

# Senior Living



# Volunteer Opportunities

You may be retired, but you're not done making the world a better place.

Take some of your new free time and volunteer with a worthy organization. Silver Sneakers says volunteers may experience better health, have fewer mobility problems and have higher life satisfaction.

## **NATIONAL PARK SERVICE**

The National Park looks after more than 80 million acres of wilderness and historic sites. That's a lot of ground to cover, literally. You can help. These sites need help greeting visitors, giving out information and leading tours.

Bonus: If you accrue 250 service hours, you get a free annual pass to more than 2,000 federal recreation sites.

## **FEEDING AMERICA**

Feeding America is the largest domestic hunger-relief organization in the country. It operates more than 200 food banks and helps more than 40 million people. Volunteers can answer calls, help sort food and do administrative work. Contact your local food bank for more information on how you can help.

## **HABITAT FOR HUMANITY**

This nonprofit builds and remodels homes for families that are in need. Volunteers work side-by-side with the future homeowners, but, if



© ADOBE STOCK

you're not handy with tools, you can also staff offices, fetch supplies or help at the organization's home improvement stores.

## **MEALS ON WHEELS**

This program delivers food to older people who otherwise cannot access food services. It has more than 5,000 locations and 2 million volunteers who do administrative work, deliv-

er meals and more.

## **FOSTER GRANDPARENTS**

If you've got a heart for helping children, sign up with an organization such as AmeriCorps, which has foster grandparent opportunities available. Volunteers help educate, mentor and care for children. No AmeriCorps opportunities, no problem. Talk to your local houses of

faith to see whether they have any opportunities for you to serve.

## **COMMUNITY GARDENS**

Community gardens provide local families with food and a chance to learn how plants, both edible and decorative, grow. Volunteers can work in the gardens, but also do tasks such as packing seeds, logistics, event plan-

ning and marketing.

## **SCHOOLS**

Talk to your local schools about helping teachers in their classrooms, tutoring children, chaperoning field trips and more. See if your area has a program like Eldera, which connects people over 60 with students who could use help with their homework.

# Planning a Heart-Healthy Diet

Heart disease is a leading cause of death in the United States.

About 695,000 people in the U.S. died from heart disease in 2021, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says. The good news is that you're just a few delicious dishes away from keeping heart disease from turning you into a statistic.

## PORTIONS

Don't overload your plate or eat until you're stuffed. Be mindful of the portion sizes of your food, especially at restaurants, which often serve more than people should eat. At home, use a small plate or bowl and practice using measuring cups and spoons until you can estimate the proper serving size of a given food. Choose more low-calorie, nutrient-rich foods and cut down on high-calorie, refined or processed foods.

## PICK WHOLE GRAINS

Whole grains are great sources of fiber and nutrients that help regulate blood pressure and heart health. Substitute whole grain flour for white flour in your cooking and choose whole grain breads, such as 100% whole wheat bread. Cereal is another great source of whole grains; look for five grams or more of fiber per serving. Whole-grain pasta is another great substitution to make.

## LIMIT UNHEALTHY FAT

Limit how much saturated

and trans fat you eat to reduce your cholesterol and lower your risk of coronary artery disease. High blood cholesterol can lead to a buildup of plaque in the arteries, increasing your risk of heart attack or stroke. Saturated fats should make up less than 6% of your total calo-

ries per day and you should avoid trans fats altogether.

## PICK HEALTHY PROTEINS

Choose lean proteins such as poultry, fish, low-fat dairy and eggs. Legumes are another great source of protein that comes with lower levels of fats

and a healthy dose of fiber. Limit or avoid proteins such as organ meats, fatty or marbled meats, spareribs, hot dogs and sausages, bacon and fried meats.

## TREAT YOURSELF

Unless your medical profes-

sional advises you against it, it's OK to treat yourself every once in a while.

Don't let the occasional cheat meal talk you into giving up on healthy eating altogether. Think of it as a one-time indulgence and continue eating well.



© ADOBE STOCK

# Projects for Aging in Place

Aging in place means being able to remain in your home rather than moving to assisted living or another institutional setting. Nearly 90% of seniors want to stay in their homes and with some planning, they can.

## CONSIDER HEALTH NEEDS

Start by talking with your medical professional about any illnesses you have and how they could affect your ability to get around and take care of yourself. Think long-term rather than short-term and make a plan that includes the effects of any illnesses you may have. For instance, you may eventually need help moving around, with household chores or with modifications to keep your space safe.

