

Understanding Mature Adults

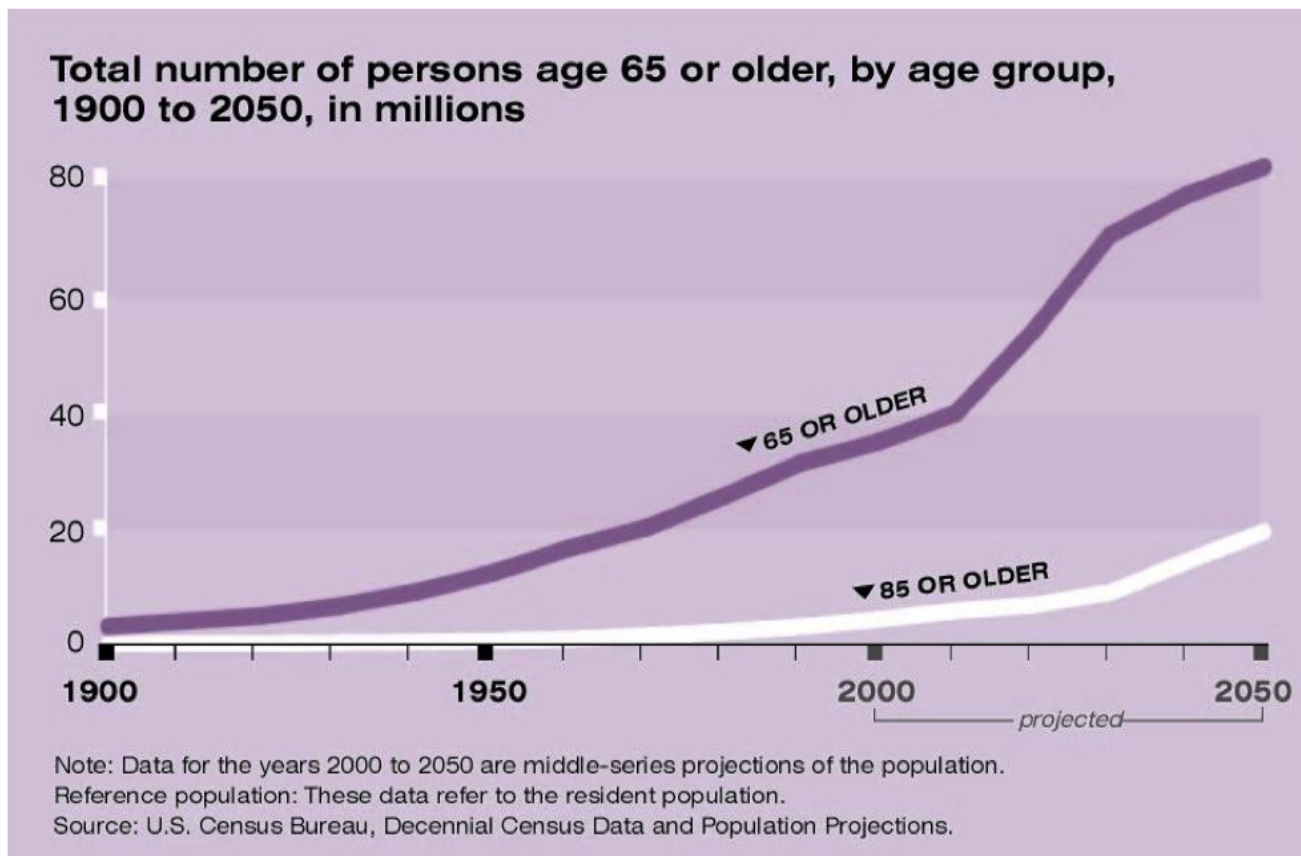
Learning Objectives

1. Describe the growth of the aging population from a global perspective
2. List common myths about growing older and describe why they are wrong
3. Recall characteristics of Boomers and Seniors

Introduction

There have never, in human history, been more adults over the age of 55 as there are today. The global population of mature adults has grown exponentially over the past several years and will continue to do so for the next 20-30 years. According to population data, the number of adults over the age of 65 in the United States is expected to grow 147% from 35 million in the year 2000 to 87 million in the year 2030. The population of adults over the age of 85 will increase by almost 400% during that time. There has never been more of a need and opportunity for fitness professionals to specialize in working with this population.

Figure 1: Growth of the U.S. older adult population



However, mature adults typically have a different set of needs, interests and desires than their younger counterparts and are often misunderstood [1, 2]. Numerous myths, misconceptions and negative stereotypes about aging and what it means to grow old pervade society and the fitness industry (see Table 1). These incorrect perspectives are barriers to working effectively with the mature population especially with the aging boomer population. The Baby Boomers are the largest age cohort in history and are driving the growth of the mature population. Boomers began turning 65 in 2010 but maybe more important than the sheer numbers is the different ideologies, perspectives and collective experiences that they bring with them compared to the generation before them. It is vital that fitness professionals working with mature clients possess an understanding of the diverse physiological, psychological, emotional and social needs of this ever-changing and fast-growing mature population.

