

# Our Aging Society

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Rehabilitation nurses who work with older adults recognize that by the year 2030 approximately 71 million people, or 20% of the U.S. population, will be older than 65 years (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] & the Merck Company Foundation, 2007). According to the recent report *The State of Aging and Health in America*, “the aging of the U.S. population is one of the major public health challenges we face in the 21st century. One of CDC’s highest priorities as the nation’s health protection agency is to increase the number of older adults who live longer, high-quality, productive, and independent lives” (CDC & the Merck Company Foundation, p.3). The National Institute on Aging, National Institutes of Health, and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2007) agreed, stating that “at no time has the need to examine and understand the antecedents and course of retirement been greater than now, as the baby boom begins to turn age 65 in 2011” (p.2). The purpose of this article is to discuss some facts about our aging society that have an impact on rehabilitation nursing. Readers are encouraged to take the quiz found in **Table 1** and review this article for findings to apply to rehabilitation nursing practice.

## Lifestyle and Behaviors

Lifestyle change can have a significant affect on overall health with age. In fact, the CDC and the Merck Company Foundation (2007) attributed 35% of deaths to three preventable causes: (1) smoking, (2) a poor diet, and (3) lack of physical activity. The concept of *active aging* supported by the World Health Organization suggests that healthy aging is not only influenced by gender and culture but also by behavioral, social, and physical environments as well as personal, economic, and social support systems (Hardin, 2006). Rehabilitation nurses can play a crucial role in assisting older adults to attain, regain, and maintain health in the presence of chronic illness and disability by promoting good coping mechanisms through behavior modification programs, such as smoking cessation, and education, such as nutritional instruction.

## Impact of Chronic Illness and Disability

Chronic illnesses are associated with advanced age and present a number of challenges to older adults. According to the *National Health Interview Survey* (2005), approximately 34 million Americans (12%) were limited in their usual activities because of one or more chronic health conditions (Adams, Dey, & Vickerie, 2007). The same survey reported that 15% of adults aged 45–64 years and 44% of adults aged 75 years or older felt they had limitations in usual activities, revealing an increase in disability with age (Adams, Dey, & Vickerie). In addition, approximately 42 million Americans (17%) older than 65 years did not have any health insurance coverage, citing cost as the most common obstacle, yet nearly one-third of adults aged 75 years or older rated their health as *fair* or *poor*. Health problems such as arthritis and hypertension are often cited as reasons for early retirement among both men and women (National Institute on Aging, National Institutes of Health, & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007).

Approximately 79% of people who need long-term care live at home or in community settings (CDC & the Merck Institute of Aging & Health, 2004), suggesting that rehabilitation nurses should explore more com-

munity-based programming. Billions of dollars are spent each year on health care for older adults with chronic illnesses, and it is expected that the nation’s spending for health care will increase 25% in the next few decades as the number of older adults in the population increases. The cost of providing care to an older patient is three to four times that of younger people, and the additional caregiver burden often results in family members giving up their full-time jobs to care for a loved one at home (National Institute on Aging, National Institutes of Health, & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007). Rehabilitation nurses may be in greater demand to teach families and patients how to continue care at home in the presence of complex health conditions.

## Emerging Trends Among Older Adults

Other interesting demographic trends seen among the older adult population also have had an impact on rehabilitation. In 2006, roughly 43% of older women were widows and half of women age 75 or older lived alone. Men tended to be married (72%) more often than women, and being married has been associated with better overall health in older adults (Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Aging, 2007). The median income of older females falls far below that of their male counterparts. Minority elders face additional inequities with regard to accessibility to health care, income, resources, and insurance. These data suggest that rehabilitation nurses should be knowledgeable about the unique needs of older women and minorities who often lack social support systems, may experience isolation, and are often of lower economic means.

The use of complementary and alternative modalities in addition to traditional Western medicine is on the rise. Of most significance to rehabilitation nurses is that approximately one in five people use some type of herbal supplement, with garlic, echinacea, ginkgo biloba, and ginseng being the most popular (National Institute on Aging, National Institutes of Health, & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007).

Rehabilitation nurses need to ask older adults for specific information about their use of over-the-counter medications, herbal supplements, and vitamins because many of these supplements can interfere with prescription medications and cause additional health concerns.

A growing number of older adults are part of intergenerational care situations. The Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Aging (2007) estimated that about 450,000 adults older than 65 years had primary care responsibilities for grandchildren who lived with them. Rehabilitation nurses will need to become familiar with the concept of intergenerational care as they work with both older adults and their extended families. Staying informed about childcare issues, childhood immunizations, and community resources for school-age children is now an essential part of providing care to older adults who are often involved in these situations.

In summary, the changing demographics of the U.S. population will have a significant impact on rehabilitation nursing and how care is delivered. Rehabilitation nurses can prepare themselves to meet the growing demands for care by keeping abreast of the current trends and issues in gerontology and by exploring creative ways to meet the future demands of this population. 

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## Table 1. Demographics of Aging Quiz

Answer <b>true</b> or <b>false</b> to each statement.	
1.	Lifestyle changes have little affect on overall health as one ages.
2.	More than one-third of deaths in the United States are preventable.
3.	Health problems such as arthritis often lead to early retirement.
4.	The cost of providing care to a person older than 65 years is slightly greater than caring for a person younger than age 65.
5.	The United States' healthcare spending is predicted to increase in 2030 by 10% because of an increase in older adults in the population.
6.	Caring for a person with a chronic illness may cause the caregiver loss of earning potential.
7.	Older Americans follow traditional medical care, rarely using complementary or alternative therapies.
8.	Being married has a positive impact on health of older adults.
9.	Nearly half a million older people have grandchildren living in their homes and for whom they provide regular care.
Answers: 1. False; 2. True; 3. True; 4. True; 5. False; 6. True; 7. False; 8. True; 9. True.	

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