

Busting Myths and Aging Well



By Laura Clapper, MD, MPPA, CPE, Medical Director for CCA Health California

In this age of misinformation, it's often difficult to parse out what's real and what's not in the world of personal health. TV is rife with commercials selling the latest supplement, and social media is full of charlatans making endless claims. Below, I've answered some of the most common questions I hear in my everyday life as a physician.

1

“Is it true that you need supplements to stay healthy as you age?”

A: This is actually not true. Unless you have a vitamin deficiency or another health issue that's been diagnosed by a doctor, there's no need to buy extra vitamins or supplements. Talk to your doctor about any supplements you currently take to give a full picture of your health.

2

“I'm healthy, with no serious diseases, so can I skip my annual physical?”

A: No, and this is even more important the older you are. Even if you feel healthy, keep that appointment on the calendar to ensure your medications are in order and doses are correct. It's also a good idea to get annual blood work to track your cholesterol and other indicators of health.

3

“I'm losing my memory, but that's normal for people as they age, right?”

A: False—sort of. According to the Alzheimer's Society, approximately 40% of people will have some form of memory loss after age 65. But even if we experience memory loss, chances are that it is more mild, and it is still unlikely to be dementia. The Cleveland Clinic has a helpful list of questions to see if the memory loss you experience is minor or something more serious: [click here to learn more](#).

4

True or false: Only older adults are increasingly being scammed via texts and email.

A: No, everyone of every generation is at risk, and scams are only getting more sophisticated. Older adults, especially when isolated, often don't want to worry people or ask for help, but even younger generations are getting duped by phone calls, text, direct mail, and emails. Stay up to date by checking the [AARP's website, which has resources to avoid scams](#).

5

“If I eat really well, I don't have to worry as much about exercising, right?”

A: Not true. Also, no one has to run marathons or lift heavy weights to benefit from exercise. Walking 30 minutes a day can make a big impact on your health. Increasing physical activity such as walking to get your mail, or around the block, can add up if done regularly. Talk to your doctor about what exercise is safe for you. Also, exercise assists with balance, bone health, and flexibility, and this is all beneficial in reducing risk and injuries of falls.

6

“I don’t need sunscreen. I don’t live in a very sunny place and besides, I don’t get sunburned.”

A: Absolutely not. In fact, older adults have more sensitive skin, and it can often be extra thin from taking blood thinners or other medications. A minimum of SPF 30 should be worn every day. The best sunscreen is the one you’ll use, so find a formula that you like and make it a habit. Often people think only fair-skinned people who burn need sunscreen, but that’s false as well. According to the Skin Cancer Foundation, people of color are typically diagnosed later, when it is harder to treat.

7

“My blood pressure meds worked so well that my BP is down, so I stopped taking them.”

A: This is one of the most dangerous and common myths. Research has shown that roughly half of patients don’t take their medication as directed. This can be extremely detrimental to your health. Make sure to speak to your doctor if costs, side effects, or any other concerns are becoming obstacles to taking your prescribed medications.

8

True or false: BMI and weight are the best indicators of health.

A: While being severely overweight certainly raises risk for heart disease, on the flip side, some people who are “skinny” may still have high blood pressure, heart disease, or any number of other health issues that they mistakenly think only occur when someone is overweight. Weight is only part of the overall picture, which is another reason why it’s so important to keep up your wellness visits to your doctor.

9

“At my age, Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) aren’t something I have to worry about anymore.”

A: False. According to the CDC, rates of STIs like chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis have increased dramatically among older adults (65+) in recent years. Many may not know that older adults can increase their risk of heart disease and cancer as a result of these STIs. It’s important to use condoms at any age.

10

“I’ve been smoking since my teens and I’m in my 50s, so isn’t the damage already done?”

A: It’s never too late to quit smoking. According to The American Lung Association, 20 minutes after quitting, your heart rate drops to a normal level, and within 24 hours after quitting, the risk of heart attack is significantly reduced. Also, vaping is not a healthier alternative. Data shows links to chronic lung disease and asthma, and associations between dual use of e-cigarettes and smoking with cardiovascular disease.

11

“What about incontinence and bladder function? What can I do to help that as I age?”

A: Incontinence is common as we get older, but it is not a given that everyone will experience this. It can happen for a variety of reasons, so talk to your provider if you feel this is affecting your daily quality of life.



Dr. Clapper is the Medical Director for CCA Health California, a community-focused health plan that serves individuals in Santa Clara and San Joaquin counties. In this role, she works closely with the plan’s clinical team, community partners, and independent physician associations to develop programs that help residents stay healthy and well.