

A practical guide to

# healthy ageing



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# Who is this guide for?

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The advice in this booklet will help improve the health and general fitness of people of any age, but it is written to be particularly relevant for people who are about 70 years or older.

People of this age, and sometimes younger, begin a 'slowing-down' process related to the effects of ageing on their body.

We cannot stop the process of ageing, but the advice given here will help to keep you fit and independent.



## **Mrs Drakos: My Story**

“ Looking back, I can see I've been a bit worried about myself for a while. It's not as though I was ill or anything, but just a feeling that I've sort of slowed down – things being more of an effort. Like doing the weekly wash seemed to take all day. Or doing the family Sunday lunch would knock the stuffing out of me. And Doreen, the Post Office lady, seemed to be mumbling all the time. Anyway, I came across this guide.

Got my daughter to help with the walking speed test. Was surprised at how slow I turned out to be. But there it was! It was a real wake-up call! So I checked out the guide and sure enough found I needed new glasses, and the hearing aid has been a real boon. Rang Age UK in the town and they put me onto a local "Get Fit" group. Love the company and chat. All-in-all, feel I'm back in control again. Thank goodness.

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# Try this at home

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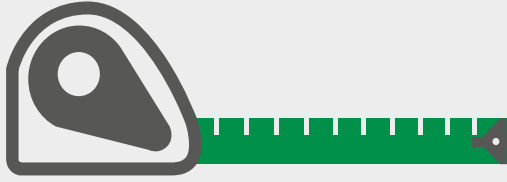


Have you noticed it's taking longer to get to the bus stop than it used to?  
Or that your weekly supermarket shop takes longer than before?

**These can be signs that you've started slowing down.**

If you've noticed you're a little slower than you used to be, or even if you haven't, you may want to try the simple test opposite which will let you know if the 'slowing-down' process of later life is affecting you. It is called the Walking Speed Test. You can do it easily at home. All you need is a tape measure and a watch with a second hand or a mobile phone with a stopwatch function.

Using a tape measure, mark out on the ground two lines 4 metres (13 feet) apart.



Stand next to the first line.



Walk at your usual speed (using a walking aid if you usually use one) until a few steps past the 4-metre mark (don't slow down as you approach the mark).



Your friend/helper should say "Go" and start timing you.



As you pass the 4-metre mark, your friend/helper should **stop** timing you.



Repeat three times, allowing sufficient time to recover between tests.

x3

If you take more than 5 seconds, it's likely you're affected by the slowing-down process of later life. Of course, some of us walk slowly for other reasons, such as arthritis, but the test will give you a good indication of your general fitness. If you have slowed down then this guide will help improve your health and general fitness.

# Look after your feet

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Your feet have been constant fellow travellers throughout your life, but they may be showing signs of strain. Healthy feet are essential for comfort and safe walking and the good news is that there are lots of things you can do to look after them.

**Painful and uncomfortable feet** aren't a natural part of growing old or something to put up with.

# A lot can be done to improve comfort, relieve pain and maintain mobility.

## Wash your feet often

Wash your feet daily to help prevent any infections. If you leave dirt on the skin, it can become irritated and infected. Dry them well, especially between the toes to help prevent Athlete's foot. If you have some hard skin, apply moisturising foot cream (not body lotion).

## Toenails

It can get harder to cut toenails as you get older, but keeping them short will help keep you mobile. When cutting your nails, trim them straight across, never at an angle or down the edge as this may cause an ingrown nail. You may need help with this from your chiropodist or a toenail cutting service. Ask your local Age UK if they provide or know of a local service.

## Keeping warm

Try to keep your feet warm. Warm stockings or socks can help. Avoid anything too tight which can restrict your circulation or cramp your toes. Wearing fleece-lined boots or shoes or even an extra pair of socks will keep you warm but make sure your shoes aren't too tight as a result. Bed socks are also a good idea when the weather is particularly cold.

