

A Guide to Managing Your Health

Portuguese American Older Adults



As an older Portuguese American person, this resource is for you, whether you were born in the United States (US) or came from another country. You may have higher risks for some diseases because of your genetics, health habits, how the healthcare system treats you, your environment, or immigration status. Health concerns include heart disease and stroke, obesity, diabetes, breathing disorders, and depression.

When you visit your healthcare professional, let them know about your health needs, cultural beliefs and practices, and questions you may have. Your healthcare professionals need to know this information because they want to give you good care and keep you as healthy as possible.

We will discuss some high-risk diseases among Portuguese Americans, and tips to talk with your healthcare professional about your health.

Common Healthcare Concerns of Older Portuguese Americans

Alcohol Use

You or your family members may drink wine, beer, or other alcoholic beverages, especially with meals. However, drinking too much alcohol as an older adult may lead to higher risks of falls or other injuries, as well as impact other health conditions you may have. It is recommended that older men have no more than two drinks a day, and older women have no more than one drink a day. Drinking less alcohol is better for your health than drinking more.

Breathing disorders

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is common in Portuguese Americans. Smoking is the most common cause of breathing disorders. If you smoke, please try to quit, and stay away from people who are smoking. Air pollution can make your breathing worse also.

Medications and exercise can improve your breathing. Healthcare professionals and pharmacists can show you how to use your inhalers correctly.

Depression and mental illness

Depression and severe sadness are not normal conditions caused by getting older, and if you are feeling symptoms, you should not ignore them. You should not feel shame or embarrassment if you are feeling depressed. Depression is a serious health condition that can lead to other health problems. Your symptoms could be due to chemical imbalances in your brain.

For some older adults, sadness is not the main symptom. Depressive symptoms can include:

- Feeling sad, tired, or irritable
- Lacking interest in hobbies and activities you used to enjoy
- Having trouble sleeping or sleeping too long
- Having a poor appetite
- Being confused or having problems with thinking (these symptoms can appear to be dementia)

If you have depressive symptoms, especially if you have thoughts of hurting yourself or others, talk to your healthcare professional who can recommend treatments including counseling, meditation, or medication that can help you feel better. Depression and mental illnesses are like heart or lung diseases and need to be treated. Support is available to cope with symptoms, and family and friends can be involved if you want them to.

Diabetes

Diabetes causes high blood sugar levels and leads to other health problems, including damage to your eyes, kidneys, and heart. Diabetes can get worse if you eat unhealthy foods, do little exercise, or are overweight or obese.

Talk with your healthcare professional about how to eat healthily, exercise regularly, and take the medications you need. Some tips include:

- Decrease carbohydrates (such as white bread and pasta) and sweets (such as chocolate) in your diet.
- Eat more vegetables and low-calorie foods.
- Drink water (preferred) or sugar-free beverages instead of sugary drinks.
- Increase your exercise. It is recommended to exercise for 30 minutes per day, five days a week, but any amount of physical activity is good for your health.

Your healthcare professional will check your blood sugar, blood pressure, cholesterol, and kidney function. You need to check your feet daily and report any skin problems to your healthcare professional immediately. You need your eyes checked every year and visit a dentist every 6 months. Be sure to have your vaccinations up to date.

Be aware of immediate risks to your health.

- If you have chest pain and/or shortness of breath, you might be having a heart attack. If so, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room right away.
- Strokes happen when the brain's blood supply is blocked or stopped. Brain cells can die within minutes. If you have trouble speaking, weakness on one side of your body, severe headache, or loss of vision or balance, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room right away.

Obesity

Eating more food than your body needs can make you overweight or obese. If you eat foods that are high in fat and sugar or drink sugary drinks, you can gain weight. Getting little exercise and having sleep problems can also cause you to gain weight.

Being overweight or obese can lead to diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, stroke, heart disease, sleep apnea (problems with breathing during sleep), and even cancer. Obesity can also make breathing worse and cause more arthritis pain and problems with walking or moving.

Talk to your healthcare professional about ways to lose weight and improve your fitness and quality of life. Some ways to lose weight include:

- Stop eating unhealthy food and eat more fruit and vegetables. Decrease how much you eat by 500 calories each day. A dietitian (a person trained in healthy nutrition) can evaluate what you usually eat and help you create a healthier diet.
- Walk or exercise for 30 minutes, five days a week. Resistance exercises and strength training, such as lifting weights, are important to avoid losing muscles as you age.

Common Healthcare Concerns of Older Portuguese Americans

■ Join a Silver Sneakers exercise program. Some insurance programs will pay for it. You can also work with a physical therapist who can create a good exercise plan with you. Free exercise videos found on the internet can help you create an exercise program at home.

Tobacco and Marijuana Use

Smoking causes health problems:

- Tobacco has chemicals that are bad for your health. They can cause cancer, lung disease, high blood pressure, and strokes.
- Marijuana and tobacco can cause the heart to beat faster and increase blood pressure.
- E-cigarettes (vaping) and smokeless tobacco (chewing gum, snuff tobacco) also cause serious

health problems.

■ Your family and friends breathe in your smoke and can get health problems from second-hand smoke. For example, children who live with people who smoke can develop asthma.

Older adults who quit can improve their health. However, it can be hard to stop. Get help:

- Talk with your healthcare professional about ways to quit smoking.
- Call 1-800-QUIT-NOW. It is a toll-free number operated by the National Cancer Institute that will connect you directly to your state's tobacco quit line support system.
- Take medications that can help you stop smoking.

Communicating With Your Healthcare Team

Your healthcare team can include physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, nurses, nursing assistants, social workers, pharmacists, therapists, and others. Each team member has special training to help you in different ways.

Your healthcare team will want to know about you, your culture, and what is important to you! You will receive the best care by sharing your cultural beliefs and health practices. These beliefs and practices can affect your healthcare and treatments. See the Tip Sheet on Cultural Considerations when Communicating with Your Healthcare Team for helpful suggestions.

Note that if you have immigrated to the U.S., your immigration history may be an important part of your personal story. If your healthcare professional knows your history, that will let them know if you have an increased risk of diseases that are common in other countries. It will also help your healthcare professional to know how much access you had to health care before coming to the United States. This information can be sensitive, but we encourage you to share this with your healthcare professional for better care and prevention.

We hope this information has been helpful to you. Be sure to let your healthcare providers know if you or your family members have any questions.



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The AGS Health in Aging Foundation is dedicated to improving the health, independence, and quality of life of all older people. We aim to empower older adults and caregivers to actively participate in their health care and decision-making.

DISCLAIMER: This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other healthcare provider. Always consult your healthcare provider about your medications, symptoms, and health problems. August 2024
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