

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.

There have never in human history been more adults over the age of 55 than today. The global population of mature adults has grown exponentially over the past several years and will continue to do so well beyond the year 2050. 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. Globally the world's aging

population continues to grow. By 2040 it is expected that the 65+ populations in Europe, the United States and Eastern Asia will exceed 20% of the entire population. There has never been more of a need and opportunity for fitness professionals to specialize in working with this population.

However, mature adults typically have a different set of needs, interests, and desires than their younger counterparts and are often misunderstood. Numerous myths,

FIGURE: GROWTH OF THE U.S. OLDER ADULT POPULATION

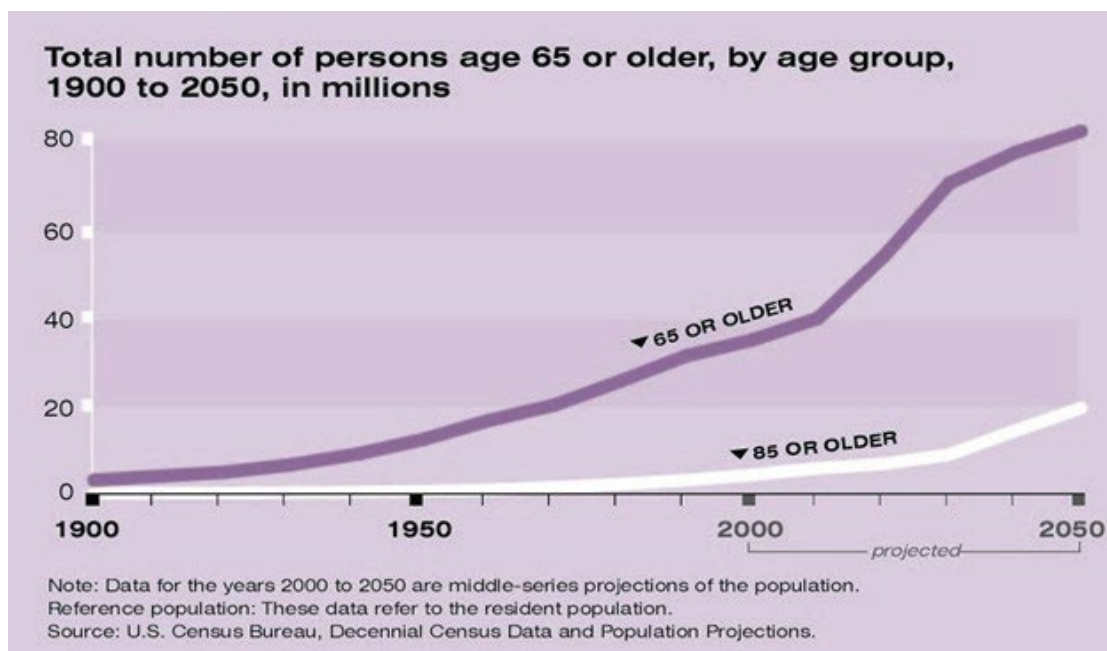
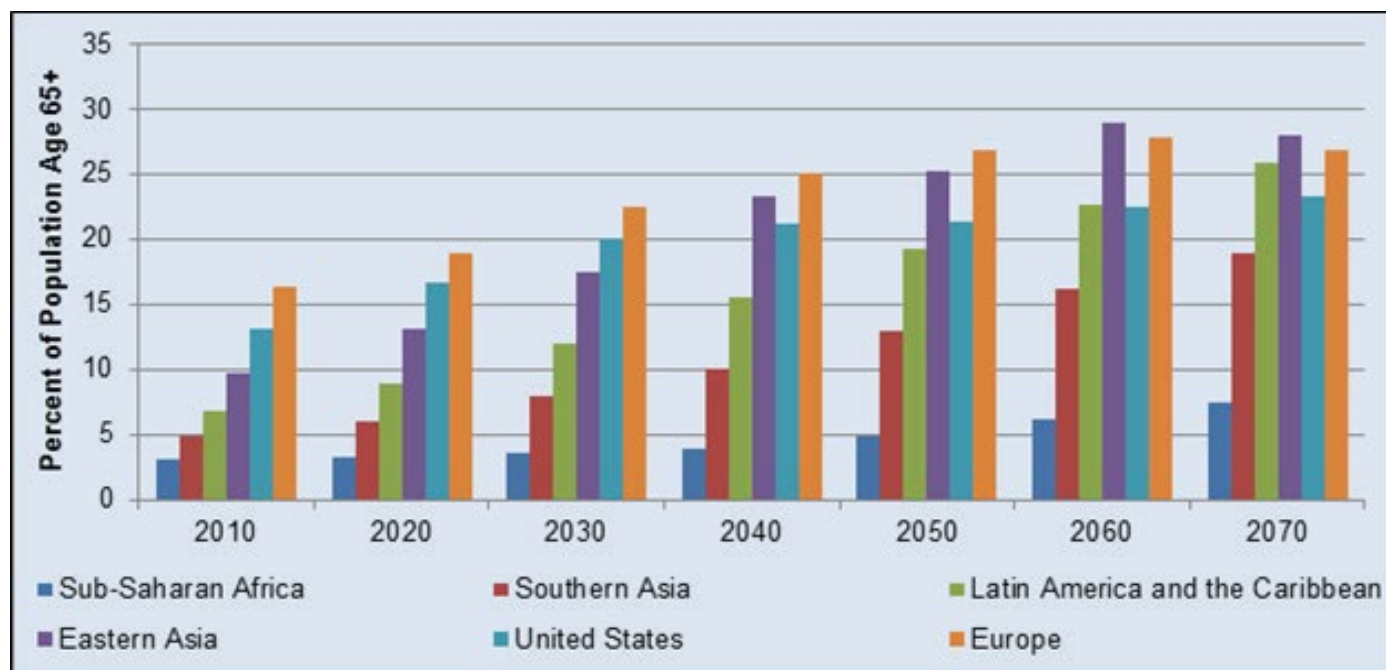