Table 1: Common Negative Myths About Aging

Myth #1: To be old is to be sick. This myth centers around the belief that aging and disease go hand in hand and individuals are destined to wind up in the nursing home or suffering from a catastrophic illness once they get older. While the prevalence of chronic diseases increases with advancing age a large number of mature adults are healthy, robust and without any significant functional limitations. Even in advanced old age there are individuals that attain incredible heights of athleticism and fitness.
Myth #2: You can't teach an old dog new tricks. Similar to myth #1 this is the belief that senility and dementia are not only a natural part of the aging process but are inevitable. Recent evidence regarding brain plasticity proves

that the human mind retains its ability to learn throughout the lifespan and declines in cognition are largely avoidable. There are many lifestyle behaviors such as physical activity levels, dietary choices, alcohol consumption, tobacco usage and level of mental stimulation that have been shown to be important factors in how much cognitive decline occurs with advancing age.

Myth #3: The horse is out of the barn. It is often believed that once an individual is older it is “too late” to reduce disease risk, increase health status or become fit. There is an overwhelming amount of evidence to show that this is not true. The physiologic capacity for positive adaptation is not lost even in advanced age. For example, resistance exercise studies conducted on individuals in their 90’s found that skeletal muscle can still grow and become stronger. We now know that it is never too late to positively benefit from an exercise program.

Myth #4: The secret to successful aging is to choose your parents wisely. Genetics definitely influence disease risk and longevity but their effects are grossly overestimated. There are some specific diseases that have strong hereditary components, such as some forms of cancer or familial hypercholesterolemia and studies on centenarians show that there is a genetic influence on their longevity. However, the overall evidence is clear that the influence of lifestyle and environment are far more important factors in the determination of health and functional ability than genetics.

Myth #5: The lights may be on but the voltage is low. The implication of this myth is that mature adults become weak and uninterested in sex. Research shows that although the frequency of sexual relations declines both men and women remain interested and active (if there is compatible partner) well into

their 70's and often beyond. In society, older men are often demonized as "dirty old men" if they show a health interest in sexual activity as if it were inappropriate. The desire for relational intimacy, in many forms, can remain strong and can, in fact, be a positive factor for continued health and longevity.

Myth #6: The elderly don't pull their own weight. There seems to be a widespread belief that older adults are a burden to society and do not contribute to its continued success. The assumption is that if a person is not working they are not pulling their own weight. This could not be further from the truth. Mature adults fill many important roles in society and often in unpaid situations. They represent one of the largest volunteer forces and many organizations depend heavily on their contributions of time and effort. In addition, they fulfill family responsibilities, such as caring for grandchildren so that their parents' can work. More recently, the trend of working past typical retirement age is increasing.

Source: Rowe and Kahn (1998), Successful Aging. Dell Publishing Company, New York, New York; pages 11-35.

The Mature Market

The older adult market is burgeoning thanks mainly to the huge numbers of baby boomers that began turning 55 in 2002. The fitness industry has an amazing opportunity to tap into this market as the boomers are now dealing with the effects of aging and as messages extolling the many benefits of physical activity saturate the media. But does the current youth-focused, body-image club that is so prevalent today have what it takes to reach these millions of potential members? Will what worked 10 years ago or 20 years ago work now? 10 years from now? 20 years? The clubs that adapt to meet the needs, interests and abilities of adults over the age of 50 will likely flourish while those that don't will likely become stagnant or decline. They say that knowledge is power. Gaining an understanding of how older adults differ from their younger counterparts and even from one another is vital in our quest to develop facilities, programs and products for 50+ adults. This article will briefly explore some of the more important concepts and facts that need to be considered by club owners, managers, directors and trainers that seek to tap this market.

Principle #1: Diversity is the Rule, Not the Exception

A common mistake in the fitness industry, and many industries for that matter, is a failure to appreciate the immense diversity that exists within the older adult market. Older individuals are NOT all the same. This misconception is likely due to

several factors. For one, because so much time and energy has been spent on serving primarily younger, and rather homogeneous, clients for the past 20 years the industry is inexperienced in working with older adults. Second, while there have been a handful of professionals warning that the age wave is coming, these significant demographic shifts represent an unprecedented time in history. Never before have there ever been so many people living such long lives. So this is really a new experience for industries of all types.

