MIDLIFE AND OLDER ADULTS' HEALTH: KNOWLEDGE AND CONCERNS

MAY 2021

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KEY FINDINGS

Executive Summary

- Older adults rated that their **overall health in a variety of ways**, but **level of income** made a notable difference.
 - The majority of adults 40-plus rated their overall health as *good*, *very good*, or *excellent*, with little variability by age. However, those whose annual household income is less than \$30,000 were more likely than those with higher incomes to rate their overall health as *fair* or *poor*.
 - Men and younger respondents noted improved overall health in past two years, while respondents with household incomes of less than \$30,000 said their overall health had *gotten worse*.
- Adults 40-plus generally gave **higher ratings to their mental health than to their overall health**.
 - Adults 40–59 and those with household incomes of \$50,000 or less rated their mental health status as *fair* or *poor*.
 - Men were more likely to consider their mental and overall health as *excellent* or *very good*.
- **Stress levels are high**, with younger adults, women, and less affluent adults feeling it more.
- **Eight in 10 adults 40-plus report some sort of health condition**. Only one-fifth say they do not have any of the health conditions about which they were asked.
 - While many physical health conditions (e.g., high blood pressure, arthritis, and high cholesterol) were more common among older respondents, mental health conditions like anxiety and depression were significantly more prevalent among those age 40–59.
 - Women were more likely to have experienced anxiety, arthritis, asthma, and osteoporosis, while men were more likely to have experienced heart disease.

Executive Summary

- Nearly nine in 10 older adults noted that **maintaining brain health, getting enough sleep, and not being dependent on drugs, alcohol or other substances** are *extremely* or *very important* to staying healthy.
 - Except for exercise, women were more likely to consider all health practices as *extremely* or *very important* to staying healthy. The most affluent adults 40-plus were more likely than their less affluent counterparts to consider nearly half of them as *extremely* or *very important*.
- **Maintaining brain health and a healthy weight were the biggest health concerns** as adults ages.
 - Concerns about brain health, vision, hearing loss, and colorectal cancer increased by age, while concerns about depression decreased by age. Women were more concerned than men about a healthy weight, their brain health, osteoarthritis/osteoporosis, and breast cancer.
- Notable **lack of knowledge about health conditions poses potential risks**.
 - Men 40-plus were least knowledgeable about breast cancer, liver disease, and lower respiratory disease, with lack of knowledge generally more common among older men, although it tapered off among those 70 and older.
 - Overall, women 40-plus were least knowledgeable about liver, lower respiratory, and kidney diseases, but women 40–49 were less knowledgeable than their older counterparts about hearing loss or decline, cervical or endometrial cancer, and vision loss.

DETAILED FINDINGS

Older adults rated their overall health in a variety of ways, but level of income made a notable difference.

Rating of overall health

Total, by age, by gender, and by household income

■ Poor ■ Fair ■ Good ■ Very good ■ Excellent

Q1. How would you rate your overall health?

Base: All respondents (n=1,505)

Men and younger respondents reported improved overall health in past two years.

Reported change in overall health over the past two years
By age and by gender

Q3. Over the past two years, would you say your **overall health** has gotten better, stayed the same, or gotten worse?
Base: All respondents (n=1,505)

But less affluent older adults reported that their overall health had gotten worse.

Reported change in overall health over the past two years
Total and by household income

Q3. Over the past two years, would you say your **overall health** has gotten better, stayed the same, or gotten worse?
Base: All respondents (n=1,505)

Adults 40-plus gave higher ratings to their mental health than to their overall health.

Rating of overall health and mental health

Q1. How would you rate your overall health? Q2. How would you describe your overall mental health at this point in time? Base: All respondents (n=1,505)

Adults 40–59 and those with lower household incomes reported poorer mental health.

Rating of mental health

Total, by age, by gender, and by household income

■ Poor ■ Fair ■ Good ■ Very good ■ Excellent

Q2. How would you describe your overall mental health at this point in time?

Base: All respondents (n=1,505)

Men were more likely to report their mental and overall health as *excellent* or *very good*.

