



News Column for Week of May 20, 2019

Barbara Stockebrand
Southwind Extension District –Yates Center
Family and Consumer Sciences

The Five Senses and Aging

Most of us can relate the aging process to the visual changes we observe. We might not move as quickly and we are not as stable on our feet.

What about the aging process when it comes to our senses (hearing, vision, taste, smell, touch)? These are often more gradual and less noticeable changes.

Our senses collect and turn information into sensations that our brain interprets. A certain level of stimulation is required before a sensation is created, often referred to as a threshold. With aging, the threshold is raised requiring more stimulation to create a sensation.

Hearing and vision are usually the senses most affected by aging. Our ears have a two-fold purpose. Obviously we need our ears to hear, but we also require the inner ear for balance. With age, there can be functional decline within the ear along with some structural changes. The result can be more difficulty in picking up sound – sometimes certain sounds. There may also be more difficulty maintaining balance when sitting, standing, and walking.

Vision takes place when light passes through the various parts of the eye creating a sensation. As with the ears, the eye structure changes with age. Vision is less sharp, it's harder to focus on close-up objects, glare begins to interfere, and peripheral vision declines. The field of vision gets smaller and depth perception can be affected. Navigating unlevel ground becomes more difficult. Driving may become dangerous – especially at night.

The sense of smell enhances the taste of the food we eat. Nerve endings that create smell sensations in our nose can diminish with age. A loss in the sense of smell can make it more difficult to detect smoke, gas fumes or spoiled food.

It's natural to lose taste buds over the years with the sweet and salty tastes being the first to decline. We may have a sixth of the taste buds in our late 70's as we had in our early 20's. This makes for a clearer understanding of why food may not taste as good to an older adult. Smoking along with some diseases speed up the loss in taste and smell.

Aging reduces the sensitivity of the touch sensation. A natural decrease in elasticity, thinning of the skin, and reduction in circulation can be contributing factors. The brain interprets the sense of touch as to whether it is a pleasant, neutral, or unpleasant sensation. A decline in the sense of touch can challenge the sensation of pain to where the older adult may not realize they are scalding themselves with hot water or experiencing cold to the point of hypothermia.

Everyone will experience sensory decline at different levels. However, when we know there are natural reductions of our senses as we age, we can be encouraged to take steps now to postpone or slow the progression of the decline.

Begin by taking care of your body by eating a nutritious diet and staying physically active. Wear ear protection when working around loud noises, such as engines and lawn mowers. Keep the music volume down. Wear eye protection when working around flying debris. Also remember to wear a hat and sunglasses when out in the sun. Don't smoke. Protect your skin from the sun with sunscreen or lightweight clothing.

For more information on aging, contact a Southwind Extension District office or go to www.southwind.ksu.edu.