If your feet are cold, don't try and warm them up by putting them close to a fire or on a hot radiator as this risks chilblains.

## Choosing the best footwear

If your shoes fit well they protect and support your feet and may improve your balance and stability. Poorly-fitting shoes or slippers can easily trip you up and cause a fall. Look for shoes with uppers made of soft leather or a stretchy man-made fabric which is also breathable.

Avoid plastic 'easy clean' uppers which don't allow the foot to breathe and won't stretch to accommodate your own foot shape. Check that the heel is held firmly in place. You'll find that a lace-up or Velcro fastening shoe will give more support than a slip-on.

Shoes should be comfortable in the shop. If they don't fit well, they can make even minor foot problems worse. Don't buy them if they're too tight thinking you can break them in.

If your feet swell during the day, it's a good idea to put your shoes on as soon as you wake up, before your feet have had a chance to swell. Also, try shopping for shoes in the afternoon and make sure they have adjustable fastenings so that they can adjust to your foot shape.

**Speak to your GP to find out if you are eligible for NHS treatment. If you are not or need urgent treatment, you should contact a private chiropodist.**

# Look after your eyes

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Your eyes should give you a lifetime's service, but sometimes they can be affected by conditions that develop as you grow older.

It's easy to neglect your eyes because they rarely hurt when there's a problem. Having an eye test will not only tell you if you need new glasses, it will also check the health of the eye and can spot eye conditions before you become aware of them so they can be treated early. If you have a low income, you may be eligible for help with the cost should you need glasses or contact lenses.

An eye test can pick up eye conditions, such as glaucoma and cataracts, as well as general health problems, such as diabetes and high blood pressure.

## You can help keep your eyes healthy by:

- not smoking – smoking damages the eye, making it more likely to develop age-related macular degeneration and cataracts
- eating lots of fruit and vegetables
- protecting them from the sun by wearing sunglasses.

**The good news** is that if you're 60 or over, you can have a free NHS eye test every two years. You can have a free test every year if you're 70 or over.



# Look after your mouth

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Maintaining good oral health is important. It contributes to general wellbeing and allows you to eat, speak and socialise without discomfort or embarrassment.

## Some top tips to improve your oral health:

- Reduce the amount and frequency of sugary foods and drinks you consume and avoid eating or drinking sugary foods and drinks just before bedtime.
- Using fluoride toothpaste is an effective way of preventing tooth decay.
- Brush your teeth at least twice a day, last thing at night and on one other occasion, with fluoride toothpaste.
- Your dentist may prescribe a toothpaste with a higher fluoride content if you have tooth decay or are at particular risk of tooth decay.
- Spit after brushing, and do not use mouthwash straightaway as this will rinse away the fluoride in the toothpaste.
- Avoid excess alcohol consumption and do not smoke (or use smokeless tobacco such as paan, chewing tobacco and gutka), as this can increase the risk of mouth cancer. If you would like help to stop smoking, ask your dentist to refer you to your local stop smoking service.

Whether you have your own teeth or wear dentures, you should see your dentist regularly for an overall check of your mouth, teeth, gums and fit of your dentures.

**A dry mouth can increase your risk of dental decay and can impact on your quality of life through its effect on your ability to speak, eat and enjoy your food. It can also affect the comfort of your dentures, if you wear them.**

- Take regular sips of water.
- Suck on sugar-free sweets or chew sugar-free gum.
- Suck on ice-cubes.
- Avoid alcohol (including alcohol-based mouthwashes).
- Ask your dentist, GP or specialist to suggest/prescribe an artificial saliva substitute.

## For more information:

[www.nhs.uk/conditions/dry-mouth/pages/introduction.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/dry-mouth/pages/introduction.aspx)

# Make your home safe

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It is important to feel safe and comfortable in your home. There are some simple things you can do to ensure that you keep yourself and your possessions safe and reduce the risk of accidents, fires and other issues.