The fact is that the 50+ market consists of a remarkably diverse group of individuals that vary tremendously in physical abilities, life experiences, interests, socioeconomic status, health status and numerous other ways. They are, without a doubt, the most heterogeneous population we can identify and much more so than the younger members and clients the industry is used to servicing. Therefore, gaining an adequate understanding of these differences is an important key to developing effective strategies to attract and retain them as members and clients. On the other hand, stereotyping these individuals based on age alone or perpetuating common myths about aging can repel them faster than you can imagine.

Principle #2: Chronological Age Isn't What It's Cracked Up To Be

Some of the most recognizable changes with aging are physical. Wrinkles, graying hair and age spots are rather innocuous but highly visible. More serious changes

are those that affect health and physical functioning. Chronic diseases and conditions associated with advancing age include cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, arthritis, osteoporosis, dementia, Parkinson's and sensory impairments (vision, hearing, touch). Functional impairments that individuals may experience in late life include difficulty climbing stairs, shopping, driving, performing yard work, cleaning their home, enjoying recreational activities, working and, if left unchecked, bathing, dressing and feeding.

However, despite the prevalence of each of these conditions, they affect individuals at different ages, to differing degrees of severity, progress at differing rates, are treated medically in a variety of ways, and may not affect some people at all. Chronological age really becomes a second-rate method of predicting physical abilities because of the tremendous degree of heterogeneity that exists among older individuals. Therefore, all prior assumptions can be thrown out the window. That is, we can neither assume that an 80 year old suffers from arthritis nor that a 55 year old does not although we recognize that the chance of an 80 year old having arthritis is greater. There are centenarians who are still very active and living independently in contrast to 60 year olds that have to get help performing daily activities. Identifying a market based on age alone just doesn't cut it with today's older populations.

Principle #3: Gender Still Matters

There are a significantly greater proportion of older women than older men due to their additional longevity. The gender disparity increases after the age of 50 and by 85 there are approximately twice as many women than men. Older women differ from their male counterparts in many respects. They are much more likely to be single due to divorce or the death of a spouse; to live alone; to be sedentary or insufficiently active; and to have a lower net worth. On the flip side we find that women are the primary decision-makers to 80-85% of all buying decisions; they feel better about themselves in midlife and beyond; look more for companionship when starting an exercise program; and consider themselves to be in good, or better, health.¹

The CurvesTM phenomenon has proven that the market of middle-aged and older women is substantial and worth pursuing. It has also taught us that this group has different needs and interests than men and if approached accordingly will respond favorably to our efforts.

Principle #4: Cohort Differences Provide Valuable Insight

As stated earlier, chronological age is one of the most inaccurate means of assessing an individual's condition due to the significant heterogeneity in the older populations. However, there are some very interesting and significant cohort differences

which need to be considered. A cohort is a group of people that is born around the same time period and sharing many of the same societal experiences. Cohort effects are seen in many areas of life because these groups tend to also carry with them similar values, perspectives and concerns. Although just because someone is from a particular cohort does not dictate that they behave a certain way understanding these cohort differences is vital. Images, messages and products may connect well with one cohort but not others. It is why so much attention has been given to how the boomers are going to change the way society views aging. The boomers represent a specific cohort with experiences, values and perceptions distinct from previous generations. In actuality, the current 50+ market currently consists of multiple cohorts. While there are more cohorts than what is listed below this condensed version gives you an idea of how cohort identification can affect involvement in programs.²

- Seniors: Born 1929 or prior. Currently 77 years or older. Experiences span two world wars, the roaring twenties and the Great Depression. Report highest levels of satisfaction with family life, social life, leisure activities and physical activities. Also the least active cohort.
- Young-Olds: Born 1930-1945. Currently 69-84 years old. Experiences include the Great Depression and World War II. Huge discretionary spending power and financial assets.
- Baby Boomers: Born 1946-1964. Currently 50-68 years old. The largest and most affluent cohort representing 1/3 of the Canadian population is likely to

change the way many social issues such as work, retirement and healthcare are viewed. Their impact on society as a whole and on the fitness industry is expected to be significant.

- **Baby Busters:** Born 1965-1979. Currently 35-49 years old. Not surprisingly they have the highest levels of physical activity and lowest prevalence of overweight. However, they also report lower levels of satisfaction with work and family life and the highest levels of stress and loneliness than their older counterparts. Interestingly enough this cohort represents the largest percentage of the workforce in the fitness industry.

The Perfect Storm

When we put all of this information together it is apparent that there is a perfect storm that is brewing that consists of four very important facts: 1) The Boomers are a large group that is aging; 2) They are very interested in services and products that will help them retain their youthfulness; 3) Their aging bodies need exercise in order to stay healthy and functional; and 4) They have the discretionary funds to pay for services (often premium services). The bottom line is that there is an amazing opportunity for fitness professionals who take the time to understand their distinct needs and desires and can train them safely and effectively.