



Senior Series

A partnership between Ohio State University Extension
and Ohio Aging Network professionals



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Sensory Changes

The prospect of a long life is a treasure, not a fear! From the moment of our conception to the moment of our death, we age; however, the emotions we feel about the aging process change with each stage of life.

Not everyone agrees with the criteria that identifies old age. The term "old" can be used at many ages depending on job requirements, diversity issues, legal definitions, and personal attitudes. An Olympic figure skater may be considered old at age 30, but a grandmother may be considered young at age 40. The important part about growing older is not the "age," but how we accept and prepare for these life changes.

There are definite physical changes we experience throughout life. Perhaps the most difficult to adjust to are those that happen later in life. Our hearing and vision decline, our sense of touch lessens in sensitivity, and our senses of taste and smell change. While this may seem terribly discouraging, LIFE is precious and exciting and can be even more so later in life—*if we allow it!*

Sensory changes do not occur at the same age for each person, nor do all changes occur at the same time and at the same degree. Studies have shown changes accelerating at the following approximate age ranges:

- Vision—mid-50s
- Hearing—mid-40s
- Touch—mid-50s
- Taste—mid-60s
- Smell—mid-70s

Let's make sense of the aging process by exploring the senses and ways we can make a difference.

Vision

As we age, the shape of the eye lens changes. The lens and cornea become less transparent, the pupil becomes smaller, and the field of vision shrinks. With these physical changes come the following visual difficulties:

- Decreased ability to see objects clearly
- Decreased ability to focus on objects at different distances
- Decreased ability to function in low light levels
- Decreased ability to distinguish certain color intensities
- Decreased ability to correctly judge distances

A problem in many homes that affects vision is an improper amount of light. As we age, we need

greater amounts of light. Studies show that a person who is 80 years old will need about three times more light than a young adult to read a book. In addition to larger print, color contrast between the print and the paper can reduce the effort of reading.

As changes occur in vision, schedule a visit to your optometrist to secure the proper glasses for optimal vision. Make needed changes around your home to compensate for changes in vision. To maximize your visual capabilities in the home, increase the level of light by using a higher watt light bulb and evenly distributing or balancing the light sources to eliminate glare.

Hearing

Loss of hearing is very gradual, starting at middle age. The loss appears to be caused by a decrease in the elasticity of the eardrum. There is a decreased ability to hear high frequencies and sounds in general. Sounds may be muffled and difficult to understand. Studies find that high frequency sounds are filtered out or not heard. Therefore, asking individuals to speak louder

may not make the message easier to understand.

Persons with decreased ability to hear may deny the problem or be embarrassed to talk about it. Hearing aids, while very beneficial, can never replace normal hearing. Many background noises from radio, television, appliances, traffic, or busy public gatherings all detract from hearing normal conversation. There could be other obstacles playing a part which may be treatable. Share with your doctor any concerns about your hearing.

Touch

Touch is a wonderful and needed sense. As we age, the sense of touch decreases because the skin's sensitivity decreases. The skin becomes less taut and has a loss of elasticity. Tissue loss occurs immediately below the skin. Because the skin loses sensitivity, an older adult may not experience pain until the skin has already been damaged.

The need for touch is still there. Ask your spouse or a friend to exchange a shoulder or neck rub, or get a massage. Consider getting a pet. A pet can meet the need for

touch. Some studies show that older persons who have pets to care for live longer.

Taste

At the age of 30, a person has 245 taste buds on each of the tiny elevations (called papilla) on the tongue. By age 70, the number of taste buds decreases to approximately 88. The sense of taste changes slowly.

Sweet and salty tastes seem to be the first affected. For older persons, normal seasoning may seem bland. Using herbs instead of salt may be one answer to increasing the flavor of foods without increasing sodium content, especially for older adults who have high blood pressure.

Smell

Good news! Minimal changes occur in the sense of smell as one ages.

Summary

Today, more research is being done to better understand the aging process. Studies show results leading to a longer and better life. These studies are replacing “aging myths with facts.” Not only are

older Americans healthier and better fit, but they are becoming more aware of the aging process by preparing for the event.

You can be one of these Americans making sense of aging and living a full and satisfying life!

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The important part about growing older is not the “age,” but how we accept and prepare for these life changes.

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