

This information sheet is designed to give autistic adults an introduction to what happens when you get older.

Ageing is a normal process and is part of every person's life. As you get older, there will be some changes to your body, your needs and how you feel. Just like when you go through puberty, which is the change between being a child and being a young adult, you will go through changes as you go from being a young adult to an older adult.

Looks and feelings

As people change, the amount of chemicals your body releases changes. This happens during puberty, when you get an increase of hormone release. As adults get older, the amount of chemicals in your body changes again, and this causes some of the effects we see in ageing. For example:

- Wrinkles
- Tiredness
- Grey hair
- Weight gain or loss
- Baldness
- Increased blood pressure
- Changes to sleep
- Changes to hearing and sight

These changes can be confusing and distressing for some people. For example, if you are not expecting to see wrinkles appearing, it could be quite scary to see the changes when you look at yourself in a mirror.

Sensory and stress

It is common for autistic people to have a higher stress level than people who do not have autism. This means that you may find everyday experiences very tiring and draining. For example, many people find a trip to the shops overwhelming. As you get older, your energy levels are likely to decrease and you may get less sleep. This can mean that you find it more difficult to cope with things you were able to manage when you were younger. You may also experience some sensory issues such as extra sensitivity to lights and loud noises. These may get worse over time as your energy levels get lower. This may also be affected by changes to your sight and hearing. For example, if your sight gets worse and becomes blurred, you may be extremely uncomfortable when you are not wearing your glasses. It could also have a positive effect, for example, if your hearing gets worse, then this may help if you are over-sensitive to sound.

Menopause

All women go through the menopause, unless they had their ovaries removed before puberty. This is caused by changes to the chemicals in a woman's body. After the menopause you won't have any more periods and you can no longer have children. It usually happens when a woman is between 40 and 60 years old but this is different for everyone and some women go through the menopause much younger. It can also be caused by some illnesses or medical procedures – such as chemotherapy or having your ovaries removed.

The menopause affects everyone differently but these are some of the common signs and symptoms of the menopause:

- Hot flushes and night sweats
- Feeling your heart racing
- Changes to your vagina, such as dryness, discomfort, itching and pain during sex
- Problems with sleeping
- Less interest in sex
- Changes in your mood, such as feeling tired, irritable, depressed or anxious
- Having difficulty concentrating or poor memory
- Urinary problems – such as recurrent urinary tract infections, loss of bladder control.

These may seem a little bit scary, but remember, almost all women go through this and there is a lot of help available if you are worried about your symptoms. Most people will only have some of these symptoms and they may be uncomfortable but not prevent them from doing things. Some people, though, will get very bad symptoms of the menopause and may need medicine to help them to manage it. If you think any of these things are happening to you, speak to someone you trust and go to see a GP – these symptoms can also be signs of different health problems and your doctor will be able to advise you on what to do.

Some of these symptoms are also common aspects of autism, such as poor working memory, sleep problems and difficulty concentrating. This can make it hard to tell when changes start to happen. If you aren't sure, speak to someone you trust for advice, or go to see your GP.

Male ageing

Men also experience big changes as they get older but it is not usually as sudden as for women, this is sometimes called 'andropause'.

Symptoms include:

- Changes to erections – less often or for less time
- Less likely to be able to have children
- Changes to urination (weeing)
- Less interest in sex
- Enlarged prostate.

These symptoms are all a normal part of growing older. Not all men will have all of these symptoms and it will be different for every man. There may also be different symptoms for you. If you are worried about this or any symptoms, you should speak to someone you trust. You should also speak to your GP if you experience any of these symptoms as they can also be signs of other health conditions.

Health

When you are young, your body is able to repair itself and fight diseases. This is why when you get a cold, you get better, or when you get a cut or bruise, it heals. But over time it gets more difficult for your body to heal itself and this means you may take more time to heal and to get better when you are ill.

The changes to your body caused by the ageing process can also mean that you are more likely to get ill.

Other health issues happen because your body has been working hard to heal and repair for your whole life and it gets harder for it to do that, the longer it works. For example, you use your joints every day; they are part of all of the moving parts of your body. The 'wear and tear' caused by this can mean that your joints get damaged. This can cause arthritis – painful, swollen joints – and stiffening of your joints. Many people get more aches and pains as they age.

There are some illnesses which are much more common as you get older, such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer. This makes it very important that you take care of your body to help you live a healthy life for as long as possible.

Keeping healthy

Keeping healthy means looking after your body and not putting extra strain on it. Some top tips for keeping healthy are:

- A healthy diet – this means eating a balance of different foods and getting the right vitamins and minerals. You can learn more about this online or by speaking to your GP.
- A healthy weight – if you are overweight then you put a lot more strain on your body and organs. If you are worried about this then you should try to lose weight by exercising and eating healthily.
- Exercise – exercise is great for losing weight but it is also good for helping to keep you active, making your heart and lungs strong and it releases chemicals that can improve your mood.
- Seeing your GP – if you have any concerns about your health, see your GP as soon as possible. If there is something wrong, the longer you leave it, the harder it will be to treat. If you are not sure whether you should go to the doctor, discuss it with someone you trust first.

Conclusion

Ageing can be difficult and confusing for some people but it can also be a good thing. You may have developed coping strategies that make everyday life much easier and gained confidence in your skills and abilities. Do not be afraid of growing older, everyone experiences some changes and still live happy and full lives. But remember to take good care of your body to stay healthy and active for as long as possible. If you have any worries or concerns, speak to someone you trust or go to see your GP.

Useful resources

Older Adults and Autism Spectrum Conditions: An Introduction and Guide
by Wenn Lawson

www.who.int/topics/ageing/en/ - World Health Organisation information on ageing