As you can see from the chart displaying statistics on an aging nation from the United States Census Bureau, for the first time in U.S. history, older adults are projected to outnumber children by 2035.

According to the 2018 Profile of Older Americans from the Administration for Community Living, the need for caregiving increases with age and most older persons have at least one chronic condition and many have multiple conditions. With the aging population and the need for care, you will most likely provide care for an increased number of people over age 65.

Leading chronic conditions among older adults include hypertension, arthritis, heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and stroke. It is important when assisting with or providing care for an older person to understand the effects of aging and the unique needs of an older adult.

The body's ability to perform many of its functions changes gradually over the years. In general, the body performs its functions least well at both ends of life - in infancy and in old age. During childhood, body functions gradually become more and more efficient and effective, during late maturity and old age, the opposite is true, they gradually become less and less efficient and effective. During young adulthood, they normally operate with maximum efficiency and effectiveness. The rate at which aging takes place differs with each person, but it increases and becomes more noticeable during the later years.

Ageism is prejudice or discrimination against a particular age-group and especially the elderly (Merriam - Webster dictionary). Everyone has ideas and feelings about what it will be like to get older that can influence your work with clients. You will need to consider your own thoughts about aging as you work with older adults.

There is no typical older adult. Each is a unique individual who will age at his or her own rate and in his or her own way.

**WHEN I AM 80:**

Take a few minutes to give thought to the questions below as you begin to think about how you will experience life as an older adult.

1. Where will I be living?
2. What will I look like?
3. What will I be doing?
4. In what ways will I be the same as I am now?
Aging is a normal, gradual process, and each person ages in his or her own way. Aging is physical and mental rather than a matter of years. How people age is influenced by inherited factors, life experiences, stress, and disease. However, people do experience many changes as a part of normal aging, some of which affect their quality of life and may require the need for assistance. As we get older, our bodies change, examples of body system changes and ways to assist clients experiencing changes are:

**Circulatory System**

As people age, the flow of blood changes.
- The heart gets weaker and doesn’t work as well.
- Tubes that carry blood get harder and narrower. This slows the flow of blood.

Because of these changes, older people often:
- Feel cold, especially in their hands and feet
- Have a fast heartbeat when they get upset
- Are short of breath after doing things

To help with blood flow, ask the client to:
- Avoid crossing their legs and wearing tight clothes
- Avoid things that upset them
- Move around
- Put their legs up
- Soak their feet in warm water, or take a warm bath

If the client is cold, ask them to:
- Dress in layers
- Eat and drink warm things
- Turn up the heat or use an extra blanket. But do not offer hot water bottles or heating pads.

To help with shortness of breath:
- Take their time doing activities
- Rest at intervals and as needed

**Digestive System**

As people age, their eating and digestion change.
- They have fewer taste buds.
- They feel less thirsty.
- They may lose teeth or have dentures that don’t fit well. This makes it hard to eat some foods.
- They have less saliva.
- Food stays in the stomach longer.
- The muscles of the large bowel do not work as well.
- They feel less of an urge to empty their bowel.

Because of these changes, older people often:
- Have a dry mouth
- Have gas, bloating, or stomach pain
- Have hard bowel movements

If the client does not want to eat:
- Offer them snacks.
- Make food look better and have more flavor.

If the client does not want to drink, or has hard bowel movements:
- Offer them small amounts of fluids often.

To help with dry mouth:
- Ask the client to drink before taking pills.

To keep teeth healthy:
- Offer mouth care often.

If the client has trouble digesting, ask them to:
- Eat 6 to 8 small meals each day, per plan of care.
- Eat foods that are high in fiber, per plan of care.
- Avoid foods that are spicy or could cause gas.
- Eat slowly and chew well.
- Sit up for 30 minutes after eating.
- Take plenty of time to empty their bowels.

More than half of adults older than age 65 have two or more chronic health conditions and 40 percent have four or more conditions occurring at the same time. Older adults are at a higher risk of infection and often have weakened immune systems as a result of aging and/or chronic illnesses.

Infection control and standard precautions are important such as handwashing, wearing gloves and not exposing your clients to illnesses.
As people age, their brain and nerves change.
- Nerve cells die.
- The senses don’t work as well.

Because of these changes, older people often have trouble:
- Coping with change
- Falling asleep
- Getting used to changes in light
- Going up and down stairs
- Keeping their balance
- Learning and recalling new things (learning may take longer)
- Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and feeling things

If the client forgets things easily:
- Ask them to write things down.
- Give them clues to help them remember.
- Give them puzzles and mental challenges for practice.

If the client loses their balance easily:
- Ask them to use handrails and any prescribed assistive devices.
- Ask them to change position slowly and count to 10 after they get up, then assist them to walk as needed.
- Give them plenty of time to get around.

If the client has trouble getting to sleep:
- Ask them to move around during the day.
- Ask them to avoid coffee, tea, chocolate, and alcohol before bed.

If a client has trouble seeing:
- Make sure they have plenty of light and a clear view.
- Do not move things around in their room.
- Ask them to get their eyes checked and wear their eye glasses.
- Assist them to find their way, if needed.

If a client has trouble hearing:
- Speak clearly, see text box on hearing for additional tips.
- Encourage them to get their hearing checked. Remind them to wear their hearing aid (if applicable).

As aging progresses, most people do not have the strength they formerly had. It takes longer to do the tasks they used to do, and these jobs are very tiring. Many of the oldest old (85 years and over) are unable to perform household duties (IADL’s) or activities of daily living (ADL’s) because chronic illness interferes with mobility. Older adults who live alone lack another household member to help them bathe, dress, cook, eat, or provide care if they are injured or become ill. These older adults require assistance with home management and personal care, such as bathing and grooming.

Falls are common and costly, especially among Americans age 65 and older. Falls are preventable and do not have to be an inevitable part of aging. Report to your supervisor if your client reports feeling dizzy or sleepy after taking their medications, some medications, even over-the-counter and herbal supplements, can increase falls risk. Report if your client reports feeling dizzy or lightheaded when going from a sitting to standing position. Talk to your client about trip hazards in the home and assist with removing those hazards. Encourage your client to use non-slip mats in the bathtub and on shower floors. Bathrooms pose slip and falls risk, play close attention to wet floors, and other potential hazards when assisting a client in the bathroom. Report unsafe home conditions per agency policies.