Then, talk to your family. Share your plan and get their input. They may be able to help alleviate some of your concerns or help with home modifications so you can stay in the place that you love.

## PROJECTS TO PREVENT FALLS

Start with little things, like removing slippery throw rugs, especially in the bathroom. Install grab bars and grips in the tub or shower to help you



© ADOBE STOCK

support yourself. Make sure any handrails on steps or stairs are secure. Make sure pathways, especially ones you use at night, are well-lit so you can see where to place your feet.

If and where you can, remove steps and reduce their height. Rearrange and reposition furniture to make navi-

gating your home easier.

## PUTTING THINGS IN REACH

Consider having light switches and electrical outlets either raised or lowered for ease of use. Widen the front entrance and any other doors to comfortably fit wheelchairs and other mobility devices.

Add an entrance ramp if needed, along with a no-step shower or a bath lift. Lower countertops if you may have mobility issues that require a wheelchair in the future. Install a stair lift if you routinely go up and down stairs.

## SWITCHING ROOMS

Consider moving rooms

around in your home so that you can do most or all of what you need on the first level, including going to the bathroom and sleeping. Make sure you can get in and out of your home easily. Eliminate steps where you can, even if that means moving your bedroom or installing new bathroom fixtures.

# The Importance of Staying Social

In 2020, about 27% of older adults (over 65) lived alone. Older adults who live alone are at greater risk for loneliness and social isolation.

It's important to start by setting some definitions. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, loneliness is the feeling of being alone, regardless of the amount of social contact someone has. Social isolation is a lack of social connections. Social isolation can lead to loneliness, but people can also feel lonely without being socially isolated.

The CDC says there's strong evidence that social isolation and loneliness can be detrimental to your health. There's an increased risk of premature death from all causes, which is a statistic that rivals the deadliness of smoking, obesity and physical inactivity.

Social isolation is linked to a 50% increased risk of dementia, and poor social relationships can also lead to an increased risk for heart disease and stroke. Loneliness is associated with higher rates of depression, anxiety and suicide.

If you think you're experiencing loneliness or social isolation, talk to your medical professional immediately. They can help connect you with programs in your area to help you stay socially active.



© ADOBE STOCK

You can also reach out to organizations such as the AARP, your local Council on Aging, the National Council on Aging, the National Institute on Aging, or find resources through your house of worship. Look for opportunities to volunteer or

give back to your community in ways that will keep you socially active. This can be at a food bank, animal shelter or even your grandkids' school.

Talk to your family about keeping active in your community. Ask them for help getting

you out to do things and including you in activities. They may have some ideas of how you can volunteer your time or stay active. Get out and exercise, even if it's just a walk around the block, if it's OK with your medical professional.

If you're dealing with grief at the same time, reach out to grief counselors through those same channels listed above.

Losing friends and family members can leave you feeling isolated. You're not alone. There are resources that can help.

# Mental Health for Seniors

It's not just your physical health that you need to be concerned with as you age. There's an important mental health aspect to aging, too.

Coping with chronic or serious illnesses, the deaths of friends or family and other major life changes can throw seniors for a loop.

The good news is that help is available.

## SYMPTOMS

Some symptoms of mental health disorders in older adults can include:

- Noticeable changes in mood, energy or appetite.
- Feeling flat or having trouble feeling positive emotions.
- Difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much.
- Difficulty concentrating, feeling restless or feeling on edge.
- Increasingly worried or stressed.
- Angry, irritable or aggressive.
- Ongoing headaches, digestive issues or pain.
- The misuse of alcohol or drugs.
- Sadness or hopelessness.
- Thoughts of death, thoughts of suicide or suicide attempts.
- Engaging in high-risk activities.
- Obsessive thinking or compulsive behavior.



© ADOBE STOCK

- Seeing, hearing and feeling things that other people do not see, hear or feel.

If you or a loved one experiences any of these symptoms, talk to a health care professional right away. They can help develop a treatment plan to help.

## GETTING HELP

You can also call any one of these hotlines for immediate assistance. Call 911 if you or someone you know is in immediate danger.

### 988 Suicide and Crisis

**Lifeline:** Call or text 988 to connect with a trained crisis counselor. The hotline is free and provides confidential emotional support 24 hours a day.