Rating of mental and overall health
By gender

Q1. How would you rate your overall health? Q2. How would you describe your overall mental health at this point in time? Base: All respondents (n=1,505)

Stress levels are high, with younger adults, women, and less affluent adults feeling more stressed.

Self-reported level of stress
Total, by age, by gender, and by household income

Q23. On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is extremely low and 10 is extremely high, please rate the overall level of stress in your life today.
Base: All respondents (n=1,505)

Those in *fair* or *poor* health were also the most stressed.

Self-reported level of stress
By overall health

Q23. On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is extremely low and 10 is extremely high, please rate the overall level of stress in your life today.
Base: All respondents (n=1,505)

A large majority of older adults reported some sort of health condition.

Percent who have the following health conditions

Q4. Many people have various health conditions. Please tell me if you have any of the following health conditions.
Base: All respondents (n=1,505)

Reported health conditions varied by age and gender.

While many physical health conditions (e.g., high blood pressure, arthritis, and high cholesterol) were more common among older respondents, mental health conditions like anxiety and depression were significantly more prevalent among those age 40–59.

Health Conditions – by Gender and Age	Men	Women	Age 40–49	Age 50–59	Age 60–69	Age 70+
	n=700	n=800	n=434	n=455	n=344	n=281
High blood pressure	37%	35%	24%	33%	47%	44%
Arthritis	24%	33%	16%	30%	34%	42%
High cholesterol	27%	25%	13%	27%	34%	33%
Chronic pain	18%	22%	20%	25%	15%	20%
Anxiety	24%	34%	40%	36%	19%	14%
Diabetes	19%	16%	14%	16%	20%	22%
Depression	24%	29%	36%	34%	17%	10%
Heart disease	8%	4%	2%	4%	5%	16%
Complications due to a fall, etc.	8%	7%	6%	8%	7%	9%
Respiratory disease	7%	7%	5%	6%	9%	10%
Gastric distress	7%	8%	9%	7%	8%	6%
Asthma	8%	14%	16%	10%	10%	6%
Osteoporosis	3%	8%	2%	5%	4%	14%
Cancer	4%	4%	2%	3%	2%	9%
Alzheimer's or dementia	2%	<1%	1%	<1%	<1%	3%
None of the above	23%	15%	25%	15%	21%	11%

Q4. Many people have various health conditions. Please tell me if you have any of the following health conditions.
(Base: All respondents)

Prevalence of health conditions declined with income.

Percent who have the following health conditions
Among those earning **less than \$30K (n=467)** and **\$50K or more (n=607)**

Q4. Many people have various health conditions. Please tell me if you have any of the following health conditions.
Base: All respondents (n=1,505)

Views on the importance of health practices varied by gender and income.

Except for exercise, women were more likely to consider all health practices as *extremely* or *very important* to staying healthy. The most affluent were more likely than their less affluent counterparts to consider nearly half of the health practices as *extremely* or *very important*.

<i>Extremely or Very Important in Staying Healthy</i>	Total	Men	Women	< \$30K	\$30K–\$49K	\$50K+
<i>Total and by Gender and Income</i>	(n=1,505)	(n=700)	(n=800)	(n=467)	(n=368)	(n=607)
Maintaining brain health	89%	85%	91%	87%	86%	91%
Getting enough sleep	88%	84%	90%	87%	86%	88%
Not being dependent on alcohol, drugs, and other substances	86%	82%	89%	86%	86%	85%
Reducing stress	84%	81%	87%	83%	84%	86%
Maintaining a healthy weight	82%	78%	85%	80%	79%	87%
Having a sense of purpose in life	82%	78%	87%	82%	80%	86%
Having a yearly physical or check-up	79%	73%	84%	79%	74%	82%
Getting enough regular exercise	78%	76%	80%	77%	73%	83%
Eating healthy foods	78%	75%	82%	77%	74%	84%
Having regular check-ups for your vision	76%	68%	82%	76%	72%	77%
Practicing safe sex	74%	69%	78%	72%	74%	76%
Getting regular routine dental check-ups and cleanings	72%	65%	77%	66%	69%	79%
Getting recommended immunizations	68%	64%	71%	62%	69%	72%
Socializing with friends, family, and community	65%	58%	71%	59%	65%	70%
Taking vitamins and supplements	62%	57%	66%	62%	64%	62%

Q5. I'm going to read you a short list and ask you how important you think each item is in your staying healthy.

