

What's  
Your  
Aging  
IQ?



National Institute on Aging  
National Institutes of Health



## We all know someone “old”.

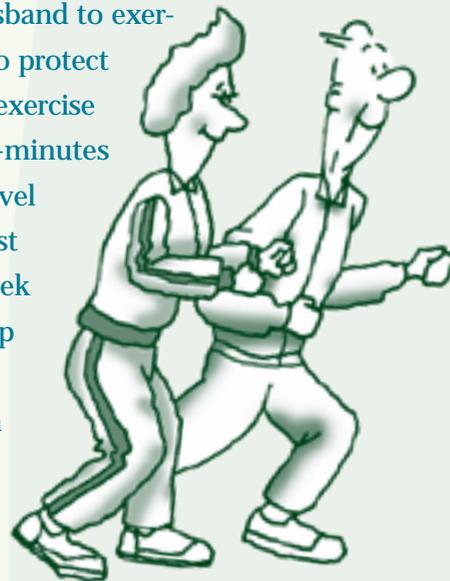
It might be a grandparent, a neighbor, or maybe the person behind the counter at the dry cleaners. But do you really know what it means to be “old?” Do you know what older people are concerned about, how they can get the most out of the rest of their lives, and what normal aging really is? Here are several very short stories, each followed by a few related questions. Some are multiple-choice, some are true/false (T/F), and some yes/no (Y/N). Tear out the answer sheet on page 23. Then circle the answers you think are right. When you are done, compare your answers with the correct ones starting on page 10.

*Scattered between these story/question combinations are more general questions about growing old, like this first one.*

1. Which of the following age groups is one of the fastest growing segments of the American population?
  - a. babies and children under age 5
  - b. children age 15 to 19
  - c. people over age 85

*Let's look at some older people and see how much you know about aging.*

**Phyllis is 64.** Recently, she had a DEXA-scan to check her bone density. The results showed she was at risk of a hip, wrist, or spine fracture because she was developing osteoporosis. Her doctor wants her to start doing weight-bearing exercise 3 or 4 times a week to increase the density of her bones. The doctor also suggested she get her husband to exercise with her to protect his bones. An exercise program of 30-minutes of moderate-level activity on most days of the week would also help prevent heart disease in both of them.



2. Is Phyllis too old to lift weights? Y/N
3. Should her husband worry about his bones? Y/N  
Do men get osteoporosis also? Y/N
4. I thought heart disease was a man's disease. Does Phyllis have to worry about that too? Y/N

**Sylvia is 75.** She has smoked cigarettes since she was 20. Her children and grandchildren all want her

to quit. But several members of her family died of cancer in their old age, and she believes it's too late now to make a difference.



**Harry is 80** and seems depressed lately. His wife has noticed a change in his mood around the house and is concerned. He has always loved to drive his car. But, lately, he's worried when he gets behind the wheel. His vision seems to be changing. Last week he almost hit a messenger on a bike. The eye doctor says he has a cataract in one eye and needs surgery.

5. Even if an older person has smoked tobacco his or her whole life, it still makes sense to quit. T/F
6. Screening for cancer is less important with each year of life since older people can't put up with aggressive treatment. T/F

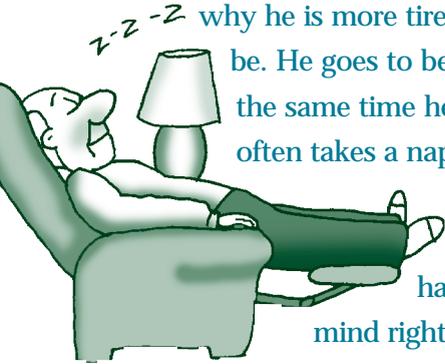
If many older people survive cancer, is it still a major cause of death?