## Have a look round your home and check for some simple things you can do to make your home as safe as possible:

- Consider getting and wearing a personal alarm, particularly if you live on your own. This will let you contact a 24-hour response centre at the touch of a button should you fall or become unwell. Don't be afraid or embarrassed to push the button if you need to. The response centre will be glad to reassure you or call for help.
- Have smoke alarms installed in hallways and living rooms of your home and a heat alarm in the kitchen. If you have a gas boiler or a coal or wood burning fire or stove you also need a carbon monoxide alarm. Test all alarms regularly (at least once a month).
- To receive a free home visit contact your local fire and rescue service who will provide fire and safety advice and fit smoke alarms.
- If you have an electric blanket, get it tested every year and replace it every ten years. Check for danger signs such as frayed fabric and scorch marks. You can ask the shop where you bought it about testing and servicing, or contact trading standards.
- It's easy to slip in the bathroom. Get a non-slip bath mat and a handrail to help you feel more stable.
- Remove any clutter on the stairs that might trip you up and ensure stair carpets or stair runners are secured in position.
- Use plug-in night lights that turn on automatically at night. They provide a low light so you can see your way to the bathroom or stairs.
- Coil up any long or trailing electric leads, particularly around doorways or stairs, or tape them close to the wall. Don't overload sockets and make sure leads and cables aren't damaged – if they are, then have them replaced.
- Don't walk in socks, tights or bare feet. Wear well-fitting slippers.
- Don't wear loose-fitting, trailing clothes that might trip you up, such as a long dressing gown.
- Loose rugs and mats can be a trip-hazard and should be avoided. Replace frayed carpets or repair with double-sided carpet tape.



Read Age UK's free guide *Home safety checker* for more information.

Call **0800 169 6565** or download it from [www.ageuk.org.uk](http://www.ageuk.org.uk)

# Keep active

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It can be easy to retreat into the pleasing comfort of an armchair, particularly during the colder months.

But taking life too easy can actually speed up the slowing-down process of later life. It's never too late to start being more active or begin an exercise program.

# Keeping active is the key to staying fit, mobile and independent.

Regular exercise can help reduce the impact of several diseases, such as osteoporosis, diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke. Regular exercise can also reduce arthritis-related pain, improve sleep, prevent falls and fractures, and improve low mood and memory. In fact, taking regular exercise is one of the best things you can do to remain independent.

The good news is that any exercise is good for you. You don't need to go to a gym! Try to find things that can be part of your everyday routine, such as simple chair-based exercises, walking to the shops, or things that are fun, such as dancing or playing bowls.

**Why not contact your local leisure, community centre or Age UK to see what they've got on, or if possible see if you can find an activity to do with friends or other people, such as walking and dancing. This is especially important if you are finding that you are spending a lot of time on your own.**

**If you haven't been very active,** you should aim to minimise the amount of time spent sitting down for extended periods. You could do this by reducing the time you spend watching TV, taking regular walks around the garden or street, or swapping a bus or car journey for walking part of the way.

Your next aim should be to increase your activity so you build up to about 30 minutes activity on three to five occasions a week. Each activity should be sufficient to raise your heart rate and make you breathe faster and feel warmer.

## Examples of the sorts of activity that improve or maintain health include:

- Brisk walking
- Ballroom dancing
- Climbing stairs
- Swimming

## You should also aim to undertake activity to improve muscle strength on at least two days a week, such as:

- carrying or moving loads such as groceries
- gardening jobs such as pushing a lawn mower, digging, or collecting grass and leaves
- activities that involve stepping and jumping such as dancing
- chair-based exercises.

**Read Age UK's free guide *Healthy living* for more information.**

Call **0800 169 6565** or download it from **[www.ageuk.org.uk](http://www.ageuk.org.uk)**

# Talk about your medicines

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You may be taking several different medicines, especially if you have a condition such as diabetes or asthma. It's important that your medicines and the doses are reviewed regularly.

