Age NI and Age Scotland.

This information guide has been prepared by Age UK and contains general advice only, which we hope will be useful. Nothing in this guide should be construed as specific advice and it should not be relied on as a basis for any decision or action and is in no way intended as a substitute for professional medical advice specific to any individual case. Age UK does not accept any liability from its use. We aim to ensure that this information is as up to date and accurate as possible, but please be warned that certain areas are subject to change from time to time. Please note that the inclusion of named agencies, companies, products, services or publications in this information guide does not constitute a recommendation or endorsement by Age UK. Please seek medical advice for guidance regarding appropriate exercise levels and precautions. It is particularly important to seek such advice if you suffer from an ongoing medical condition that may be affected by exercise. Always start any exercise programme slowly, never force or strain. If you feel any soreness, strain, discomfort, distress or other symptoms, stop the exercise and seek medical advice immediately.

Every effort has been made to ensure that the information contained in this guide is correct. However, things do change, so it is always a good idea to seek expert advice on your personal situation.

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**Introduction**

It’s never too late to think about adopting a healthier lifestyle. It doesn’t mean that you suddenly have to change your diet and start spending every day at the gym. Just a few small changes can make a big difference – making you feel better, giving you more energy, helping you to sleep more soundly. And research shows that having a positive attitude to life in general and to getting older can help you enjoy better-health.

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

So it’s important not to forget the parts of your body that are crucial to keeping active – your feet, eyes and ears.

This guide highlights changes you may like to consider and the benefits they can bring. Making changes isn’t always easy – but improvements in your health and wellbeing should be well worth the effort.

**Key**

- This symbol indicates where information differs for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- This symbol indicates who to contact for the next steps you need to take.
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 (see pages 22–26). Contact details for local organisations can usually be found in your local phone book. If you have difficulty finding them, your local Age UK/Age Concern* should be able to help.

As far as possible, the information given in this guide is applicable across the UK.

*Many local Age Concerns are changing their name to Age UK.
Staying active

There’s no doubt that keeping active helps us to feel more energetic. But there are other more specific benefits, including help 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 also 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 stamina, strength, flexibility and balance are important as you get older.
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, get in and out of a car, wash your hair and get dressed.

**Balance** helps you walk and climb steps confidently, stand from a sitting position, respond quickly if you trip.

Any amount of extra activity that is appropriate for your age group and health makes a difference. Aim to build up to about 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.

Read our book *Strength and balance exercises for healthy ageing* for more ideas. You can buy a copy from Age UK Advice by calling 0800 169 65 65. We also have two DVDs: *Be strong, be steady*, a programme of chair-based and standing exercises, and *Step to the future*, an exercise programme devised to help older people keep strong and active. *Step to the future* is also available on VHS. Call 0800 169 65 65 for more details and to buy a copy.
Different activities bring different benefits, so try a variety of different things. The value of some typical activities and exercise classes are outlined below.

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You don’t 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 UK/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.

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Healthy eating

No single food contains everything you need to stay healthy, so the golden rule is to eat a variety of foods each day. Eating healthily does not mean cutting out foods you enjoy, but you may do well to eat some foods less often and/or in smaller portions. Use the symbols found on many food labels to help you make healthy choices. Click on the ‘Food labels’ tab at www.eatwell.gov.uk for more information about food labels.

**Eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day**
Research suggests that people who eat plenty of fruit and vegetables are less likely to develop heart disease, certain cancers and eye conditions. To help you reach the target of five, think of all the fresh, frozen, canned or dried fruit, fruit juices and vegetables you like. Try to 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 or cod, and another of oily fish, such as salmon, mackerel or sardines. Oily fish are rich in vitamin D and a type of fat that helps prevent heart disease. But grill, poach or bake fish rather than frying it.

**Cut down on 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 – much of the salt we eat is in food when we buy it. Always think before you sprinkle salt on your meal.
‘Since I started trying to eat my five portions of fruit and veg a day, I always have frozen veg in the freezer, have a banana or apple 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.’
**Cut down on foods that are high in saturated fat**
This includes foods such as cakes, biscuits, sausages, meat pies, fatty meat and cheese. Saturated fats raise the level of cholesterol in the blood and increase the risk of heart disease and stroke.