7. After heart disease, the next most common cause of death after age 65 in 2000 was:
  - a. stroke and related diseases
  - b. chronic respiratory disease, such as chronic bronchitis, emphysema, and asthma
  - c. cancer

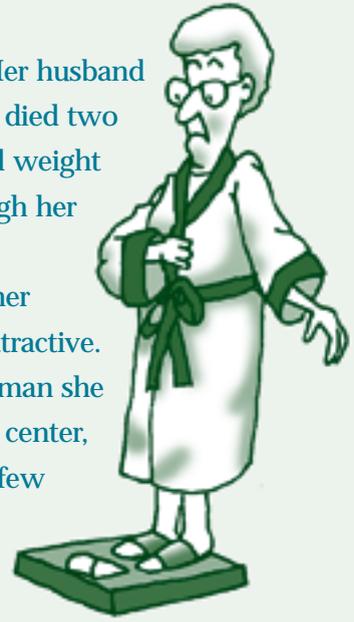
8. Is cataract surgery really likely to help Harry see better? Y/N
9. Will Harry still have to stop driving his car anyway, since he is 80? Y/N
10. Is depression normal at Harry's age? Y/N



**Sam is 70.** He can't understand why he is more tired than he used to be. He goes to bed and gets up at the same time he always has. He often takes a nap in the afternoon. Maybe it's because he has a lot on his mind right now. He's worried because he seems to be more forgetful than before—even a little confused some times. And his younger brother was just diagnosed with probable Alzheimer's disease. Does he have it too?



**Mary is 66.** Her husband had a heart attack and died two years ago. She's gained weight in recent years although her eating habits haven't changed. This makes her wonder if she is still attractive. Last month George, a man she met in her local senior center, asked her out. After a few dates, he suggested they become more intimate. Her husband had lost interest in having sex several years before he died, so Mary was surprised, but also pleased. George added to her surprise by asking if she had been with other men and suggested they use a condom to avoid HIV/AIDS.



11. The older a person gets, the less he or she needs sleep. T/F
12. Forgetfulness and even a little confusion are not necessarily signs of Alzheimer's disease. T/F
13. Sam's brother having Alzheimer's disease means Sam will get it too. T/F

Osteoporosis, heart disease, eye problems, trouble sleeping—just to name some of the things we've discussed. No wonder older people seem to take a lot of medicine!

14. Which age group uses the most prescription medicines?
  - a. Under age 18
  - b. Age 19 to 64
  - c. Over age 65

15. Why might Mary be gaining weight?
  - a. Her body needs less food as she gets older.
  - b. She is not exercising as much as in the past.
  - c. Both of the above
  - d. Neither of the above
16. People begin to lose interest in sex around age 50. T/F
17. What is George thinking? Do older people really have to worry about getting HIV/AIDS? Y/N

**Jim, 82,** lives alone on a pension. To save money in the winter he keeps his thermostat at 62, even when it's freezing outside. Now it's summer, and he refuses to buy a window air conditioner. When the weather report predicted 100° heat, his son Bob offered to pick Jim up and let him spend the day in Bob's cool house. Jim was grumpy and refused to leave his home.

- 18. Like Jim, most older people live alone. T/F
- 19. Do people always get grumpy as they age? Y/N
- 20. What about the heat? Can too much heat or cold be dangerous for older people? Y/N

It seems like older people are always going to the doctor. Or, is that just another myth about the aging population? Let's see.

- 21. Americans are living longer, so they are sicker and more disabled. T/F

**Harriet is 68.** She is always on the go—busy doing things around her house. And she has always managed the finances for her husband and herself because he worked long hours and she was a homemaker. But, lately she has been bothered by urinary incontinence. Sometimes she can't make it to the bathroom in time. Then last month, while hurrying to the bathroom, she slipped on a throw rug in the hall, fell, and broke her hip. She spent almost a week in the hospital and then several weeks in a care facility getting therapy. Her husband had trouble at home finding what he needed to pay the bills.

- 22. Urinary accidents are a fact of life for older people. T/F
- 23. Older people can't help falling. T/F
- 24. Make sure someone you trust knows where all your important papers are. T/F

