



# Senior Series

*The Ohio  
Department of  
Aging*



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## When Does Someone Attain Old Age?

“**O**ld Age” is really a social category that is defined differently by various cultures. In the United States, we define “old” in a number of ways.

- Age 40 is the age at and beyond which a person may not be discriminated against in employment. (Age Discrimination in Employment Act—ADEA)
- Age 55 is the age at which low income individuals might qualify for subsidized employment and learn new work skills. (Title V of the Older Americans Act)
- Age 60 is the age of eligibility for Older Americans Act services. Due to limited funding, however, services tend to be targeted to those aged who are most needy. (Older Americans Act of 1965)
- Age 62 is the age at which persons can take “early retirement.” (The Social Security Act)

- Age 65 has been the “traditional” age for full retirement. However, because of longer life expectancies, the full retirement age is increasing for people born after 1938. Full retirement now goes from 65 to 67 depending upon the year of your birth. (The Social Security Act)
- Age 70 has been used as a mandatory retirement for the members of some professions.

Rather than “lumping” everyone past a certain age as “old,” some social gerontologists make a distinction between the “young-old” (ages fifty-five to seventy-four) and the “old-old” (ages seventy-five and older). Still other gerontologists add a “middle-old” category between the young-old and the old-old categories.

However the aged are categorized, aging is a highly individual experience. Chronological age may differ consider-

ably from a person's functional age, and age-related changes occur at different rates for different persons. Age-related changes don't begin at the same time nor do they all occur simultaneously. Changes as we age are normal and occur in all five senses.

Typically, the beginnings of change in the five senses are as follows.

- Hearing—the mid 40's
- Vision—the mid 50's
- Touch—the mid 50's
- Taste—the late 50's
- Smell—the mid 70's

This is not to suggest, however, that a person experiences changes in any particular order. People may, for example, experience vision problems with no noticeable loss of hearing. Furthermore, some people advance into their later years with little or no perceptible losses in their five senses. Also, because individuals cope differently, the effect of those aging losses differs with individuals. Generally, however, it can be said, that:

- Age-related changes within any one individual can differ greatly. For instance, intelligence and memory change in a complex manner rather than generalized declines.
- Age-related changes differ greatly from one individual to another in the same manner as each person differs

from one another while moving from infancy to maturity.

- No sharp differences occur either physically or psychologically when a person reaches 65 years of age. Absolutely no clinical evidence exists for selecting this chronological age as a retirement age.
- Some impairments and deficiencies do occur as a person ages, but the person often finds ways of adjusting and compensating.

Whatever changes come with aging, most older adults are in relatively good health. Physiological, sensory, emotional, and physical changes do occur, but the human body and a person's ingenious method of compensation often allow the older person to successfully function in today's complex world.

## **Aging Produces a Heterogeneous Population**

Aging is not a disease. It is, actually, a series of processes that begin with life and continue throughout the life cycle. As individuals move through the processes, they become more and more different from everyone else. Thus, it is noted that the aging population is a very heterogeneous population.

What makes individuals, as they age, different from one another is a combination of many factors (for example, place of birth, place of residence, marital status, the foods eaten and not

eaten, education, heredity, physical and mental health, family size and composition). There is also a time period effect on an individual. A person's age when he or she experiences a particular time period (for example, the Great Depression; the assassinations of JFK, MLK, Jr. and RFK; the events of 9/11) also influences how they age. In sum, the factors that influence the manner in which people age are too numerous to mention here.

Because of the burgeoning size and heterogeneous nature of our nation's aging population, there is a rapidly increasing need to understand both the normal aging processes and the consequences of aging on the population. Where once it was unusual for families to have three living generations, now it is not unusual for families to have four living generations. Many persons experience full lives for two to four decades past 60 years of age. In fact, they are quite capable of enjoying life fully until the end of their lives.

## In Conclusion: Some Thoughts on Age and Aging

“Age is a question of mind over matter. If you don't mind, it doesn't matter.”

—Satchel Paige

“Grow old along with me!

The best is yet to be.

The last of life, for which the first was made.”

—Robert Browning, “*Rabbi Ben Ezra*”

“Nobody grows old merely by living a number of years. We grow old by deserting our ideals. Years may wrinkle the skin, but to give up enthusiasm wrinkles the soul.”

—Samuel Ullman

“For age is opportunity no less  
Than youth itself, though in another  
dress,  
And as the evening twilight fades away,  
The sky is filled with stars invisible by  
day.”

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow,  
“*Morituri Salutamus*,” 1875

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Adapted by Linnette Mizer Goard, Extension Agent, Ohio State University Extension and Judy Hardy, The Ohio Department of Aging

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