

Opening Statement
Senator Susan Collins
“Promoting Healthy Aging: Living Your Best Life Long into Your Golden Years”
September 25, 2019

By the year 2030, one out of five Americans will be over the age of 65. These Americans represent the fastest growing demographic segment of our population. They are independent. They are diverse. And they are often still working.

Today, the Aging Committee is convening this hearing, during Healthy Aging Month, to make healthy aging a goal that all Americans can strive to achieve.

Hospitals are required to conduct community health needs assessment surveys every three years to identify priorities. Last week, the MaineHealth hospital system, my State’s largest health care network, published a report with the results from the 2019 survey. Five local health systems identified “healthy aging” as a top priority for the coming years. For MaineHealth, this means improving access to quality health care as well as the physical and social environment that promote healthy lifestyles. While this may come as no surprise to the State of Maine, where older adults outnumber children, healthy aging ought to be a priority for every state.

Healthy aging starts with community. Last Congress, we held a hearing on the increasing epidemic of social isolation among older adults, and uncovered the startling fact that prolonged isolation and loneliness are comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Staying connected with family and friends helps to stave off physical illness and mental decline. It adds years to life and life to years.

Aging with community means staying engaged, physically, socially, and cognitively. Mounting evidence indicates that this trifecta can help reduce the risk for serious age-related diseases from Alzheimer’s disease to cardiovascular conditions. Physical activity, for example, promotes healthy aging and fights chronic disease from the cellular to the systems levels. During exercise, mitochondria, the energy powerhouses within cells, grow stronger and proliferate, improving the function of the entire body from head to toe. While we have long known the benefits of exercise, today’s research is shedding new light on the mechanisms through which exercise supports healthy aging, and the results are truly impressive. Exercise can actually change the way that genes are regulated, reducing risk for age-related degenerative diseases.

In fact, growing research shows that several lifestyle factors can modify gene expression. Today we will learn that approximately 95 percent of gene mutations linked with certain age-related diseases can be modified in their expression through changes in lifestyle. This gene modification can decrease the risk of certain diseases. In addition to physical, social, and cognitive activity, other key factors include diet, sleep, and stress management.

A new study published this month in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences found another remarkable lifestyle factor that promotes healthy aging: optimism. In this study, researchers followed more than 70,000 seniors for 10 to 30 years, and found that the most optimistic demonstrated on average an 11 to 15 percent longer lifespan. Research has already shown that optimistic individuals tend to have a reduced risk of depression, heart disease, and other chronic illnesses. This new report shows that people who “usually expect to succeed in things that [they] do,” tend to live longer, too.

The more we learn about healthy aging, the more we can do to help make it possible. Routine preventive and maintenance care is another important part of healthy aging. The Medicare annual wellness visit provides critical screenings from cardiovascular health to cognitive function, as well as medication reconciliation. With more than 42 percent of seniors taking five or more prescription drugs, reconciling these medications can help to reduce adverse drug events, such as dizziness, which can lead to falls and injuries.

From the individual to the community level, from the doctor’s office to the home, there are steps that we can take right now to improve prospects for healthy aging. Today we will hear from a great panel of experts on how to add health and wellbeing to life’s golden years.

I want to thank all of our witnesses for being here today. I will introduce them shortly but now I would like to turn to Ranking Member Casey for his opening statement.

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