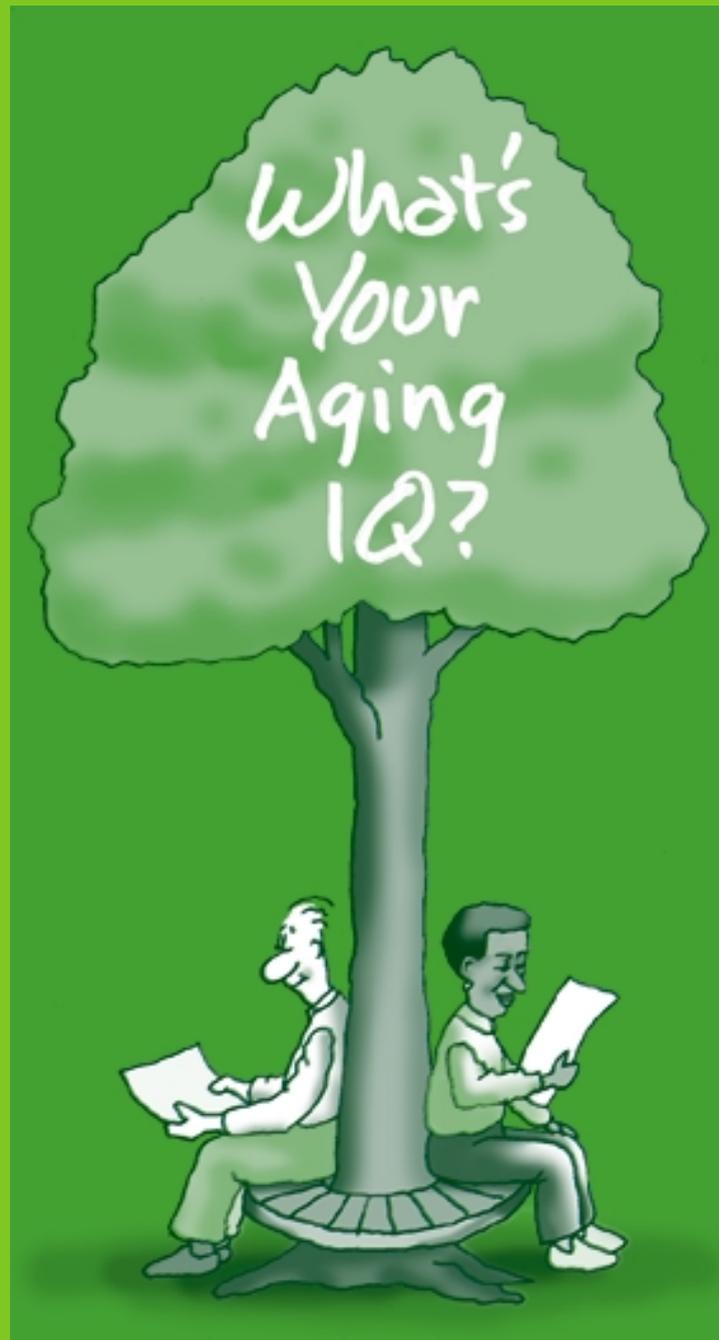


John, age 72, appears to be fairly healthy, but he takes several medicines regularly. There are pills for his high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and arthritis, plus a multi-vitamin. It's a little hard to keep track of them all. What he would really like is a "fountain of youth" pill. Maybe he'll try some of those dietary supplements. His daughter says exercise, eat well, and keep your mind active—you'll stay young at heart. She wants him to get a computer and learn how to email his grandchildren. He says, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks."

25. John should try a dietary supplement because we know they are natural, safe, and effective. T/F
26. John is right. Older people can't learn new things. T/F
27. Will there ever be a "fountain of youth" pill? Likely/Unlikely

So, since more Americans are living longer, will there be more people who are 100 or older in the future?

28. In 2002 there were an estimated 58,684 centenarians, people over the age of 100, in America. The estimated number of centenarians in the US in the year 2050 could be:
  - a. 112,000
  - b. 238,000
  - c. 1,095,000



Answers

## ANSWERS

1. **c.** Today, there are more than 4 million Americans 85 and older. That number is expected to grow almost 5 times larger by the year 2050, when the youngest baby boomers turn 86. That means there may then be more than 20 million people over age 85 in the U.S. Some researchers forecast even larger numbers—perhaps more than 28 million by that year.
2. **No.** Physical activity at any age can help make the heart, lungs, and muscles stronger. It may also lower blood pressure and, depending on the exercise, might help slow bone loss. The *Resources* section has information on how to get an exercise video and free exercise guide from the National Institute on Aging.
3. **Yes to both questions.** Women are at special risk for osteoporosis, but one in five Americans who have this disease or are at risk for developing it are men. Everyone can help prevent bone loss by eating foods rich in calcium and vitamin D and exercising regularly throughout life. Foods that have lots of calcium include milk and other dairy products, dark green leafy



