



# Addressing Ageism in Healthcare

## What is Ageism?

**Ageism** is age-related discrimination. It refers to “stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) toward others or oneself based on age.”<sup>1</sup>



**Ageism can be internalized at a young age.**

**Examples include:**

- Internalizing the misperception that all older adults are frail and vulnerable
- Using ageist talk or elderspeak
- Attributing forgetfulness to age
- Seeing older patients as set in their ways and unable or unwilling to change
- Believing older adults lack the ability to learn new skills e.g., technology



**Ageism has broader societal implications, and its impact on health and wellbeing<sup>4</sup> of older adults includes:**

- Risky and unhealthy behaviors e.g., poor diet, smoking
- Poorer mental health e.g., depression, anxiety
- Poorer physical health
- Social isolation and loneliness
- Lower quality of life
- Earlier mortality

## Did You Know?

- Ageism is very prevalent among adults 50-80 years old in the US, with over 90 percent of adults reporting they experience at least one form of ageism in their day-to-day lives.<sup>2</sup>
- Ageism can also intersect and exacerbate other forms of disparities related to gender, race/ethnicity<sup>3</sup>, and disability status.
- Costs related to ageism have been estimated to be over \$69 billion annually.<sup>5</sup>
- Ageism can affect how healthcare providers treat and care for older adults, which can exacerbate poorer outcomes by either overtreating, undertreating, or misdiagnosing patients.





## There are strategies that healthcare providers and others who serve older adults can use to address ageism:

- Viewing aging as a normal process and not necessarily one that is debilitating or declining
- Centering and caring for the whole person and focusing on the individual's needs
- Encouraging older adults to view their own aging in a more positive light by focusing on their experiences and accomplishments over time
- Promoting engagement and respectful inclusive communication in settings where both older and younger individuals are present
- Educating professionals on the importance of using appropriate language and behavior and avoiding ageist language
- Developing institutional policies and procedures that reduce age-based discrimination e.g., review of educational materials



Eliminating ageism promotes better health outcomes, quality-of-life, and productivity for older adults and promotes provision of equitable care.

Interested in learning more about ageism? Please contact:

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## Resources

<sup>1</sup>World Health Organization, "Ageism," 18 March 2021, <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/ageing-ageism#:~:text=What%20is%20ageism%3F,Who%20does%20ageism%20affect%3F>

<sup>2</sup>Allen JO, Solway E, Kirch M, et al. Experiences of Everyday Ageism and the Health of Older US Adults. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2022;5(6):e2217240. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.17240

<sup>3</sup>Michelle M. Doty et al., How Discrimination in Health Care Affects Older Americans, and What Health Systems and Providers Can Do, April 21, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.26099/yffm-2x15>

<sup>4</sup>World Health Organization, "Ageism," 18 March 2021, <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/ageing-ageism#:~:text=What%20is%20ageism%3F,Who%20does%20ageism%20affect%3F>

<sup>5</sup>Levy BR, Slade MD, Chang ES, Kanno S, Wang SY. Ageism Amplifies Cost and Prevalence of Health Conditions. *Gerontologist*. 2020 Jan 24;60(1):174-181. doi: 10.1093/geront/gny131. PMID: 30423119; PMCID: PMC7182003.

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