

## **Understanding older people's practices when designing healthy ageing interventions**

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### **The importance of practices**

Lessons learnt from the longevity 'hotspots' highlight four simple principles for healthy ageing: move naturally, eat wisely, socialise with the right people and have the right outlook (Yen et al, 2022). When older people adopt these four principles into their everyday practices, they are likely to enjoy better wellbeing, especially if they take a balanced approach in their practices, fulfilling their physical, psychological and emotional needs concurrently (Yen et al, 2022).

Lifestyle is an important determinant to health; according to World Health Organization, 60% of factors related to individual health and quality of life are linked to lifestyle (Currie et al., 2004). In contrast, an unhealthy lifestyle increases the risk of illness, disability and death. Hughes (2016) found that illnesses associated with unhealthy lifestyles cost NHS England £11 billion a year. Therefore, maintaining a healthy lifestyle through healthy ageing practices is particularly important as it can reduce demand on the healthcare system, as well as improve patient outcomes.

Practices are habitual behaviours, indicating one's willingness and ability to continue a behaviour over time. This requires interest, commitment and motivation (Halkier et al, 2011). For older adults, regular moderate-intensity exercise, such as walking, climbing stairs, yoga, and gardening, can benefit physical strength and overall wellbeing (Young et al, 2015). However, unlike sporadic attempts, practices must be repeated, systematic and continuous. To this end, wearable devices such as smartwatches and fitness trackers are gaining popularity, as they can potentially motivate people to keep up their good practices by tracking their daily physical activity (Ntshumi and Adebessin, 2019).

Some older people manage to adhere to healthy ageing principles well by incorporating them into their daily practices, while others struggle to do this. For example, despite various promotions and campaigns, only 31% of adults aged above 65 years consume five or more portions of fruits and vegetables a day (Age UK, 2019). The reasons for not doing this include poorer individual circumstances, lack of societal support and lack of accessibility. If a person has not developed the practice of consuming their 'five a day' earlier in their lives, it is much harder for them to adopt it later in life (Dhalwani et al., 2017). Loneliness could also reduce an individual's willingness to cook or engage in a healthier diet (Hughes, et al., 2004; Whitelock & Ensaff, 2018), as could limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables because of financial or logistical limitations (Thompson et al., 2011). This is why measures such as providing flexible and convenient transport is crucial to wellbeing, especially for older people who do not drive (Pristavec, 2018).

### **The need to consider older people's practices**

In the past, various interventions have been developed to support older people and help them develop a healthy lifestyle, but many have been ineffective because they did not include older people in the discussion. For example, in 2021 the Department of Health and Social Care (2021) presented a 10-year plan for adult social care, focusing on supporting and improving social care at homes for independent living. Adopting a person-centred care approach, the plan acknowledged the impact of inadequate housing, as well as the lack of suitable housing for individuals with care needs. However, there was also a contradictory approach in its insistence on supporting independent living, albeit in inadequate housing. The prevention of illness related to unhealthy lifestyle through the adoption of healthy ageing practices was barely mentioned, which shows that providing care that fits around older adults' daily practices was not considered.

A green paper published by the European Commission (2021) also aimed to promote healthy and active ageing, with an emphasis on healthy lifestyles across all ages. It discussed consumption and nutrition patterns, levels of physical and social activity, and lifelong learning to prevent cognitive decline related to older age. This green paper provided a comprehensive debate, covering many of the diverse aspects of life in older age and encouraging a balanced approach to daily practices. Nevertheless, the impact of this broad policy debate is indefinable,

as European Union member states can decide how to implement the recommended measures using their own interpretations of the document.

### **Recommendations for future initiatives**

The ageing population has led to prevention of morbidities and the promotion of a healthy lifestyle among older adults becoming the focus of major policy debates during the last 10 years (Ferguson and Belloni, 2019). Nevertheless, policies or interventions for older people's health must not be designed or developed in silos. The authors recommend that policymakers involve different stakeholders when discussing new policy initiatives to promote healthy ageing, including input from experts, practitioners and service users themselves. For example, when designing initiatives to promote an age-friendly environment, policy and research teams need to gather expertise from different fields, including gerontology, design and landscaping engineering, public health, consumer behaviour researcher and anthropology. This will provide diverse insights and knowledge on older people and their needs. Practitioners such as GPs and care providers are also integral to facilitating and supporting healthy ageing. Involving older people, together with experts and practitioners, in the consideration of facilitators and barriers across macro (environment), meso (communities) and micro (individual) levels, can help to ensure that future interventions are fit for purpose and will be adopted by older adults as part of their everyday practices.

The authors also recommend that policymakers and researchers embrace the public involvement standards when co-designing and co-developing healthy ageing policies and initiatives with older adults. These include:

- Using plain language and relevant communication that could be easily understood by older people
- Working with older people to design and develop new initiatives
- Offering inclusive opportunities that are accessible to all older people
- Providing support and learning to build older people's confidence in participating in research and policy discussions
- Involving older people in managing and discussing the regulations and policies during decision-making processes
- Working with older people to set targets and measure the impact of new policies and/or research (UK Public Involvement Standards Development Partnership, 2019).

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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