**Drink plenty of fluid, about 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. First, make sure you have enough wholegrain cereals and fruit in your diet. Drinking plenty of liquids can help too. And physical activity helps keep bowels moving, so try to think of ways to keep active.

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

Our free guide *Going solo* has more information on healthy eating and meal planning if you live on your own. Ask your GP if you think you may need a vitamin D supplement. Your GP practice may have information about healthy eating or you can go to one of the organisations or websites listed in the ‘Useful organisations’ section (see pages 22–26).
Sensible drinking

Many of us enjoy an alcoholic drink now and then. A celebratory drink can be 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.

The dangers associated with having wine or beer most evenings – maybe with your meal or while watching TV – have not received the same amount of media attention given to binge drinking. But regular drinking like this can cause real damage to your liver, brain, blood vessels and other organs. The liver in particular needs at least two alcohol-free days per week to recover from the toxic effects of alcohol.

Government guidance is that we should drink in moderation, which means that:

• men should not regularly drink more than 3–4 units a day
• women should not regularly drink more than 2–3 units a day.

‘Regularly’ means every day or most days. As an example, a pint of beer (4 per cent alcohol) and a (175ml) standard glass of wine (13 per cent alcohol) both contain 2.3 units.

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 (see pages 22–26).
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. Why would being a non-smoker be right for you? Ask your GP practice about local one-to-one or group support to help you. Stop-smoking medication is available on prescription. You can also call the NHS smoking helpline or Quit (see page 25).
Healthy bones

Bone health is largely influenced by our genes but is affected by lifestyle too. Our bones benefit from regular weight-bearing activity and a healthy diet with plenty of calcium-rich foods, such as reduced-fat dairy products.

Bone tends to become porous and less strong as we age and everyone has some degree of bone loss as they get older. Osteoporosis is used to describe the situation where bone loss makes bones significantly more fragile. It commonly affects bones in the spine, wrists and hips. It means you are more likely to break a bone if you fall or experience chronic pain if bones in your 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.

See the Age UK website for more information on osteoporosis (click on ‘conditions and illnesses’ in the ‘Health & wellbeing’ section). Speak to your GP if you think you may be at risk or contact the National Osteoporosis Society for more information (see page 24).
Foot care

It is not until we have a problem with our feet that we really appreciate how important they are to our wellbeing and ability to get out and about. It’s vital to look after your feet and 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 if 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 practice nurse or GP. Contact your local Age UK/Age Concern* if you need help with nail-cutting. They may offer a service themselves or know where help is available.

*Many local Age Concerns are changing their name to Age UK.
‘I joined the over-50s swimming club and it was the best thing I could have done. I have more energy and life seems better every day.’

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.’
**Sight**

We don’t need to tell you how important it is to look after your eyes. Doing the following can help keep your eyes healthy.

- Have your eyes checked every 12 months if you are aged 70 or over, every two years if under 70. This means changes in your vision can be corrected and problems such as cataracts, glaucoma and age-related macular degeneration (AMD) can be picked up early – before your sight is significantly affected.
- 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 increases your risk of developing AMD and cataracts.
- Eat a balanced diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables.

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.

Find out if you are due for an eye check. NHS sight checks are free if you are 60 or over (except in Scotland where everyone is eligible for a free sight check, regardless of age) and you may be able to get help with the cost of glasses if you are on a low income.

See our free guide *Health services* and free factsheet *Help with health costs* for more information. Contact the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) or the Macular Disease Society for more information about eye health and the services they offer partially sighted and blind people (see pages 24–26).
**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. Tinnitus, often described as a ringing sound in your ear or head, is another hearing-related problem. It can be distressing 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 the Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID) for more support and information (see page 26).

**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 (see page 26).
‘I feel so much happier and more confident since I got my NHS hearing aid. Before I got it I had started to avoid places with lots of background noise 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.’
Mental wellbeing

Depression can affect people of all ages. Symptoms include:

• loss of self-confidence and feeling down
• feeling anxious
• 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
• slower thoughts and movements
• unexplained aches and pains.

