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Living well

# Simple secrets for healthy ageing

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Women outlive men by two to eight years on average. They should take steps to age well

It has been said that only the lucky grow old and many of us are going to be lucky in Singapore.

In 2016, Singapore was ranked third in the world for the longest average life expectancy and second for the longest average healthy life expectancy. There are more than 1,300 centenarians (people over 100 years old) in Singapore and still counting.

Another fact we have to internalise is that women live longer than men and the world of older age is going to be populated by many more women than men.

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On average, women outlive men by two to eight years. Thus, the vast majority of older people in virtually all countries are women and the proportion increases with age. This has been termed the "feminisation of ageing".

Over the age of 85, there are twice as many women as men in Singapore. This is not good news for older women if they wish to look for an age-appropriate partner, but the older men are in luck.

Although women live longer than men on average, they have more illness and disability - osteoporosis, osteoarthritis and dementia - in general during these extra years.

According to the World Bank, "old age means something quite different - and more troubling for women than men".



Older women are more likely to be widowed than older men because of women's longer lifespan and their tendency to marry men older than themselves.

Therefore, older men who need care are more likely to be looked after by their wives than the other way round.

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Also, in the case of divorce or spousal death, women are less likely to remarry than men. Thus, it has become a truism that most women must anticipate singlehood or widowhood in their later years.

Another thing to keep in mind is that most women in Singapore tend to leave the responsibility of financial planning for their later years to their husbands, and with many women absent from the workforce because of childcare or eldercare, older women have less in their savings and CPF accounts.

Keeping these facts and scenarios in mind, women have to ensure that they take steps to age well so that they can be self-reliant for a longer time. They have to aim to live a long healthy life and then die after a short illness - known as a "compression of morbidity" plan.

It is widely accepted that there are a few simple secrets for healthy and successful ageing:

### 1. SOCIAL NETWORKS ARE THE ELIXIR OF LIFE

Spousal relationships are very important, but there have to be other relationships as well. Being connected also provides protection from loneliness, depression and mental illness.

### 2. LIFELONG LEARNING AND MENTAL STIMULATION

The brain remains plastic in mid-life and even beyond. There is growing evidence the adult brain is more malleable than assumed and that it can regenerate throughout life.

Decreased mental capacity can be avoided and even reversed by challenging the brain and doing novel and stimulating tasks.

### 3. RESILIENCE

The concept of resilience has recently been explored as "a dynamic process of positive adaptation in the face of adversity" and is enabled by both "internal traits, such as hardiness or high self-efficacy", as well as "external factors, such as social support, that promote coping".

This ability to adapt is a crucial resource for older people and allows differentiation between individuals who may otherwise have similar levels of other characteristics.

### 4. BEHAVIOUR CHANGE FOR HEALTH

It is now recognised in medicine and public health that changing behaviour for optimal health can prevent many chronic diseases.



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People who live a physically active life, do not smoke, drink alcohol in moderate quantities and eat plenty of fruit and vegetables have a risk of death in a given period that is less than one-fourth of those who have invariably unhealthy habits.

The best-kept secret in preventive medicine is exercise for health - it provides protection against a host of conditions including heart attacks, strokes, hypertension, diabetes, osteoporosis and fractures, colon and breast cancer, and memory loss.

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Exercise benefits both body and mind. With ageing, there is some shrinkage of the brain. However, exercise increases the volume of the hippocampus. This part of the brain plays an important role in the function of memory. In

general, more physically fit older adults outperform less-fit peers on a variety of cognitive tasks.

Sleep is an essential body function and is part of the behaviour change for health.

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Medications, stress, illness and poor sleep habits can prevent people from getting between seven and nine hours of sleep at night. The health benefits of sleep include more energy and better immune function.

## 5. HAVE A ROLE OR IDENTITY

Doing so - with the perception of autonomy or control over one's life and the potential for personal growth - is essential in making one's life meaningful.

Financial security is part of having autonomy in life. People are thus able to make independent decisions in their life choices, including the desire by many not to be a burden to others at the end of their lives and to be able to make provisions for this final event.

## 6. HEALTH SCREENING AND EXPERT MEDICAL ADVICE PERTINENT TO ONE'S AGE AND MEDICAL STATUS SHOULD BE SOUGHT FOR.

After dispensing the above scientific advice on successful ageing, I would like to end on a less serious note. The list below also promises a long and healthy life, but has not necessarily been subject to rigorous science:



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### • DRINK RED WINE

Red wine is packed with resveratrol, which is an antioxidant and can neutralise free radicals. The recommendation is one glass a day for women and two for men.

### • EAT DARK CHOCOLATE, WHICH ALSO CONTAINS ANTIOXIDANTS

The recommendation is to eat only a small quantity of good-quality dark chocolate every day.

### • HAVE MORE SEX

Sex and touching are essential components of health. Sex releases an assortment of beneficial hormones in the body, while touching helps in bonding with others and, in turn, increases one's self-worth.

Take your pick, but I would try to follow both lists.

• Kanwaljit Soin is an orthopaedic surgeon and a former Nominated Member of Parliament. She is the founder president of Wings (Women's Initiative for Ageing Successfully) and author of *Silver Shades Of Grey*, a book on ageing.

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