

Ageing Well while self-isolating

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Hello, my name is Jitka Vseteckova and I am Senior Lecturer in Health and Social Care in Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies at The Open University.

In a series of online and face-to-face talks, known as the Ageing Well Public Talks, we have been exploring how important it is, over our lifespan, to maintain a well-balanced nutrition and hydration as well as regular physical and social activity in the older age. The principles discussed during these series of talks are known as the Five Pillars of Ageing Well.

As part of the Ageing Well series we made 5 short films, one for every one of the five pillars, that are available to watch and download via YouTube and OpenLearn channels. In these short films we are exploring how using the knowledge around 5 pillars of Ageing Well might facilitate self-management and delay the ageing processes for as long as we can.

The coronavirus pandemic necessitates that we take several measures to protect ourselves and others in our communities. The latest evidence says that our communities, and individuals in them, will suffer less, if measures of social distancing and self-isolation are introduced. Following the advice by the World Health Organisation, several governments, including the UK Government, have now introduced or will soon be introducing measures, which are designed to delay the transmission of the coronavirus. No matter how effective these measures can be in delaying the spread of the virus, some people, especially older and vulnerable people, may find it hard to cope with being home alone for a long period of time.

What are the risks of self-isolation to older people? As we know, older people have a high risk of muscle atrophy due to lack of physical activity and other age-related changes. Self-isolation may lead to increased sedation, further lack of physical, social and cognitive activity, which may also prompt and or speed up the age-related decline.

This will be a challenging time for all, and we may feel that staying home may restrict our lives, which is true. However, we must not forget that most people, of those who will have the virus, will recover! It is very important therefore that during the time of self-isolation we take care of ourselves so that we increase our chances of full and speedy recovery.

As we know we start ageing the moment we are born, it demonstrates more significantly though when we reach certain age, the usual benchmark being 65 years of age. At around this age, age-related changes manifest rather quickly. In the previous 5 short films we briefly discussed changes brought about by ageing such as changes in metabolic rate, liver and kidney function, neural & muscle function, and overall mobility, physical and mental wellbeing.

In this short film, we discuss how we can we apply the principles of the five pillars of ageing well in supporting ourselves, if we need to self-isolate and spend a lot of time at home. To remind ourselves, the Five Pillars of Ageing Well are: nutrition, hydration, physical, social and cognitive stimulation.

In terms of Nutrition we need to be mindful of keeping regular food intake and make sure we try to keep all necessary nutrients (carbohydrates, proteins and fats) in our diet. It is possible that there will be some shortages to temporary stock in local shops which means that we may need to be inventive and replace a source of nutrient with another. For example, if we can't temporarily find pasta we may need to resort to rice and noodles. If you can eat nuts make sure you have some every day, they are an excellent source of protein as well as fats. Bananas are another excellent and filling source of nutrients. We are all aware that fats and carbohydrates are necessary but please do remember proteins are very important for our good muscle function and they are very important to keep in our daily food intake, especially when we get older. In times that we exercise less, we may need to reasonably increase our intake of fibre (fruits and vegetables) to maintain good bowel function. Certain cereals may be a good source of several nutrients, vitamins and aminoacids, as well as fibre, if there are shortages of fruit and vegetable in the market. Although this is not expected. The golden advice is to keep your weight under control and support your body with all nutrient groups to keep it strong to fight any infection. There is plenty of very useful advice regarding nutrition on the NHS and other websites (which you can access through links in the article accompanying this video on Open Learn).

In terms of Hydration it is immensely important to keep hydrated as good hydration keeps our metabolic rate at optimal level. This has substantial benefits to all body and brain functions. Good hydration is also especially important for our kidneys and liver, which in addition to very many other functions they deal with clearing up any medication we might be taking. The strict minimum clear fluids intake is 1.5 litre per day but the closer you can get to 2l per day (around 8 cups, or 3 and half pints) the better.

In the films on Five Pillars of Ageing Well we have discussed more in detail how important nutrition and hydration is to both physical and mental health & wellbeing. To keep our good health while we are getting older we need to keep the blood regularly circulating. Good hydration (drinking plenty) and regular physical activity are very important in that respect.

Physical activity does not always mean running, swimming or going to the gym. Being physically active means that we take every opportunity to exercise (keep in motion) at optimal level and as regularly as we possibly can. You may wish to check with your healthcare provider about what the optimal level is for you if you have a chronic condition but it is recommended by World health organisation that we keep active for 30 minutes five times a week, I would make a plea: make it every day if you can.

Keeping physically active will have a protective effect on our muscles, joints tendons and consequently bones. So what can we do when we self-isolate? There are a few choices: We can spend time gardening or tidying up the garage. If we live in an apartment, we can do the house chores for a few minutes every day. Those with a smartphone can download one of several free apps for exercise at home or watch Tai-Chi videos on youtube. Stretching and walking inside our home can be as good as walking and stretching outdoors. The main aim is to keep the heart working, the muscles active and the metabolism optimal.

Our cognitive functions are very important too and we need to help our brain to keep its plasticity and capacity for as long as we are able to. The brain, like the muscles, works better when regularly stimulated. Stimulation can be of various sorts: Observing the surroundings (people, places, nature etc.); Interacting with people and engaging with the world we live in. This might be challenging when we self-isolate and live on our own. Apart from passive modes of communication (watching TV, listening to the radio, reading magazines, books, crosswords) we may need to mobilise our networks from distance and not be too reserved to pick up the phone and give a ring to friends and relatives. This is perhaps a good time to learn a new language (which has been reported by research as immensely stimulating, also playing or learning to play the piano or another musical instrument was recommended). If possible, we can use a computer to connect with others. Please just remember to make regular breaks to stand up, stretch, walk a little in your home or go out for a walk, where and when this is possible and recommended.

Regularity in our approach to all activities was always recommended by research as being very important. It might be crucial to create a routine, following our own rhythm, that takes us from the morning to the evening, making sure that we have planned our day in a way that it incorporates elements of all the Five Pillars of Ageing Well, nutrition, hydration, physical, social and cognitive stimulation.

Keeping these in as much as we are able to will support us with keeping well, ageing well even when we need to have reduced social contact, self-isolate or if it is needed, in a lockdown situation.

Please remember, most young and older people will not become seriously ill because of the coronavirus. Of those people who will become ill, the ones who eat a balanced diet, drink plenty of clear fluids, exercise regularly and keep themselves socially and cognitively stimulated will recover faster and more fully. Thanks you for watching .