FIGURE: GROWTH OF THE WORLD'S OLDER POPULATION BY REGION



misconceptions, and negative stereotypes about aging and what it means to grow old pervade society and the fitness industry (see Table 1). These inaccurate perspectives are barriers to working effectively with the mature population, especially with the aging boomer population. The Baby Boomers (born from 1946-1964) are the largest age cohort in history and are driving the growth of the mature population. In the United States, Boomers began turning 65 in 2011 and 70 in 2016 at the rate of 1 every 7-8

seconds. But more important than the sheer numbers are the ideologies, perspectives, and collective experiences that they bring with them compared to the previous generation. 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, many 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 healthy 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 then 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 who began turning 55 in 2002 followed by Generation Xers who started reaching the 55-year-age threshold in 2020. Therefore, the current older adult population primarily consists of Traditionalists (adults older than Boomers) and Baby Boomers with Gen Xers just now starting to join them. 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 ten years ago or twenty years ago work now? Ten years from now? Twenty years? The clubs that adapt to meet the needs, interests, and abilities of adults over the age of 55 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 module 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 into 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 twenty 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 has there been so many people living such long lives. This is a new experience for industries of all types.

It is a fact that the 55+ market consists of a remarkably diverse group of individuals who vary tremendously in physical abilities, life experiences, interests, socioeconomic status, health status, and numerous other ways. Without a doubt, it is the most heterogeneous population we can identify. Stereotyping 55+ individuals based on age alone or perpetuating common myths about aging, can repel them faster than you can imagine. Therefore, gaining an adequate understanding of these differences is an important key in developing effective strategies to attract and retain this group as members and clients.

Principle #2: Chronological Age Isn't All 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.

Due to the tremendous degree of heterogeneity that exists among older individuals, chronological age has become a second-rate method of predicting physical abilities. Despite the prevalence of chronic disease and health conditions, individuals are affected at different ages and to differing degrees of severity. Health issues progress at differing rates, are treated medically in various ways, or may not affect some people at all. In fact, we can neither assume that an 80-year-old suffers from arthritis nor that a 55-year-old does not although the chance of an 80-year-old having arthritis is greater. There are centenarians who are still active and living independently in contrast to 60-year-olds who need assistance with daily activities.

Principle #3: Gender Still Matters

Due to their additional longevity, there is a significantly greater proportion of older women than older men. The gender disparity increases after the age of 50 and by the age of 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.