## ANSWERS

- vegetables, salmon, sardines, and tofu. Activities like walking, biking, playing tennis, and dancing can also help. Medicines are available for those who need more than diet and exercise.
4. **Yes.** Surprised? Heart disease is the number one killer of both women and men. Everyone can lower their risk greatly by not smoking, following a healthy diet, being physically active, and keeping blood pressure and cholesterol levels under control.
  5. **True.** It's never too late to enjoy the benefits of quitting smoking. Soon after stopping, people of any age have better blood flow in their arms and legs. In a few months, breathing should become easier. People feel better and could possibly live longer. They certainly save money. After a time, food may even taste better. These are just a few of the reasons why it's a good idea to quit no matter what your age. Of course stopping is hard, but there are more kinds of help available than ever before. Talk to your health care provider. And, think how proud and happy Sylvia's children and grandchildren will be.
  6. **False.** Many older people can beat cancer, especially if it's found early in the course of the disease. Almost 2/3 of all cancer patients are older than 65. That means that screening in this age group is very important.

## ANSWERS

7. **c.** Did you expect cancer to be the answer? Well, you were correct. If you combine deaths from all types of cancer, then cancer is the second leading cause of death in older people. But, those numbers could be lowered. With early testing and treatment many people with cancer can be cured or at least add years to their lives. So, be sure to have regular checkups and go to your health care provider if you have any concerns.
8. **Yes.** More than half of people over age 65 lose eyesight because a cataract is clouding the lens of an eye. In cataract surgery the surgeon removes the cataract and puts in a new artificial lens. This is very successful at restoring sight. More than 90 percent of people say they can see better after this surgery, and this may make Harry a safer driver.
9. **No.** It is not possible to pick an age at which everyone is too old to drive. In general, older drivers—those over 65—are safe drivers. They drive fewer miles and avoid risky behaviors like speeding, drinking and driving, or driving at night, in heavy traffic, or on interstate highways. But, changes with age and disease in how the eyes, ears, brain, and body work may make things like yielding right-of-way, turning (especially left turns), changing lanes, and passing more troublesome for an older person behind the wheel. Both drivers and passengers over 70 are also more likely to

## ANSWERS

die from crash injuries because their bodies are more fragile and more easily hurt in an accident. Some of the reasons for older drivers' problems cannot be changed, but others, like Harry's cataract, can. Older people should get their vision and hearing checked regularly. Older drivers like Harry might feel more secure about driving if they take refresher training to improve their driving skills.



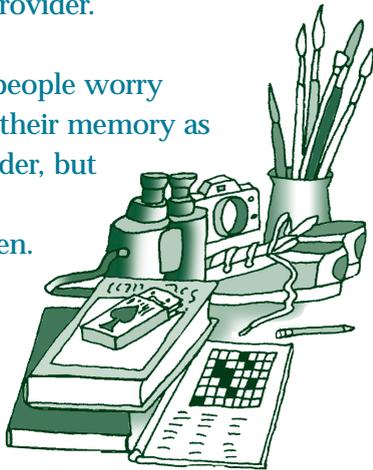
10. **No.** For many people their later years are an active, rewarding time of life. But others may become depressed. They could have trouble sleeping, remembering, or making decisions or could eat more or less than usual. If Harry's wife continues to worry about whether he is depressed, she should urge him to see a doctor. Once the cause of depression is known, the problem can often be treated. Depression can be caused by medicine or by physical illness or stress.

## ANSWERS

Family support, psychotherapy, or antidepressants may help. If someone seems to be depressed, he or she should get help from a doctor or mental health counselor. Depression is serious, but help is available.

11. **False.** In later life it's the quality of sleep that changes, not total sleep time. Older people may have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep. They may nap more during the day than a younger person does. Waking up tired every day, however, is not normal and can be helped. Sam needs to check with his health care provider.

