

# THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Old and improved: Good news! Over the hill isn't all downhill

By Barbara Yost December 28, 2006

As we age, it's easy to feel as if our bodies are falling apart, like a 1952 Buick – bumpers dented, paint peeling, headlights dimming, shocks and springs lacking the bounces they once had. Sometimes we're in the shop more than we're on the highway.

But before you envy that shiny new Mustang too much, it's good to remember that some things actually improve with age and that sometimes the new models can't do what the old ones can. If you keep your engine tuned and your grille polished, you can stay in near mint condition for years.

But the truth is, we're all aging. Much of how fast and for how long can be blamed on our genes.

"We humans are complicated machines, but (as) with all machines, they break down with aging," said Edward Perrin, a geriatrician at Banner Good Samaritan's Family Medicine Center.

If we're solidly constructed in the first place, genetically, the outlook will be more positive. Then, if we take care of ourselves, "we can age well," Perrin said.

For instance, as people get older, they require the same amount of sleep as when they were young, but they don't need eight hours all in a row. Sleep becomes flexible. Naps, once thought the bane of sound sleep, now are recommended, Perrin said.

"Napping is not only *not* bad," he said, "but it's a good part of sleep architecture."

Grown-ups can dodge some diseases, or the severity of the afflictions lessens. In later years – after 85 – we're less like to suffer or die from such ills as prostate cancer, breast cancer and lung cancer. Some studies show cancer rates level off after age 85.

Behavior becomes less risky in older adults. Incidents of substance abuse decline. We take fewer risks and, with that, there is psychological security, Perrin said. It's a beneficial cycle: When we're healthy physically, that protects our mental health, and that helps maintain physical health.

Depression is no more common in the older adult than in middle age, especially if you've planned for your financial future.

Socially, we're finally at the stage in life where we can begin to shed some responsibility and enjoy more leisure time, take up interests we put off when raising a family or struggling to establish a career.

Likewise, older adults often experience less stress and suffer fewer migraine headaches, said Gary Salzman, a geriatrician and director of the Geriatric Medicine Fellowship Program at Banner Good Samaritan. We simply grow out of it.

Wisdom and experience also serve us well, Salzman said. And many of us are thriving mentally and physically.

"Not everybody, not even in their 100s, is that bad," he said.

Adopting a healthful lifestyle enhances physical and mental health, said Dr. Pierre Tariot, director of the Memory Disorders Center at the Banner Alzheimer's Institute and an authority on the on the aging of the brain.

Some functions decline, but we improve intellectually, Tariot said, enjoying "the bedrock knowledge of how the world works." That steadily improves with age.

We get better at using vocabulary with years of knowing and learning words. We know their meaning and how to use them.

Frightened of developing Alzheimer's? The longer we survive, the less likely we are to suffer dementia. And even though the prospect of Alzheimer's looms, "We're entering an era where a lot of promising therapies are being put to the test," Tariot said.

Dr. S. Mitchell Harmon, director and president of the Kronos Longevity Research Institute in Phoenix, sees multiples benefits of aging.

Once people hit their 50s and 60s, they acquire the ability to pace themselves.

"You make fewer demand on yourself and have a greater chance to succeed," Harmon said. While 20-somethings over schedule, older adults "are more realistic and efficient and get more done."

Some diseases peak in adolescence, such as type 1 diabetes, which is rare in older people. We get fewer colds, because our contact with germ-laden children is less frequent. Less workplace absenteeism is reported among workers in their 40s and 50s, Harmon said.

Our memories are not better, but our ability to solve problems improves.

"Anything that improves with experience is likely to improve with age," he said.

Yes, muscle strength declines, "but that doesn't mean you ability to function deteriorates," he said.

Endurance races are generally won by people in their 40s and 50s. Young people don't pace themselves and break down.

"Middle-aged people have more stamina, endurance. The young guys wear out," Harmon said.

If all that doesn't put a smile on your face, consider the good news about your teeth. Most of us will still be flapping our own choppers throughout our lives.

It's not so much that teeth improve, Tempe dentist Amy Okun said, but that dental care is at such a high level that we can easily maintain a healthy mouth. Dentures may become a thing of the past in favor of healthy natural teeth and such technology as implants.

Fluoridated water has done wonders for our teeth, fostering a lack of cavities in our and future generations. Okun warns that people who drink only bottled water lose that protection and suggests instead drinking tap water that has been properly filtered to retain fluoridation.

We're more educated about how to care for our teeth, the importance of brushing and flossing. Sealants available at your dentist's office can fill grooves in the teeth where cavities attack.

Whitening solutions can perk up aged yellow teeth. So far, Okun said, there is no scientific evidence that proper whitening harms tooth enamel.

And doesn't a shiny grille take years off a vintage model?