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

Newer programs such as Ageless Fitness (a licensed program for facilities offered by FAI), that focus on attracting the older, affluent female are proving that this approach can be very successful in not only gaining older women as clients but older men as well. Ultimately, the bottom line is "Older Women Rule."

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. Therefore, interesting and significant cohort differences need to be considered.

A cohort is a group of people that are born around the same time and share 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. Of course, just because someone is in a particular cohort does not dictate that they will behave a certain way. Understanding differences within a cohort is vital. Images, messages, and products may connect well with some but not others. It is why so much attention has been given to how Boomers are changing 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 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.

•**Old-Olds (seniors):** Born 1929 or prior. Over 90 years old in 2020. 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. They were the

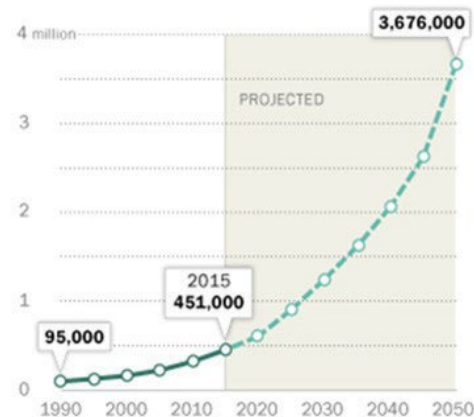
first generation to grow old in the modern era and most did not know what to expect or what to do after they retired. Therefore, they tended to listen to society which said, “Relax”, “Take it easy”, and “Stay put”. The world's centenarian population is the most rapidly growing of any other age group and is expected to continue its exponential rate of increase well past the year 2050 (see figure below).

•**Young-Olds (seniors):** Born 1930-1945; 75-90 years old in 2020. Experiences include the Great Depression and World War II. Huge discretionary spending power and financial assets but also suffering from numerous chronic conditions related to poor lifestyle habits. Many young-olds are turning to fitness programs for the first time and not all are opting for “easy senior programs” like Silver Sneakers®.

•**Baby Boomers:** Born 1946-1964; 56-74 years old in 2020; about 78 million U.S.

The world's centenarian population projected to grow rapidly

Number of persons ages 100 and older



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs
"World Population Prospects: 2015 Revision"

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SOURCE : WWW.PEWRESEARCH.ORG

The largest, best educated and most affluent older adult cohort in history is changing the way many social issues such as work, retirement, and healthcare are viewed. Its impact on society as a whole and on the fitness industry has been and will continue to be significant. Boomers witnessed their parents and grandparents grow old, sick, and “useless,” and they have determined that is not the experience they want. They desire to be healthy and fit in order to stay engaged in all of the activities they want to do and like to do.

•**Generation X (Baby Busters):** Born 1965-1979; 41-55 years old in 2020; about 82 million U.S. 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, this cohort represents the largest percentage of the workforce in the fitness industry.

•**Millennials (Generation Y):** Born 1980-1994; 26-40 years old in 2020. Presently the largest generational cohort. The Millennials are driving many of the changes within the fitness industry as they seek out new experiences, technology, and more specific “boutique” programs such as cycling, yoga, HIIT, and many others.

When we compare the different generational cohorts we can conclude that although the Millennial generation is the largest of these,

the collective population of older adults (55+) is still larger. Even with older adults dying at a much higher rate than Millennials, the 55+ population will continue to grow and will dominate the societal landscape in virtually every developed country in the world for the next 30+ years.

The Perfect Storm

When we put all this information together, it is apparent that there is a perfect storm brewing that consists of four very important facts:

- 1) The Boomers are a large group that is aging with Gen Z right on their heels.
- 2) They are, overall, very interested in services and products that will help them retain their youthfulness.
- 3) Their aging bodies need exercise to stay healthy and functional.
- 4) Many have discretionary funds to pay for services (often premium services).

Given these four facts, it is important to note that there is very little, high-quality competition for the aging cohorts' attention in the fitness industry. Some facilities and programs are doing well attracting and serving this lucrative market, but many others are failing miserably. It seems that very few industry professionals understand what these older adults really want or need. The bottom line is that an amazing opportunity exists for fitness specialists who take the time to understand the distinct needs and desires of these potential clients and can train them safely and effectively.



TWO GREAT RESOURCES TO GROW YOUR BUSINESS
WITH OLDER ADULTS

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