There are many different ways to treat depression and it can be overcome.

Don’t be afraid to approach your GP if you need help. Depression is an illness that can be treated. It is no less important than a physical illness and is not an inevitable part of getting older. Some people find that exercise helps, but the first and most important thing, if you’re experiencing any of the symptoms above, is that you seek help.

Speak to your GP and explain how you’re feeling so you can then agree what may be best for you. Your GP may prescribe medication or recommend counselling or a self-help group. Depression Alliance can give you more information and details of support groups in your area (see page 23). In Northern Ireland, contact Aware Defeat Depression (see page 23).
Social contact

Meeting friends, enjoying hobbies and getting involved in your local community 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 want to develop new interests.

Contact your local Age UK/Age Concern* for details of local activities, volunteering and other local groups (see page 22).

Choose activities that give you an opportunity to meet people socially or play a more active role in your local community.

*Many local Age Concerns are changing their name to Age UK.
Twelve steps for staying healthy

This guide contains a lot of information and suggestions about how to give yourself the best chance of enjoying good health for as long as possible.

Try to follow these 12 key steps.

• If you smoke, get help to stop.
• Eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day.
• Eat more fibre-rich foods.
• Eat fish twice a week – especially oily fish.
• Eat less salty and fatty food – check food labels before you buy.
• Keep to a healthy weight.
• Keep to safe limits for alcohol – know how much you are drinking.
• Take regular exercise, in a form you enjoy.
• Have your blood pressure and cholesterol checked regularly.
• Have your eyes tested at least every two years (every year once you are over 70).
• Have a seasonal flu jab every year. It’s free once you reach 65 or have a health condition that puts you at risk of more serious problems if you have flu.
• Accept invitations to attend NHS screenings for breast, cervical and bowel cancer.

Find out more about NHS services to keep you healthy in our free guide Health services (see back page).
Useful organisations

Age UK
Age UK is the new force combining Age Concern and Help the Aged. We provide advice and information for people in later life through our Age UK Advice line, publications and online.

Age UK Advice: 0800 169 65 65
www.ageuk.org.uk

In Wales, contact
Age Cymru: 0800 169 65 65
www.agecymru.org.uk

In Scotland, contact
Age Scotland: 0845 125 9732
www.agescotland.org.uk

In Northern Ireland, contact
Age NI: 0808 808 7575
www.ageni.org.uk

Alcohol Concern
National organisation offering information and support about alcohol abuse and local services.

Drinkline: 0800 917 8282 (free call)
www.alcoholconcern.org.uk

Arthritis Care
National organisation offering information and support for people with arthritis.

Tel: 0808 800 4050 (free call)
www.arthritiscare.org.uk
**Aware Defeat Depression**
Support network for all those in Northern Ireland affected by depression or bipolar disorder (manic depression).

Helpline: 08451 20 29 61  
www.aware-ni.org

**British Heart Foundation**
National organisation offering information and support for individuals with heart disease, including advice on how to be more active. Ask for their free booklet *Get active, stay active* for ideas on how to live your life as actively as possible.

Heart helpline: 0300 330 3311  
www.bhf.org.uk/30aday

**Deafness Research UK**
Aims to encourage and fund research to improve the quality of life for people with deafness and hearing related problems. Provides information to help manage tinnitus.

Information service: 0808 808 2222  
www.deafnessresearch.org.uk

**Depression Alliance**
National organisation providing information and a network of local support groups for people affected by depression.

Information pack request line: 0845 123 23 20  
www.depressionalliance.org
**Food Standards Agency**
Independent government department in England and Wales concerned with the safety of food and providing impartial advice on healthy eating. Visit www.food.gov.uk to download a copy of *The good life* – the Food Standards Agency’s healthy eating leaflet for the over-50s.

