

# Facts on Aging, Older Adults and Ageism

**Aging is a process** of progressive change in an individual's biological, psychological and social structures.

**Older adult and senior are flexible terms.** Today, older adult is commonly used to describe anyone over the age of 55. Senior usually means anyone over 65 – the traditional age of retirement.

## A Diverse and Contributing Population

**Edmonton seniors are diverse** in age, marital status, cultural background and incomes. They bring a diversity of experience, knowledge and other resources that add to the strength and vibrancy of our city.<sup>1</sup>

**Our senior population is growing.** One in three Edmontonians will be age 55 plus by 2041. Within the senior population, the most dramatic growth is expected to happen in the over 80 age group, with projections of a 266% increase in this group.<sup>1</sup>

**Seniors are more financially secure today than they have ever been.** Between 1988 and 2008, the average pre-tax family income for older adults in Alberta increased from \$46,100 to \$68,500 (based on 2008 dollars). Moreover, seniors' lower household incomes are offset by much lower average household expenses: \$44,927 for seniors compared to \$95,636 for adults under age 65.<sup>2</sup>

**Most seniors live at home.** At least 90% of adults over age 65 live in their own homes. Another 7% live in seniors' lodges and subsidized housing. Just 3% live in long-term care facilities.<sup>2</sup>

**Education level among seniors is climbing.** The majority of older adults have completed high school and almost two in five have some kind of post-secondary qualifications.<sup>2</sup>

**Seniors work.** In 2010, some 56,500 adults over age 65 – or about 14% - were employed.<sup>2</sup> And that number could continue to rise, as over 40% of still-working Albertans say they expect to work after age 65.<sup>3</sup>

**Seniors provide care.** Many older adults provide some sort of assistance or care to someone they know. In Canada, this unpaid care is valued at \$3.8 billion per year.<sup>4</sup>

**Seniors are involved in their community.** At least 40% of older adults, especially those aged 65-74, are actively engaged in volunteer activities and contribute some 250 hours of volunteer service each year.<sup>2</sup>

**Seniors give to charity.** Older adults donate at about the same rate as other Albertans but, on average, give more than younger adults.<sup>2</sup>

## Health

**Chronic conditions are common – but not all chronic conditions are the same.** Over 90% of older adults have at least one chronic health condition. Many of these conditions are managed with diet, regular activity and medication.<sup>2</sup>

**Age-related mental decline is not inevitable.** Research shows that sedentary older adults who engage in regular aerobic exercise can improve their scores on cognitive function tests by 15-20%.<sup>5</sup>

**Dementia is not a normal part of aging** and we shouldn't accept it as such. Many cases of dementia can be prevented through effective health promotion and disease prevention efforts.<sup>6</sup>

**Seniors are not driving up health care costs.** Economic models suggest that growth in health care costs due to population aging will be about one per cent per year between 2010 and 2036.<sup>7</sup>

**Most seniors are not afraid of dying.** While 50% of young adults say they are worried about death, just 25% of those over age 65 say the same. Older age brings an acceptance of the reality of death for many of us.

## From Ageism to Age-Friendly

**Stereotypes** are collections of beliefs that we use to categorize and process information. And they are not necessarily bad. Some stereotypes about older adults can even be good – seniors are wise, seniors are kind, seniors are safe drivers. The problem with stereotypes is that they can become over-generalized and over-used.

**Ageism**, like other “isms,” is prejudice and discrimination against individuals or groups because of age. Unlike other “isms,” however, ageism is something many of us will experience at some time in our lives.

**Negative stereotyping and ageist attitudes can harm** the way we see ourselves and others as we get older. Ageism is associated with poor self image, loneliness, reduced civic engagement and more frequent help-seeking. At a societal level, ageism can influence policies that, without intending harm, can marginalize older adults, pushing them aside, so we no longer benefit from their participation in society.

**Age-friendly communities** have policies, services and structures related to the natural, human built and social environments that enable older people to live in security, enjoy good health and continue to participate fully in society.

“Design for the young  
and you exclude the old.  
Design for the old and  
you include everyone.”

Bernard Isaacs, Founding Director,  
Birmingham Centre for Applied Gerontology

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1. The City of Edmonton & Edmonton Seniors Coordinating Council, *Edmonton Seniors: A Portrait*, 2010.
  2. Government of Alberta, *A Profile of Alberta Seniors*, 2010.
  3. Government of Alberta, *Demographic Planning Commission: Findings Report*, December 2010.
  4. Cited in Jacquie Eales and Janet Fast, “Older Canadians Provide Care Older Canadians,” *Burden or Benefit? Workshop Fact Sheets*, June 2013.
  5. “Exercise and the Aging Brain.” *Quirks and Quarks* (CBC Radio program), broadcast April 2, 2011. Available: <http://www.cbc.ca/quirks/episode/2011/04/02/april-2-2011/>
  6. Alzheimer Society of Canada, *Rising Tide: The Impact of Dementia on Canadian Society*, 2010.
  7. Canadian Health Services Research Foundation, *Myth: The aging population is to blame for uncontrollable healthcare costs*, February 22, 2011. Available: <http://www.cfhi-fcass.ca/PublicationsAndResources/Mythbusters/page/3#sthash.rusLNKBq.dpuf>