

Midlife Physical Changes

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Aging occurs at different rates in individuals. These rates are influenced by factors including genetics, lifestyle, and health. Midlife is considered to be the central period of one's life, consisting of individuals who are approximately 45 to 65 years of age, although some researchers suggest midlife consists of individuals who are 40 to 65 years of age. There are a variety of changes that occur throughout life. However, a majority of the changes that occur during midlife are considered to be normative physical changes. The physical changes in midlife include but are not limited to changes in appearance, senses, muscles, joints, and organs.

It is within midlife that noticeable signs of aging begin to emerge. Physical changes in appearance during midlife consist of graying or thinning of hair, wrinkling of the skin, presence of aging spots, loss in height, and weight gain. Weight gain can be a result of multiple factors. It is imperative to understand that many adults do not change their diet during midlife. As a result, the weight gain is likely due to their metabolism slowing down. Whether the weight gain is a result of a slower metabolism due to age or from other conditions such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes, weight gain is a common complaint of adults in midlife. With midlife also comes normative degeneration in muscle mass and strength, joints, and bones. Joint stiffness and decrease in muscle strength can contribute to increased difficulty in tasks that were previously considered unchallenging and increased difficulty in mobility altogether. These physical changes are not considered to be drastic changes once the individual reaches midlife. However, the individual may have to adapt to the physical changes of their bodies and adjust the amount of

food they intake, increase their exercise levels, and adjust their nutrition to prevent further weight gain.

Additionally, senses are impacted during the course of midlife. The two main senses which have been researched are vision and hearing. Research suggests that vision naturally starts to weaken with age. During midlife, individuals can begin having difficulty focusing on an image, maintaining focus on an image, or having difficulty viewing close images in general. These difficulties are otherwise known as presbyopia. Presbyopia is considered a natural part of aging and occurs due to the lens inside the eye hardening. The risk for macular degeneration, cataracts, and glaucoma increases during midlife. Presbyopia is considered to be due to an age-related decline in strength and performance while the chances of being diagnosed with macular degeneration, cataracts, and glaucoma increase with age, they are considered to be more of a disease rather than normative changes. Hearing begins to decline in midlife. Age-related hearing loss is otherwise known as presbycusis. Generally, high pitched sounds are lost first in comparison to the lower pitches. Men typically experience hearing impairments in midlife more often than women. The changes in vision and hearing can be compensated by the use of eye glasses or hearing aids. There are also changes in taste, smell, touch and kinesthesia which have been the focus of less research, but similar degradation is seen in these areas as well.

During midlife, organ performance begins to diminish when compared to previous stages of development. The heart and lungs are two organs in which their strength and capacities are known to decrease due to age-related changes. Other than the heart and lungs, women in particular are impacted more dramatically when it comes to the climacteric component. Women experience menopause typically between 45 to 55 years of age. However, research suggests that the median age for women to have their last menstruation occurs between 50 to 52 years of age.

Menopause is the period in which menstruation discontinues and the ovaries stop releasing eggs resulting in a loss of their ability to reproduce. As a result, certain hormones such as estrogen and progesterone decrease. On the other hand, men do not lose their ability to reproduce during midlife but they might experience a decrease in hormones such as testosterone resulting in symptoms such as diminished sex drive, difficulty achieving erections, and decreases in muscle mass.

Although a variety of changes emerge in midlife, these changes typically are not dramatic and do not cause disability. Many of these physical changes in midlife are considered to be normative and are just beginning to surface in midlife. The physical changes listed above can be exacerbated by other factors, whether it be habits, pre-existing health conditions, or overall lifestyle choices. Taking preventative measures such as exercising, eating a balanced diet, and avoiding poor health behaviors can reduce the likelihood of certain conditions occurring in the future. However, research suggests that positive health-related behaviors typically decline with age in general.

Further Reading

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