**Veterans Crisis Line:** Call 988 and then press 1 or text 838255 for free, confidential resources for veterans of all ages.

**Disaster Distress Hotline:** Call or text 800-985-5990 to get help from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. This is a free, multilingual and confidential hotline for those experiencing

distress related to any natural or human-caused disaster.

## FOR FRIENDS AND FAMILY

The National Institute of Mental Health offers these five action steps if you think someone close to you is experiencing emotional pain.

1. Ask: Are you thinking about killing yourself? It's not easy, but studies show asking will not increase suicide or thoughts of suicide.
2. Keep them safe: Reduce access to lethal items and

places.

3. Be there: Listen carefully and learn what the person is thinking and feeling. Talking about suicide may actually reduce rather than increase suicidal thoughts.

4. Help them connect: Give them hotline information to connect them to immediate counseling.

5. Stay connected: Stay in touch even after the crisis has passed. Studies show that the risk of suicide decreases when someone follows up with the at-risk person.

# Adopting a Pet

Pets for Seniors is an organization that has adopted out more than 700 older dogs and cats, saving these pets from euthanasia in Illinois and giving them loving homes with senior citizens who had given up on having companion animals.

The organization started in 1999. Initially, it would visit shelters and become familiar with older and special needs pets. When a senior was interested in adopting, the group would bring several compatible choices to their homes for an interview. If the person met the right pet, the group would then pay most of the adoption fee, bathe or groom the animal, take it to the vet, have it microchipped and vaccinated, and deliver it to its new home.

In 2003, Pets for Seniors received a grant to build its own shelter for cats and dogs. Volunteers, many seniors themselves, come to walk the dogs daily. Even with its own shelter, Pets for Seniors continues to work with shelters around Illinois.

If for some reason a match doesn't work out, Pets for Seniors says it will always take the animal back and refund the senior's portion of the adoption fee or let them try a different



© ADOBE STOCK

animal. The first animal is not euthanized; Pets for Seniors works to find it an appropriate home.

Pets for Seniors also provides start-up supplies for new pets including collars and leashes, beds, dog coats, toys, litter

boxes, litter, food bowls and food. The organization provides free transportation to take the pet to the vet or groomer. It will even bathe and trim nails for free or for a small donation. It will continue to drop off food and supplies for seniors who

don't drive.

If the adopter has to be hospitalized or spend time in a nursing home, Pets for Seniors will take care of their pet for free until they're home. They're also available to help when pets have medical emergencies.

Pets for Seniors will stand in for the owner in any case where the owner is unable to be there, such as searching for lost pets or burying a pet that has passed on. It has been able to negotiate some veterinarian discounts for senior adopters.



© ADOBE STOCK

# Switching Medical Providers

Seniors are in frequent contact with health-care systems, either to manage existing illnesses or just to take care of themselves as they age.

There may come a time, however, when a beloved doctor retires, moves or no longer takes insurance. Then it's time to find a new provider, which, given some seniors' extensive medical histories, may be difficult. Here's how to cope.

## **FIND A NEW PROVIDER**

Once you've been notified that your doctor will no longer see you for whatever reason, you need to find new care

as soon as you can. Ask friends and family members who they see. Turn to support groups and health-specific associations to find medical professionals who specialize in your conditions and illnesses.

You can also work through your insurance company to find a new provider. Make an appointment to see your current provider and ask who they would recommend to continue your care.

## **REQUEST MEDICAL RECORDS**

Ask for and complete the paperwork to obtain a copy of your medical information as soon as you can. Keep copies for yourself, but also do so in plenty of time for your doctor to forward your records to your new doctors' office. This will make sure you get the care you need when you need it.

## **TAKE A NOTE**

If you're switching doctors because of the way you were treated or for some other reason, consider writing a note to the doctor explaining your decision. If you're switching because you're being forced to by insurance or another reason, you can pen a letter thanking them

for their care over the years.

## **ESTABLISHING A NEW RELATIONSHIP**

Before your old doctor closes up shop, make an appointment with the new doctor. Make sure you feel heard and respected.

The doctor should take time to explain things right away and in a way that you can understand. You should feel comfortable asking questions.

Don't be afraid to speak up for yourself. If you don't feel heard or feel uncomfortable, trust your gut and find another provider. Just make sure you have appropriate coverage for your medications before you give them the boot.