

A Guide to Managing Your Health

Vietnamese American Older Adults



As an older Vietnamese American person, this resource is for you, whether you were born in the United States (U.S.) 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, diabetes, cancer, Hepatitis B, 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 Vietnamese American older adults, and tips to talk with your healthcare professional about your health.

Special Healthcare Concerns of Older Vietnamese Americans

Cancer

Vietnamese Americans are at risk for cancer. For women, these risks include cancers of the thyroid, cervix, and stomach. For men the risks include liver, stomach, and nasopharynx (part of the respiratory system). Discovering cancer early leads to better results. So:

- Tell your healthcare provider about any new symptoms. If you don't, cancer can be harder to find and treat.
- Make an appointment with your healthcare professional quickly if you experience any of the following: feeling a lump in your breast; developing new shortness of breath, a long-lasting cough, or

coughing up blood; or finding blood in your urine or feces.

- Ask your healthcare professional to screen for cancer so it can be found earlier.

Avoiding alcohol and stopping smoking are some of the best things you can do to lower your risk of cancer. A diet full of vegetables and fruit and regular exercise can decrease your risk of getting cancer. So can eating a diet low in salt and fat.

Depression

Getting older doesn't always lead to depression or severe sadness. These conditions can be caused by chemical imbalances in your brain. Having chronic illnesses or being in the hospital can increase the risk

for depression.

Depression is a serious health condition and can lead to other health problems. Symptoms of depression 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 symptoms of depression or have thoughts of hurting yourself or others, talk to your healthcare professional as soon as you can. They can recommend counseling and medications. Family members and friends can support you when you are depressed.

Depression is a disease that needs treatment. Medications and behavior therapy can help.

Diabetes

Diabetes causes high blood sugar levels and leads to other health problems, including damage to your eyes, kidneys, and heart. People with diabetes are also at higher risk of developing wounds on the feet that are difficult to heal. Diabetes can get worse if you eat foods high in sugar or fat, do little exercise, or are overweight or obese.

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

- Decrease carbohydrates in your diet, such as white bread and pasta or sweets
- Eat more vegetables and low calorie foods
- Drink water (preferred) or sugar-free beverages instead of sugary beverages
- 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 to have your eyes checked every 1 to 2 years. Be sure to take any medications your healthcare professional has recommended.

Heart Disease and Stroke

Your risk of having a heart attack or stroke is higher if you have high blood pressure, heart failure, diabetes, obesity, or if you smoke or do little physical activity.

Be sure to eat lots of fruits and vegetables and only a little meat and few sweets. Eating foods low in fat and salt is important. Limit the alcohol you drink to one drink per day for women and two for men.

Other things can reduce your risks. These include getting daily exercise, quitting smoking, controlling blood pressure, and taking recommended medications. Talk to your healthcare professionals about how to reduce your risks and follow their advice.

Be aware of immediate risks to your health.

- Heart attacks happen when the blood flow to part of the heart is blocked or stopped. If you have chest pain and/or shortness of breath, you might be having a heart attack. If so, you need to 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 you need to call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room right away.

Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B is an infection that can spread through body fluids. This makes testing and vaccination very important.

If a person with Hepatitis B doesn't get treatment, they can have serious liver disease later in life. There are higher rates of untreated Hepatitis B infections in Asian immigrant populations.

Tell your healthcare professional if you have never been tested for or vaccinated for Hepatitis B.

Preventive Health

Preventing or discovering disease early can limit damage to your body. Seeing your healthcare professional at least once a year will help you find out about diseases early so that they are easier to treat and you have better results.

Your healthcare professional will discuss preventive healthcare with you. For example:

- Hepatitis B testing
- Cancer screenings are important. Some common

Special Healthcare Concerns of Older Vietnamese Americans

screening tests are mammograms, prostate exams, and colonoscopies.

■ Vaccinations including flu, pneumonia, shingles, and COVID-19 shots can prevent serious infections. If you are concerned about getting vaccinations, ask your healthcare professional for more information.

Let your healthcare professional and pharmacists know if you take home remedies, herbs, vitamins, or supplements. These professionals can help make sure these remedies are safe to take with your other medications and treatments.

Tobacco Use

Smoking causes health problems:

■ Tobacco has chemicals that are bad for your health. These chemicals can cause cancer, lung disease, high blood pressure, and strokes.

■ Marijuana 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 by:

■ Talking with your healthcare professional about ways to quit smoking.

■ Calling 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.

■ Taking 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 care practices. These beliefs and practices can affect your health and healthcare 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 United States, 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. Also tell your healthcare professional if you receive care from a provider trained in a different tradition than that used in US clinics and hospitals, such as from traditional Chinese medicine or other alternative cultural providers. This information can be sensitive, but we encourage you to share this with your healthcare professional.

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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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. May 2024

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