Base: All respondents (n=1,505)

Maintaining brain health and a healthy weight were the biggest health concerns.

Biggest concerns as one ages

Percentage of Respondents Who Reported Discussing These Topics As Biggest Health Concerns: continued

Lung cancer	11%
Colorectal cancer	11%
Breast cancer	11%
None of these	9%
Kidney disease	9%
Cervical or endometrial cancer [Women Only]	8%
Chronic lower respiratory disease	7%
Chronic liver disease	5%
Other	3%

Q12. What, if any, are your biggest health concerns as you age? Base: All respondents (n=1,505)

Women were more concerned about a healthy weight, their brain health, osteoarthritis or osteoporosis, and breast cancer.

Biggest health concerns as one ages
Among **females (n=800)** and **males (n=700)**

Q12. What, if any, are your biggest health concerns as you age? Base: All respondents (n=1,505)

Concerns about brain health, vision, hearing loss, and colorectal cancer increased by age. Concerns about depression decreased by age.

<i>Biggest Health Concerns— by Age</i>	Age 40–49	Age 50–59	Age 60–69	Age 70+
	<i>n=434</i>	<i>n=455</i>	<i>n=334</i>	<i>n=281</i>
Maintaining brain health	27%	36%	38%	51%
Maintaining a healthy weight	33%	38%	35%	40%
Maintaining muscle mass and strength	23%	30%	27%	44%
Heart disease	26%	31%	29%	29%
Vision decline or loss	22%	30%	32%	36%
Diabetes	24%	28%	24%	26%
Depression	34%	30%	13%	11%
Prostate cancer (men only)	7%	10%	10%	17%
Dental health	23%	23%	18%	20%
Stroke	16%	22%	21%	22%
Hearing decline or loss	12%	18%	24%	28%
Osteoarthritis or osteoporosis	11%	21%	20%	25%
Erectile dysfunction (men only)	6%	10%	7%	9%
Pneumonia and influenza	7%	12%	16%	19%
Lung cancer	12%	12%	12%	8%
Colorectal cancer	5%	11%	13%	17%
Breast cancer	14%	11%	9%	10%
None of these	13%	8%	8%	6%
Kidney disease	8%	10%	7%	13%
Cervical or endometrial cancer (women only)	7%	3%	3%	2%
Chronic lower respiratory disease	6%	7%	7%	10%
Chronic liver disease	6%	7%	4%	4%
Other	2%	3%	4%	6%

Q12. What, if any, are your biggest health concerns as you age? Base: All respondents (n=1,505)

Men 40-plus were the *least knowledgeable* about breast cancer, liver disease, and lower respiratory disease.

Percentage of males not very or not at all knowledgeable about the following health risks

Q13. [MEN ONLY] How knowledgeable do you feel about the following health risks for men as they age? Is that extremely, very, somewhat, not very, or not at all knowledgeable? (n=700)

Lack of knowledge was generally more common among older men, tapering off among those 70-plus.

<i>Not very or Not at all Knowledgeable Among Men — by Age</i>	Age 40–49	Age 50–59	Age 60–69	Age 70+
	<i>n=434</i>	<i>n=455</i>	<i>n=334</i>	<i>n=281</i>
Breast cancer	39%	56%	62%	53%
Chronic liver disease	34%	45%	61%	47%
Chronic respiratory disease	30%	48%	54%	50%
Kidney disease	27%	34%	43%	42%
Osteoarthritis or osteoporosis	29%	38%	45%	37%
Colorectal cancer	32%	37%	25%	29%
Lung cancer	25%	33%	41%	31%
Erectile dysfunction	23%	31%	37%	23%
Prostate cancer	27%	27%	30%	15%
Cognitive decline	20%	27%	34%	19%
Hearing decline or loss	23%	29%	33%	17%
Depression or suicide	14%	26%	35%	29%
Diabetes	16%	25%	33%	21%
Stroke	19%	27%	23%	18%
Heart disease	17%	23%	27%	15%
Vision decline or loss	15%	21%	23%	17%

Q13. [MEN ONLY] How knowledgeable do you feel about the following health risks for men as they age? Is that extremely, very, somewhat, not very, or not at all knowledgeable? (n=700)

Women 40-plus were the *least knowledgeable* about liver, lower respiratory, and kidney diseases.