12. **True.** Some people worry about losing their memory as they grow older, but this does not always happen. Finding a hobby, keeping an active mind, eating well, and staying physically active will help many people remain alert and clear-headed. Sometimes, however, a minor head injury, high fever, poor nutrition, adverse drug reaction, or depression, for example, can temporarily lead to confusion. When this happens, treating the problem may make the confusion



## ANSWERS

disappear. There are other conditions, such as Alzheimer's disease, that cause permanent damage to the brain and grow worse with time.

13. **False.** Alzheimer's disease (AD) is one form of dementia, a brain disorder that makes it hard for people to carry out their daily activities. AD, the most common form of dementia among older people, affects the parts of the brain that control thinking, memory, and language. Although it gets more common as people grow older, AD is not a normal part of aging. A rare form of AD, familial AD, occurs between the ages of 30 and 60 and may be inherited. There is no obvious family pattern in the more common form that occurs later in life. About 4 million Americans suffer from AD.
14. **c.** Almost 3/4 of people over 65 years old take at least one prescription drug, while only 1/5 of people under age 18 and less than 2/5 of people 19 to 64 do. Older people often have several health problems. More than one drug may be needed to treat them. They are also more likely to have a serious reaction to a drug. It's a good idea for everyone, no matter what age, to have a list of all prescription and over-the-counter medicines and supplements they use. They should bring the list whenever they have an appointment with any health

## ANSWERS

care provider. It's also wise to check with a doctor on a regular basis to make sure all drugs and doses still make sense.

15. **c.** Many people gain weight as they age. Along with changes in how the body uses food, older people are often less active. That means they usually need fewer calories—less food. But, a balanced diet is still important. So are valuable nutrients. An unplanned gain or loss of 10 pounds over 6 months is reason to check with a doctor.
16. **False.** A slowing of sexual response is a normal part of growing older. But, many older people want and can lead an active, satisfying sex life, no matter their age. When problems develop, they may be caused by illness such as Mary's husband's heart disease, disability, or medicines. Often, something can be done—for example, treat the illness, change a prescription, try a different position, or see a counselor.
17. **Yes.** George is right. About 10% of all people with AIDS in the United States were 50 or older when first diagnosed. This means that older people having sex need to take exactly the same precautions as younger people. They need to make sure their partners are HIV-negative and free of other sexually transmitted diseases. And, they need to

## ANSWERS

protect themselves by using a male or female latex condom during sex. If they use illicit drugs, they should not share needles or other materials.

18. **False.** Most older people are not alone. About 8 of every 10 older men and 6 of every 10 older women live in family settings—with a husband, wife, or other family members. Less than 5 percent of people over age 65 live in nursing homes



19. **No.** Personality has long been considered one of the constants of life. That is, people are likely to behave with age much as they have since becoming adults. However, recent research suggests that your personality may even change some throughout your life. So, it's possible that someone in their 60s,

## ANSWERS

70s, or 80s could become more conscientious and agreeable and less neurotic as they grow older. While small changes in personality are possible, major changes in personality are unlikely. For example, an outgoing, cheerful, assertive person is probably not going to change with aging into a solitary, cheerless, submissive person. In the same way, a calm, easygoing person does not change into a grumpy old person because of aging. Bob needs to question why his dad is grumpier than usual. Perhaps it's the heat.

20. **Yes.** A change in behavior such as becoming confused or grouchy can be a sign of heat stroke during hot weather or hypothermia in the cold. Getting too hot or too cold can make it hard for the human body to keep its temperature



## ANSWERS

around 98.6°. The brain works as the body's thermostat. For example, if a person gets too hot, the brain sends messages to glands in the skin to release fluids, the person sweats, and the skin cools down. If a person gets too cold, the brain sends messages to the muscles to start shivering, and that activity helps warm the person. With age, this thermostat in the body may not work as well as it did before. As a result, hot or cold weather is more likely to make an older person very sick more quickly. Bob should check on his dad and get him to medical help if Jim does not seem better.

21. **False.** As our population ages, the actual number of disabled older people is expected to grow. But disability rates for people age 65 and older—the percentage with a disability—are falling. For example, in 1982, 24 percent of Americans age 65 and older suffered a chronic disability, while by 1994, that percentage had fallen to 21 percent. Experts don't know how long this decline will continue, but it is a hopeful sign that disability can be reduced, even at advanced ages.
22. **False.** Millions of older people, especially older women like Harriet, have urinary incontinence or bladder control problems. But these are symptoms, not a disease. Incontinence can be caused

## ANSWERS

by infection, disease or injury, or the use of certain medicines. No matter the cause, treatment can usually help. Not treating incontinence might lead to serious complications like Harriet's fall.

