



Celebrate Elderhood
Facts on Aging* Series, Article 1

Celebrate Elderhood is a Kalamazoo County initiative that brings attention to the issues of aging, challenging myths and misconceptions so elders can reach their full potential no matter what their circumstances are, benefiting themselves, their families and communities. In this article and those to follow, we will explore the myths and realities of aging.

Myth #1 – Dementia is a normal part of aging. FALSE

Getting a little forgetful is a normal part of aging. It is normal to forget milk at the store, or to forget someone's name. It is not normal to become so forgetful that it is impossible to manage the tasks of everyday life.

Dementia is a severe form of memory loss and is not normal. There are a variety of causes of dementia and some can even be reversed. Malnutrition, depression, dehydration and drug interactions can all lead to dementia. Depression can be treated with talk therapy or medication and the dementia from depression may be reversed. Once the person receives proper nutrition and/or adequate liquids, the dementia may lift. Physicians should always be informed of all medications a person is taking to avoid the dementia that can result from bad combinations of drugs.

More severe and long-term forms of dementia are caused by diseases such as Parkinson's, strokes or brain injuries. Alzheimer's disease is the most common kind of dementia and causes severe memory loss and confusion. Alzheimer's disease creates physical changes in the brain and people with it eventually fail to recognize their own family members and sometimes themselves. There is no cure for Alzheimer's disease and the cause is still unknown. According to the 2016 Alzheimer's disease Facts and Figures Report published by the Alzheimer's Association, one in nine people 65 and older (11%) have Alzheimer's disease. About one-third of people age 85 and older have Alzheimer's disease. Alzheimer's disease is not a normal part of aging.

Myth #2 – As people grow older, their intelligence declines significantly. FALSE

Current research evidence suggests that intellectual performance in healthy individuals holds up well into old age. The average magnitude of intellectual decline is typically small in the 60s and 70s. In the 80s there is more average decline observed, although even in this age range there are substantial individual differences. Little or no decline appears to be associated with being free of cardiovascular disease, little decline in perceptual speed, at least average socioeconomic status, a stimulating and engaged lifestyle and having flexible attitudes and behaviors at mid-life. TIP: Intellectual decline can be modified by life-style interventions, such as physical activity, healthy diet, mental stimulation and social interaction.

*Contributors to this article are: Judy Sivak, Director, Region IIIA Area Agency on Aging, Vicki Martin, MA, LPC Administrator, Senior Services Southwest Michigan, and Breytspraak, L. & Badura, L. (2015) Facts on Aging Quiz (revised; based on Palmore (1977; 1981).