General enquiries: 020 7276 8829
www.eatwell.gov.uk

In Scotland and Northern Ireland, contact:

Food Standards Agency Scotland
Tel: 01224 285 100
www.food.gov.uk/scotland

Food Standards Agency Northern Ireland
Tel: 028 9041 7700
www.food.gov.uk/northernireland

**Macular Disease Society**
National organisation dedicated to helping people with age-related macular degeneration.

Tel: 0845 241 2041
www.maculardisease.org

**National Osteoporosis Society**
National organisation offering information and support on prevention and treatment of osteoporosis.

Helpline: 0845 450 0230
www.nos.org.uk
NHS Choices
Offers information to help you understand more about healthy eating and drinking, and the alcohol content of various drinks.

www.nhs.uk
www.drinking.nhs.uk

In Wales, visit www.wales.nhs.uk
In Scotland, visit www.nhs24.com

NHS smoking helpline
For information on stopping smoking and details of support.

Helpline: 0800 022 4 332 (free call)
Textphone: 0845 169 0171
http://smokefree.nhs.uk

Parkinson’s UK
National organisation offering information and support to people with Parkinson’s disease and their families.

Helpline: 0808 800 0303 (free call)
www.parkinsons.org.uk

Quit
Charity helping people who want to stop smoking.

Quitline: 0800 00 22 00
www.quit.org.uk
Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)
National organisation offering information and support for blindness and visual impairment.

Helpline: 0303 123 9999
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)
Email: informationline@rnid.org.uk
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
Textphone: 0845 127 0062
www.sense.org.uk
Can you help Age UK?

Please complete the donation form below with a gift of whatever you can afford and return to: Age UK, FREEPOST LON13041, PO Box 203, London N1 9BR. Alternatively, you can phone 0800 169 80 80 or visit www.ageuk.org.uk/donate. If you prefer, you can donate directly to one of our national or local partners. Thank you.

Personal details

Title:  
Initials:  
Surname:  

Address:  

Postcode:  

Tel:  
Email:  

By providing your email address and/or mobile number you are agreeing to us contacting you in these ways. You may contact us at any time to unsubscribe from our communications.

Your gift

I would like to make a gift of: £

☐ I enclose a cheque/postal order made payable to Age UK

Card payment

I wish to pay by (please tick)  ☐ MasterCard  ☐ Visa  ☐ CAF CharityCard  ☐ Maestro  ☐ American Express

(Maestro only)

Expiry date  /  Issue no. (Maestro only)  

Signature X

Gift Aid declaration

☐ (please tick) Yes, I want Age UK and its partner organisations* to treat all donations I have made for the four years prior to this year, and all donations I make from the date of this declaration until I notify you otherwise, as gift aid donations. I confirm I pay an amount of income tax and/or capital gains tax at least equal to the tax that the charity will reclaim on my donations in the tax year. Date:  /  /  

(please complete) *Age Cymru, Age Scotland and Age NI

We will use the information you have supplied to communicate with you in line with Data Protection guidelines. Age UK (registered charity no 1128267) comprises the Charity, its group of companies and national partners (Age Cymru, Age Scotland and Age NI). If you would prefer not to hear from them or carefully selected third parties, let us know by phoning 0800 107 8977.
It’s never too late to think about adopting a healthier lifestyle. Making changes isn’t always easy – but improvements in your health and wellbeing should be well worth the effort.
What should I do now?

For more information on the issues covered in this guide, or to order any of our publications, please call Age UK Advice free on 0800 169 65 65 or visit www.ageuk.org.uk/healthandwellbeing

Our publications are also available in large print and audio formats.

The following Age UK information guides may be useful:

• Health services
• Staying steady
• Going solo

Age UK offers a wide range of products and services specially designed for people in later life. For more information, please call 0800 169 18 19.

If contact details for your local Age UK/Age Concern* are not in the box below, call Age UK Advice free on 0800 169 65 65.

*Many local Age Concerns are changing their name to Age UK.
Age UK is a charitable company limited by guarantee and registered in England (registered charity number 1128267 and registered company number 6825798). The registered address is 207–221 Pentonville Road, London N1 9UZ. Age Concern England (registered charity number 261794) and Help the Aged (registered charity number 272786), and their trading and other associated companies merged on 1 April 2009. Together they have formed the Age UK Group, dedicated to improving the lives of people in later life. 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 and Age Cymru.