Your GP, nurse or pharmacist will do this for you. They may recommend alternative medicines or lower doses, or sometimes suggest the medicine is stopped altogether.

**Did you know** that your pharmacist can help you with queries you might have about your medicines? They are experts on medicines, and often have extended opening hours and no appointment is necessary.

Don't simply stop taking a prescribed medicine if you are worried about side effects. If you think a medicine is causing side effects (perhaps dizziness, a fuzzy head, dry mouth, loss of appetite, nausea or constipation), get advice from your GP, practice nurse or pharmacist.

**You should see your GP, nurse or pharmacist if you have not had your medicines reviewed for more than one year, or if you are concerned about the medicines you are taking.**

# Get your vaccinations

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As we age, our immune system becomes less efficient at protecting us. A number of different vaccinations are available for older people. These are free on the NHS.

If you're 65 or over, get a free flu jab every year.

- Flu vaccination, commonly known as the flu jab, protects against influenza. Flu can be particularly serious in older people and cause complications such as pneumonia. It is free to people aged 65 and over and also to carers and younger adults with conditions that make them susceptible to complications if they have flu. So ask at your GP service if you think you could be eligible for an annual flu jab.
- People who are aged 65 and over should have a single pneumococcal vaccination which will protect you for life. This is a one-off jab that will protect you from pneumococcal infections caused by bacteria.
- People who are aged 70, 78 or 79 should be offered a single vaccine to prevent shingles, a common and painful skin disease. Talk to your GP practice for further information.

# Preventing falls

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Falls are a common concern as we get older, but they are not inevitable and there is much that can be done to reduce the chance of a fall, even if you have already had one.

The slowing-down process of later life affects our balance and makes our muscles weaker. This increases the risk of falling. But both balance and muscle strength will be improved simply by taking some of the actions already described in this guide.

## Preventing falls

- Looking after your feet (see page 5)
- Looking after your eyes (see page 7)
- Making your home safe (see page 9)
- Staying active (see page 11)
- Getting your medicines reviewed (see page 13)
- Looking after your hearing (see page 16)

**So each of these actions has a double benefit. All the more reason to consider them!**

**Dizzy spells** or faints can be related to too much medication and should be discussed with your GP or pharmacist.

Read Age UK's free guide *Staying steady* for more information.

Call **0800 169 6565** or download them from [www.ageuk.org.uk](http://www.ageuk.org.uk)

Read SAGA's free guide *Get up and go*.

For more information download it from [www.saga.co.uk](http://www.saga.co.uk)



# Get your hearing tested

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Losing your hearing is a normal part of the ageing process, but because it happens gradually you may not notice any change.

You may realise that you need to have the TV on louder or find you can't always follow conversations, especially in a group.

Having trouble hearing can make it hard to understand and follow a doctor's advice, to respond to warnings, and to hear doorbells and alarms. This can sometimes be frustrating, embarrassing, and even dangerous.

**NHS hearing tests are free and can be arranged through your GP.**

It is important to identify hearing loss early as treatment is more likely to be effective when problems are diagnosed early. The problem may be as simple as earwax, which after removal can restore hearing.

To do a quick hearing check before seeing your GP, use the free hearing check provided by Action on Hearing Loss. It only takes five minutes and you can do it at home either by phone (0844 800 3838 (local rate), or online for free ([www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/hearingcheck](http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/hearingcheck)). This check will indicate if you have hearing loss. If you have any concerns, speak to your GP.

**Hearing aids** are much more discrete than ever before and will enhance your hearing.

# Keep warm and well

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Keeping warm over the winter months can help to prevent colds, flu and serious health problems such as heart attacks, strokes, pneumonia and depression.

