

Ageing well

“Old age” is a term we don’t usually apply to ourselves. Whatever our age, we generally think of other people as being old.

At the official level, the term “seniors” is often applied to anyone over the age of 55; while “Seniors Cards” are generally provided to people over 60 who are not in full time employment. From a medical point of view the line is usually drawn at 65.

Whatever definition we use, people in the older age group are certainly increasing in number, as a proportion of the total population. It seems older people are becoming more popular too. They are being specifically targeted by providers of goods and services – including governments. The aging “baby boomers” are expected to have greater purchasing power.

Unfortunately, one of the side effects of living longer is that we are more likely to suffer with illness. Heart disease, kidney disease, diabetes and some types of arthritis are all more common in older people. Medicines are often the best way of controlling the symptoms of these conditions, so it is not surprising that people in the over 65 age group use more than 20% of all prescribed medicines.

Of course, old age doesn’t have to mean ill health. A study in the USA has shown that on average elderly people are growing healthier, happier and more independent; and according to a report in *New Scientist* magazine, the diseases of old age are actually affecting fewer people and, when they do strike, it is much later in life.

The study also showed that better educated people are likely to live longer; and that in older people, a sense of independence and control is a good guide to who will stay healthy in old age.

Whatever our age or physical condition, there is no doubt that we benefit most when we personally take control of our health as much as possible. This includes making informed decisions – decisions based on the answers to questions we should ask doctors, pharmacists, nurses and other health providers.

For instance, when we go to the doctor we could ask: “What is wrong with me and how long will it last?” “What can I do to help myself get better?” “If I need a medicine, what is its name, what does it do, and how long should I take it?”

These questions and quite a few others are listed on the *Wise Use of Medicines* Fact Card, which is available from pharmacies around Australia providing the Pharmaceutical Society’s Self Care health information. Your pharmacist can print out a copy of the card for you.

There are also fact cards available on topics of extra special interest to us as we get older – topics such as *Rheumatoid Arthritis, Osteoarthritis, High Blood Pressure, Osteoporosis, Prostate Problems, Preventing Falls, Carer Support* and *Sleeping Problems*.

And for specific information about particular medicines, ask your pharmacist for the official Consumer Medicines Information (CMI) leaflet. CMI is available for all prescription medicines. Often it is automatically included within the box of medicine; but if not, ask your pharmacist for a copy. It’s especially useful if you’re taking a medicine for the first time. It describes what the medicine is for, how it works, how best to take it, and what unwanted effects to look out for.

In his book *Ageing Well*, Professor George Vaillant, from the Harvard Medical School, described a study of nearly a thousand men and women from their teens to old age. One of the major conclusions from the study is that people with strong social support – giving and receiving love and affection from friends and family – are most likely to age well.

Professor Vaillant puts it this way, “it’s not the bad things that happen to us that doom us; it’s the good people that happen to us at any age that facilitate enjoyable old age”.

So it makes sense to make your health care provider part of your wider family circle. Where possible have a regular family doctor and pharmacist you know and trust to give you helpful advice.

Last month “Seniors Week” was celebrated in NSW and the ACT. Seniors Weeks occur later in the year elsewhere in Australia; but there are opportunities for older people to keep fit and well all year round.

So, if you want to stay in control and be better informed, call the Pharmaceutical Society on 1300 369 772 for the location of your nearest Self Care Pharmacy or check out the Pharmaceutical Society’s website at www.psa.org.au and click on the Self Care Pharmacy Finder.