

# Successful Aging 1

## Key Factors

by Joanne K. Morse, Ph.D.

What is aging? According to the Columbia online encyclopedia<sup>1</sup> "...aging, in biology, is the cumulative changes in an organism, organ, tissue, or cell leading to a decrease in functional capacity." This change, over the course of several decades, leads the last stage of life or "senescence." Once we reach this stage we are more vulnerable to diseases and of course the inevitable outcome – death.

So, yes we all will eventually succumb to death, but the person who ages successfully will not be incapacitated before they die. These people will be sharp and active up to the end. Now I don't know about you, but that sounds like the kind of aging I want to experience.

How do we age successfully? There are several key factors that impact the aging process. Interestingly, studies have shown that attitude is more important than any other factor. In fact most geriatric healthcare providers will agree that success is 80% attitude<sup>2,3</sup>. So having a good outlook and a positive attitude can go a long way to improving your aging experience.

However, there are other issues that do have an affect on aging. The only one we have no control over is genetics. If we have neutral or negative genes, we are more likely to develop genetic diseases at any stage during our lifespan. Genetic issues tend to be most important at birth and gradually lessen in importance as we age. This is the opposite of lifestyle, which becomes more important as we mature.

Lifestyle and environment are the other key factors that will impact how we age. These factors we can control by making choices. Is the pay more important or the stress level of the job? How much alcohol should I drink? What about smoking? What kinds of foods should I eat? How much food should I eat? Do I really need to exercise?

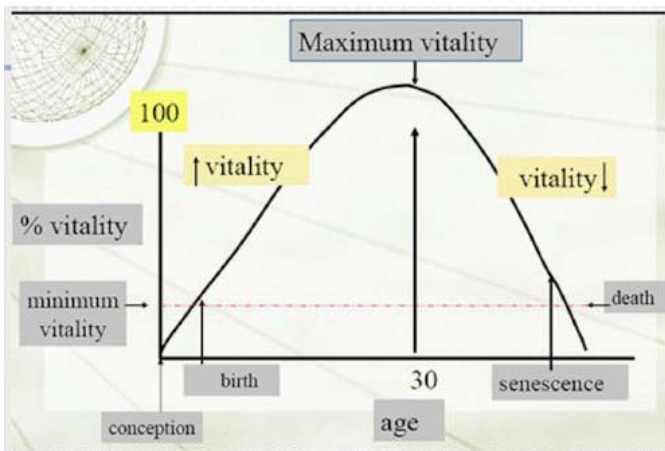
We make lifestyle choices throughout our lives and most of them impact how we age. Everyone knows the risk factors for heart attack and other cardiovascular problems. If we are overweight, not exercising, have high cholesterol, and/or hypertension, we are at risk for several more serious disease states. The problem is we tend to ignore the implications and keep right on doing what we know is unhealthy until we have a dramatic problem. Once we have a dramatic problem, it is often too late to undo the resulting damage.

The most important concept is the understanding that **age in and of itself does not cause disease**. Dysfunctions often attributed to aging are more likely related to other phenomenon such as lifestyle choices and it is the aging aspect that allows the dysfunctions to occur rather than causing them. The older body is less able to fight off illnesses than the body of a younger person. I hope you will determine for yourself how best to implement change into your lifestyle so you can put yourself on the path to successful aging now. The younger you are when you start this process the more successful you will be and the more positive your experience along the aging continuum.

We start the aging process from the moment we are conceived. As we mature into fully functional human beings we are moving in a positive direction. This positive upswing continues until we are

about thirty years of age. Obviously we don't all age exactly the same but somewhere around your 30<sup>th</sup> year you do stop growing in vitality (see Vitality curve<sup>4</sup>). Vitality is the body's ability to respond to various challenges such as illness or stress. After the third decade our vitality will gradually decrease (decreases at about 0.8% each year) over the next several decades as you move closer to senescence.<sup>5,6</sup> You can do the math – just remember that you can reduce this number if you work at living a healthy lifestyle.

1. Encyclopedia. Columbia University Press. Accessed Feb 16, 2006  
<http://www.answers.com/topic/ageing>
2. Wong, P.T.P. (2000). Meaning in life and meaning in death in successful aging. In A. Tomer (Ed.), Death attitudes and the older adult. Brunner/Mazel Publishers.
3. Wong, P. T. P. (1989). Successful aging and personal meaning. Canadian Psychology, 30, 516-525.
4. Lucchino, PhD R. Infusing Cross-cultural Aging Education into Allied Health Curriculum: Vitality Curve. Slide #6. June 2005.
5. Novak, M. W. (1985). Successful aging: The myths, realities and future of aging in Canada. Markham, ON: Penguin Books Canada.
6. Kahn, R. L. (1995). Successful aging. New York: Dell Publishing



### Vitality Curve

adapted from<sup>4</sup>

(Ronald Lucchino, Ph.D.

Director of Communications and  
Legislative Advocacy, Alzheimer's  
Association, NM)