- Heat your rooms to a minimum of 18°C (65°F). If you can't heat all the rooms you use, heat the living room during the day and the bedroom just before you go to sleep.
- Keep your bedroom window closed at night. Breathing in cold air is bad for your health and could put you at risk of a chest infection.
- Use a wheat bag or hot water bottle to keep warm.
- Make sure you are receiving any benefits you are entitled to. Your local Age UK can provide advice and even help you to fill out forms.
- Hot meals and drinks help to keep you warm, so have regular hot drinks and eat at least one hot meal a day if possible. Eating regularly helps keep energy levels up during winter.
- Wear several light layers of clothes (rather than one chunky layer). Thermal underwear can be good as a base layer.

**Read Age UK's free guides *Winter wrapped up* and *More money in your pocket* for more information.**

Call **0800 169 6565** or download them from **[www.ageuk.org.uk](http://www.ageuk.org.uk)**

# Get ready for winter

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There are practical things that you can do to prepare for winter weather, which may bring cold, ice, snow and high winds. Remember that cold weather can start in October.

- Icy pavements and roads can be very slippery. Take extra care if you go out and wear boots or shoes with good grip on the soles. Rubber snow/ice grips that attach to outdoor shoes are very effective.
- Consider fitting a grab rail if you have steps at your front or back door.
- Have your heating system serviced before winter arrives.
- Have some food supplies in a cupboard or freezer in case you can't go out for a few days.
- Ask your family, neighbours or friends if they could call or visit you more often if a period of cold weather stops you getting out and about.
- Keep simple cold, flu and sore throat remedies in the house.
- Speak to your friends, family or carer if you are feeling under the weather, down or need some practical help. They may be able to help you.
- Order repeat prescriptions in plenty of time, particularly if bad weather is forecast.
- Local pharmacists can help you manage long-term conditions and can offer advice if you have a bad cough, a cold or a sore throat. They have longer opening hours than GP practices, and most have a private consultation area. They'll also tell you if they think you should see a doctor.



Read Age UK's free guides *Winter wrapped up* and *Save energy, pay less* for more information.

Call **0800 169 6565** or download them from **[www.ageuk.org.uk](http://www.ageuk.org.uk)**

# Eat well and drink plenty

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Hot meals and drinks help to keep you warm, so eat at least one hot meal each day and have hot drinks during the day, especially during cold weather.

Wholesome soups make a warming snack. Include a good range of foods in your diet (for example wholegrain cereals, milk and cheese for calcium).

Aim for five portions of fruit and vegetables each day, so that you're getting plenty of nutrients and vitamins.

**Remember that frozen vegetables are as good as fresh.**

Having a glass of water within reach during the daytime will remind you to keep up your fluid intake. Having a hot drink before bed and keeping one in a flask by your bedside can be good ideas too.

It's important to eat enough, especially in winter. If you're worried about a poor appetite or losing weight, speak to your GP.

**Read Age UK's free guide *Healthy eating* for more information.**

Call **0800 169 6565** or download it from **[www.ageuk.org.uk](http://www.ageuk.org.uk)**

# Bladder and bowel problems

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People of all ages can experience bladder control problems – including over 2.5 million people over 60 – yet many people keep it a secret for years.



Bladder and bowel problems are not an inevitable part of ageing, or something you have to put up with. Start by talking to your GP. Symptoms such as frequency, urgency, not getting to the toilet quickly enough, or having to get up at night to pass urine are common so there's no need to feel embarrassed. Your doctor will assess your symptoms, identify the cause, and discuss what treatments or exercises may help. Or you could refer yourself directly to your local NHS continence service for an assessment, where a continence adviser can help you.

**There are things you can try that may help improve your symptoms too.**

- Drink normally, as cutting down on liquids will usually make urinary incontinence worse, not better.
- If you notice that tea, coffee and cola make your symptoms worse, cut down or try decaffeinated versions.
- Check whether any medicines you're taking could be affecting your bladder.

**Urinary infections** can be serious. Consult your GP or pharmacist if you think you have a urinary infection.

Symptoms include needing to urinate more often, pain when urinating, cloudy urine or blood in your urine, an unusually unpleasant smell, or back or groin pain.

