

SENIOR LIVING GUIDE

Normal Aging vs. Cognitive Decline

» BY ALICE P. PAXTON

Aging is a gradual, continuous process of natural changes that begin in early adulthood. People do not become older or elderly at any specific age.

Traditionally, age 65 has been designated as the beginning of older age. You can begin to apply for Social Security at age 65 – but the reason is based on history not biology.

Normal aging refers to the universal, gradual and inevitable biological changes that occur over time. These include gray hair, wrinkling skin, reduced bone density and slower processing speeds.

Changes occur in both your body and your mind. They occur while you're still maintaining your independence. Normal aging is distinctly different from disease-related cognitive decline.

Most older people remember many ordinary things, such as how to sing a familiar song and tie a shoe. Currently, many people live into their 90s and beyond without any significant signs of cognitive impairment. It may take them longer to recall a word or a name, but their general language ability, vocabulary and reasoning capacity can remain relatively intact.

In between age-associated memory impairment and dementia there is a condition known as Mild Cognitive Impairment.

MILD COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENT

Mild Cognitive Impairment occurs when there is more difficulty with memory and thinking than what is expected at a per-

son's age. Cognitive deterioration beyond normal aging expectations can stem from a neurodegenerative disorder or be linked to factors such as vitamin deficiency, sleep disturbances or medication side effects, potentially allowing for reversibility.

Individuals with this impairment often experience heightened memory and cognitive challenges, leading to difficulties in daily tasks, verbal expression and feeling easily frustrated, disorganized and overwhelmed despite maintaining some level of independence.



Alice Paxton

While research continues to focus on diagnosis, treatments and cures, considerable emphasis has shifted toward studying lifestyle and environmental modifications that can reduce the risk and delay the development of cognitive decline.

Investing in preventative health, like being fitted for hearing aids, has been shown to reduce brain damage due to normal biological aging. A 2024 report of The Lancet Commission estimates that nearly 50% of all dementia cases are preventable.

Experts agree that physical exercise, staying active socially and engaging in cognitively stimulating activities or hobbies can help protect against cognitive decline by building mental muscle or cognitive reserve. These activities have virtually no downsides.

HOW TO WARD OFF COGNITIVE DECLINE

Some healthy lifestyle and environmental modifications have been scientifically validated to reduce the risk of cognitive decline. These include:



Engaging in mentally stimulating activities such as crossword puzzles can help older adults protect against cognitive decline.

- Maintain a healthy diet.
- Exercise regularly to whatever degree is possible for you. Breaking a sweat builds your brain.
- If you aren't working or socially active, consider getting involved somewhere to be socially and intellectually stimulated.
- Try to get the best medical care possible if something seems to be physically or psychologically wrong. Talk with your doctor and ask them to adjust medications that may affect

your cognition.

- Correct even mild hearing or vision loss. Reduced activity in the brain due to age-related sensory changes can lead to faster rates of atrophy and an increased risk of cognitive decline and dementia.
- Address sleep problems. If untreated, they may contribute to cognitive decline and affect the brain's resilience.
- Moderate or eliminate alcohol consumption and stop using tobacco products.
- Minimize stress.

Prioritizing healthy habits will have a measurable impact on the future incidence of your cognitive decline. For most people, maintaining general good health requires more effort as you age. The sooner you develop these healthy habits the better. Be proactive to ensure your best life as you age.

Alice Paxton, M.Ed., CDP, is the founder and CEO of Paladin Life Care, which provides care and advocacy for senior clients and those with disabilities in Virginia, Maryland and the District of Columbia.



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New Events Announced for 2026 Senior Olympics

Rock climbing, weight lifting and the game of darts will be new events in the 2026 Northern Virginia Senior Olympics.

This year's Senior Olympics are scheduled to be held from Sept. 9 through Oct. 4. Several events will be held before the official opening on Saturday, Sept. 19, at the Thomas Jefferson Community Center in Arlington.

Over 70 events will take place at more than 30 venues across Northern Virginia. Most events are in five- and 10-year age groups and by gender.

"We are quite proud of the diversity of events offered each year, truly something for everybody," said Mi-

chael Coleman, chair of the event. In addition to traditional athletic events, such as track and field, tennis, swimming, cycling, pickleball and golf, the Senior Olympics also includes competitions in Scrabble, canasta, Mah Jongg, poker, line dancing and jigsaw puzzles.

A full list of events is at www.nvso.us. The registration fee is \$20 for an unlimited number of events. Registration is open July 6-Aug. 24.

The Senior Olympics are sponsored by the counties of Arlington, Fairfax, Fauquier, Loudoun and Prince William and the cities of Alexandria, Fairfax and Falls Church.