Percent of females not very or not at all knowledgeable about the following health risks

Q14. [WOMEN ONLY] How knowledgeable do you feel about the following health risks for women as they age? Is that extremely, very, somewhat, not very, or not at all knowledgeable? (n=800)

Women 40–49 were *least knowledgeable* about hearing loss or decline, cervical or endometrial cancer, and vision loss.

<i>Not very or Not at all knowledgeable Among Women — by Age</i>	Age 40–49	Age 50–59	Age 60–69	Age 70+
	<i>n=434</i>	<i>n=455</i>	<i>n=334</i>	<i>n=281</i>
Chronic liver disease	39%	40%	48%	52%
Chronic respiratory disease	38%	40%	41%	38%
Kidney disease	38%	37%	34%	35%
Colorectal cancer	38%	36%	31%	32%
Cervical or endometrial cancer	26%	32%	27%	40%
Lung cancer	28%	29%	27%	37%
Hearing loss or decline	30%	26%	18%	17%
Osteoarthritis or osteoporosis	25%	23%	17%	23%
Diabetes	21%	22%	20%	25%
Heart disease	23%	23%	16%	18%
Cognitive decline	21%	25%	13%	12%
Stroke	20%	24%	14%	13%
Depression or suicide	13%	20%	21%	20%
Vision decline or loss	21%	20%	11%	11%
Breast cancer	18%	20%	8%	12%

Q14. [WOMEN ONLY] How knowledgeable do you feel about the following health risks for women as they age? Is that extremely, very, somewhat, not very, or not at all knowledgeable? (n=800)

IMPLICATIONS

Implications

Results from our survey underscore older adults' lack of important knowledge about various health conditions, posing potential risks to their own health and that of their family members.

Although heart disease and cancer are the two leading causes of death in the U.S., a striking one-fifth of both women and men said they were not very or not at all knowledgeable about heart disease, and between one-quarter and one-third said they were similarly uninformed about various forms of cancer.

Knowledge about health conditions, family history, and preventive steps can help adults ages 40 and older avoid (or mitigate) long-term consequences.

Doctors and other health care professionals can also help midlife and older adults to better understand their own health risks and equip them with the tools they need to adopt healthier lifestyles.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives and Methodology

Objective: To learn more about midlife and older adults' health status and health conditions, insurance and health care coverage, and access to health professionals as well as health concerns and screenings, health habits (including exercise), and concern about COVID-19.

Methodology: Phone, nationally representative survey.

Sample: U.S. adults ages 40 and older; n=1,505.

(601 via landline telephones and 904 via cell phones)

Interviewing Dates: November 10–20, 2020.

Language: Interviews conducted in English.

Weighting: Data were weighted by age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, and Census division according to 2017 5-year U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS) estimates.

Questionnaire length: 25 minutes (median).

Confidence Intervals: $\pm 2.5\%$.

The margin of error among subgroups is higher.

Note: Some percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding or the use of multiple response question formats.

About AARP

AARP is the nation's largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to empowering Americans 50 and older to choose how they live as they age. With nearly 38 million members and offices in every state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, AARP works to strengthen communities and advocate for what matters most to families with a focus on health security, financial stability and personal fulfillment. AARP also works for individuals in the marketplace by sparking new solutions and allowing carefully chosen, high-quality products and services to carry the AARP name. As a trusted source for news and information, AARP produces the nation's largest circulation publications, AARP The Magazine and AARP Bulletin. To learn more, visit www.aarp.org or follow @AARP and @AARPadvocates on social media.

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