

# “Will I Get Sick As I Grow Older?”

By Moira Fordyce, MD, MB ChB, FRCPE, AGS

**Over my years in practice caring for older adults, my patients have asked me questions like the following many times. Here are my answers.**

## **Will I get sick as I grow older?**

Disease or illness is not caused by growing older. Although we might not be as flexible as in former years and we take longer to recover if we do get sick, illness is the result of the same things that caused it when we were younger, for example infection and injury.

A good health care practitioner will look for a reason if you become sick or just don't feel right, and will NOT say “Well, what do you expect at your age?” Early diagnosis and effective treatment at any age can mean a return to good health.

## **My father became disabled when he grew older. Will this happen to me?**

Although you have a lot in common with your parents, you are not the same as them. You are unique and won't necessarily grow old the way they did. We now know about the health benefits of:

- Eating a good, varied diet
- Exercising every day
- Not smoking
- Using sunscreen
- Getting our flu and other shots
- Keeping our brain active
- Socializing with all ages

These all help us to age well.

## **My mother fell twice in the past few weeks but fortunately didn't hurt herself. What should we do about the falls?**

Ask her to see her doctor for a thorough check up. A series of falls in an older adult can be caused by hidden, treatable disease, for example, a chest or urinary tract infection. She should take all her medications to her doctor for review, prescription, bought at the pharmacy without prescription and all herbal and alternative therapies. Some medications can cause dizziness and falls.

## **How safe is her living environment?**

Loose rugs, clutter, uneven surfaces, pets underfoot, stairs with unmarked edges, and poor lighting can all contribute to falls. Grab bars in the bathroom promote safety as do well-fitting, comfortable shoes.

## **I noticed some blood in my bowel movement the other day. What should I do about this?**

There are many reasons for blood in the bowel movement. Most are due to conditions that are not life threatening but nonetheless should be treated—an example is hemorrhoids.

However, the bleeding could be a sign of cancer of the bowel. Fortunately most bowel cancers grow slowly and spread late so early diagnosis can mean cure. Visit a savvy health professional ASAP and have this

thoroughly investigated. Black, sticky (tarry) bowel movements should also be reported ASAP and a reason for them sought.

## **Sometimes I can't get to the bathroom in time and I leak urine. I'm so ashamed. I guess this is just part of growing older?**

This is not part of normal aging. See a doctor who is experienced in the care of older adults, who listens to you and answers your questions. You need a good general health evaluation plus a thorough evaluation of your whole urinary tract. Some forms of urine leakage can be cured—ALL can be helped.

## **I have had a sore on my face for several weeks. It hasn't changed much. What should I do about this?**

An ulcer or sore anywhere on the body that is slow to heal should be checked by a healthcare professional. It could be a skin cancer most of which fortunately respond well to treatment. Don't delay. The earlier the diagnosis is made, the better the result of treatment.

*Got a question for Dr. Moira Fordyce?  
Email: moiraf9@gmail.com.*

