

INTRODUCTION

Policy Forum: *Healthy Aging in North Carolina*

Aging is an inevitable part of the lifecycle. What is not inevitable, however, is that aging must equate to declining health. Healthy aging encompasses many different things and the authors of this issue of the *North Carolina Medical Journal* explore its definitions and determinants. Healthy aging is more than physical health; it is mental and emotional health as well. It involves social engagement and an active and healthy lifestyle.

As we grow older our health and life circumstances will certainly change. With these changes come new challenges and new opportunities. Challenges older adults sometimes face include lack of adequate health and social services or access to those services. Seniors may also face barriers in terms of transportation or financial hardship. Aging bodies may be less able to exercise or be more prone to disease. These are issues that we must address head-on in order to help create an atmosphere where increasing age does not have to mean declining quality of life. Instead, aging can bring about a stage of life filled with tremendous opportunity and growth. Retirement may lead to increased time for being involved in activities, and staying engaged with social networks, through family, friends, religious affiliations, volunteer opportunities, or civic organizations. Older adults may find new and enjoyable ways to keep their bodies and minds active.

Now more than ever, North Carolina must be prepared for the demographic shifts that we will experience in the coming years. The aging baby boomers, coupled with the “longevity revolution,” practically guarantee us that the older adult population will markedly increase in the years to come. As a state, we need to ensure that their needs are met. We need to ensure that there are enough geriatric specialists to support the health care needs of the aging population. We need to ensure that Medicare benefits remain a robust and reliable source of health insurance coverage for all older adults. We need to consider our surroundings and how they may change due to the aging population. But perhaps most importantly, we need to encourage people of all ages to commit to a healthy lifestyle and to share that lifestyle with their community and their family. Healthy habits that are established earlier in life will help ensure successful healthy aging. By defining healthy aging as a lifelong process, we can help forge a new definition of an older adult as someone who is active, engaged, and enjoying their good health.

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