**Read Age UK's free guide *Bladder and bowel problems* for more information.**

Call **0800 169 6565** or download it from **[www.ageuk.org.uk](http://www.ageuk.org.uk)**

# Look after your mental health

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Good mental wellbeing is important for all of us. Here are some things you can do to help or improve your mental wellbeing:

- **Begin a conversation** – Communication is key to wellbeing and we all respond to a friendly face
- **Invite friends for tea** – Make time for friends
- **Keep in touch by phone** – The next best thing to catching up in person
- **Learn to love computers** – Connect with others and browse the web
- **Get involved in local community activities** – Singing, walking, book clubs, bridge, bingo
- **Try do something every day** – Plan things to look forward to
- **Help others** – Volunteering can be a great way to stay involved and meet new people
- **Age UK's befriending services** – The service works by assigning each older person a befriender, who provides friendly conversation and companionship. Ask your local Age UK if they provide this service.

## Depression

We all feel down from time to time, but if you are feeling low and out of sorts for longer periods of time, you may be suffering from depression.

### Symptoms include:

- loss of confidence and feeling down
- feeling anxious or panicky
- not being able to enjoy the things you usually do
- unexplained aches and pains
- avoiding people, even those you're close to
- sleeping badly
- loss of appetite
- feeling bad or guilty, or dwelling on things from the past.

With the right help you stand a very good chance of getting better, whatever age you are and however long you've felt this way.

Depression is just as significant as a physical illness, so speak to your GP and explain how you're feeling. You can then agree on the best treatment for you, such as talking to a counsellor who can help you manage your thoughts and feelings and the effect they have on you.

## Bereavement

**A common trigger for depression can be bereavement. People are affected by bereavement in many different ways. Remember that there is no right or wrong way to feel, and it can take time to adjust. However, if you feel things aren't improving for you, you might need help if:**

- you neglect yourself or your family, for example you don't eat properly
- you feel you can't go on without the person you've lost
- the emotion is so intense it's affecting your life, for example you can't face getting out of bed or you're taking your anger out on someone else.

If you feel that you are not coping it is important that you talk to someone about it and share your feelings with someone that can help. For some the best way to cope is to discuss feelings with family or friends but if you don't feel this works for you then you can always contact local bereavement services through your GP.

**Read Age UK's free guides *Healthy living and Bereavement* for more information.**

Call **0800 169 6565** or download it from **[www.ageuk.org.uk](http://www.ageuk.org.uk)**

# Looking after your brain

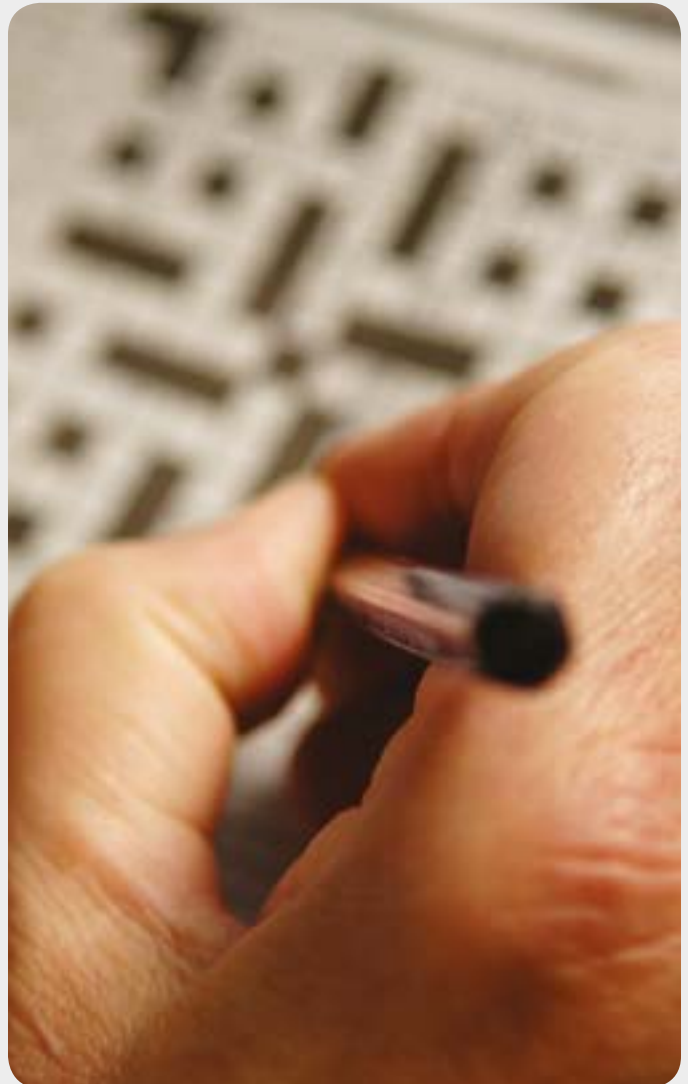
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There's a lot we don't know about how to keep our brain healthy but we do know that what's good for our body is good for the brain.