23. **False.** Falls are a common cause of injuries in people over age 65, but they don't have to be. It is important to take steps to avoid falling. Vision and hearing should be checked regularly. There are ways to make sure the home is safe. Loose rugs, like the one Harriet slipped on, should be fastened down or removed, and electrical cords should be put out of the way. Some medicines can affect balance and coordination. A doctor can talk about any side effects of medicines he or she prescribes.
24. **True.** Whether someone has a large family or just a spouse or lives alone with no relatives nearby, he or she needs to prepare for the uncertainties of the future. No one expects to be too sick to pay bills, take care of his or her home, or to say how he or she wants to be cared for. But, sometimes this happens. That's why everyone should make sure someone they trust knows where all the important papers are kept—whether it's the checkbook, bills, a will, or an advanced directive for health care decisions.
25. **False.** We don't know which supple-

## ANSWERS

ments are effective or even safe. Dietary supplements are "big business" today. Many different types are sold, and you don't even need a prescription to buy them. But, it is not the US Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) job to check dietary supplements before they go on the market. In addition, the supplements' ingredients may have several effects on your body and can interfere with medications you may already be taking. Some have serious side effects. Make sure your doctor knows which supplements you are taking, even vitamins.

26. **False.** People of any age can still learn. There is even research showing that older people can improve skills they've had for years, for example, driving. Older people can also learn new skills like using computers to get information and keep in touch with their families.



## ANSWERS

27. **Unlikely.** Scientists have not found a magic drink or pill that will prolong lives and don't imagine they ever will. Aging is a complex process. There are things people can do to stay healthy and active as they age. John's daughter was on the right track. Eating a balanced diet, keeping mind and body active, not smoking, getting regular checkups, and practicing safety habits at home and in the car will help everyone make the most of life.
28. **c.** Using an estimate based on the 1990 census, the US Census Bureau has suggested there could be 1,095,000 centenarians in America in 2050. However, depending on changes in mortality rates at older ages and migration/immigration rates, the number could be as low as 757,000 or as high as 1,634,000.



## ANSWER SHEET

1. a. b. c.
2. Y / N
3. Y / N Y / N
4. Y / N
5. T / F
6. T / F
7. a. b. c.
8. Y / N
9. Y / N
10. Y / N
11. T / F
12. T / F
13. T / F
14. a. b. c.
15. a. b. c. d.
16. T / F
17. Y / N
18. T / F
19. Y / N
20. Y / N
21. T / F
22. T / F
23. T / F
24. T / F
25. T / F
26. T / F
27. Likely / Unlikely
28. a. b. c.

## ANSWER SHEET

### SHARE YOUR AGING IQ QUIZ WITH A FRIEND

1. a. b. c.
2. Y / N
3. Y / N Y / N
4. Y / N
5. T / F
6. T / F
7. a. b. c.
8. Y / N
9. Y / N
10. Y / N
11. T / F
12. T / F
13. T / F
14. a. b. c.
15. a. b. c. d.
16. T / F
17. Y / N
18. T / F
19. Y / N
20. Y / N
21. T / F
22. T / F
23. T / F
24. T / F
25. T / F
26. T / F
27. Likely / Unlikely
28. a. b. c.

So, how did you do? Did you already know everything? Or, perhaps some of the answers surprised you. How can you know that those surprising answers were actually true? All this information comes from the National Institute on Aging (NIA), part of the Federal Government's National Institutes of Health (NIH) at the US Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). We at the NIA conduct and support research on aging and educate the public about our findings. You can contact us for free publications on many aspects of growing older. One of these is *Exercise: A Guide from the National Institute on Aging*. This 80-page illustrated brochure is available in English or Spanish, and it's free. A kit with both the book and a 48-minute exercise video, in English, is available for \$7. More information about many of the subjects discussed in this aging IQ test is available from the Institute in a series of fact sheets known as *Age Pages*. For these publications or a publications list contact:

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