**There are some simple things we can do.**

**These include:**

- eating a healthy diet
- maintaining a healthy weight
- exercising regularly
- not drinking too much alcohol
- stopping smoking (if you smoke)
- making sure to keep your blood pressure at a healthy level
- getting enough sleep, including a day time nap if you need one
- keeping socially active with friends and family
- keeping your mind busy: learn new things; hobbies; volunteering; clubs; gardening; read books; attend plays; solve puzzles; learn a language



**Memory loss** can be annoying if it happens occasionally, but if it's affecting your daily life or is worrying you or someone you know, you should seek help from your GP.



# Caring and looking after yourself too

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Lots of older people care for a family member or friend; this might be helping someone with eating, getting dressed or washed, or reminding them how to do day-to-day things. You may also be looking after the home or doing the shopping.

This is an important role which can be tough, and may affect your physical or mental health. Make sure you look after yourself. You should ask your local authority for a carers assessment to find out if you are entitled to any support, including time off from caring. Your GP or local carers group can support you too and help you get the information and support you need.

**To find support in your local area, visit [www.carers.org](http://www.carers.org)**

**For further information and advice, visit [www.carersuk.org](http://www.carersuk.org)**

**Read Age UK's free guides *Advice for carers* or *Caring for someone with dementia* for more information.**

Call **0800 169 6565** or download it from **[www.ageuk.org.uk](http://www.ageuk.org.uk)**

# Action plan

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## Five things we recommend you do:

1. Check your walking speed.
2. Stay active or become more active.
3. Socialise regularly, spend time with other people and have regular chats.
4. Keep on top of your health (get your eyes and ears tested, have your vaccinations and get your medicines reviewed).
5. Look after yourself (keep your home warm, eat well and don't put off asking for help).

## Five things I am going to do:

1.

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3.

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5.

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To reorder this guide please order for free online via **[www.orderline.dh.gov.uk](http://www.orderline.dh.gov.uk)** or call **030 0123 1002** quoting reference HA2.

This guide has been prepared by NHS England and Age UK with support from CFOA, Carers Trust, Carers UK, Public Health England and older people themselves and contains general information which we hope will be of use to you.

Your individual case may well have specific circumstances that apply to it and so this guide should not be read as specific advice given to you, it should not be relied on as a basis for any decision or action you take in respect of the matters it covers and it should definitely not be used as a substitute for seeking specific advice from an appropriately qualified and experienced professional (generally, your GP).

Neither NHS England nor Age UK nor any of their respective subsidiary companies or charities accept any liability arising from this guide or its use by you, except where the law states otherwise. We aim to ensure the information contained in the guide is as up to date and accurate as possible as at the time of publication, but it is inevitable that certain areas will be subject to change from time to time. Please see our website or contact us for more up to date information.

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