

CHANGING

HEALTH AND AGING

Seasons

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Successful aging through the eyes of Aunt Virginia

BY PEGGY SMITH

On the morning of the interview, 100-year-old “Aunt Virginia” Plummer began with a twinkle in her eye and a most profound statement: “Time marches on, and as you get older, time goes faster.”

She should know. Aunt Virginia was born Virginia Baxley on April 15, 1906 in Minnesota, where she lived with her mother, father and sister and later, with her husband and daughter. As a child, she loved doing puzzles with her father. As a teenager she worked at a downtown department store doing anything they needed done and, because she was young and strong, she was given the hardest jobs. As a homemaker and mother, she raised her daughter and created lovely needlepoint.

In fact, Aunt Virginia credits her longevity to keeping busy.

“I always liked being busy,” she said. “I like being active, and so I’ve just always done something. I never just sat back and rested. But I’ve been lucky. I’ve always been physically active. I walked a lot. I iceskated and rollerskated, swam and did all those things. I sleep well and I eat well, but then I keep going, so I burn that all up. And I traveled. Oh, I *love* to travel. I’ve been all over the world – Europe, South America. Traveling is so wonderful. I’ve been to all the states except Hawaii. That’s the only place I haven’t been. I don’t know, I just like to go.”



Virginia Plummer, pictured at the age of 5, grew up in Minnesota.

Director’s welcome



PHOTO BY DENISE TRUNK

Marco Pahor

I speak for the Institute on Aging’s physicians, researchers and health-care service providers when I welcome you to the first edition of our quarterly newsletter, *Changing Seasons*. The theme of this issue is successful aging, which parallels the mission of Florida’s Institute on Aging.

Our continuing goal, to be at the forefront of research, health care, education and career development in the area of aging, is set in order to make significant contributions to the preservation of independence and the prevention and rehabilitation of disabilities affecting senior citizens.

Our professional staff is dedicated to high-quality clinical care and research into all aspects of health and aging – from molecules to patient care.

I hope that this newsletter will provide you with useful information as to how we are fulfilling our mission to be a one-stop resource for aging research, education and patient care.

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She also doesn't believe in "bothering around with this ache and that ache."

She said, "I don't allow myself to think about it. I'm not going to think myself sick. You can sit in one place and make yourself ill if you really want to be. Some people, I think, have worried so much that they became ill because they were afraid they would. You gotta think right."



Virginia Plummer at 20.

She shared additional secrets:

Q: What are your favorite things to do now?

A: I like to read, I read a lot – all kinds of things. And tomorrow, if someone said let's go someplace, I'd go. I've been well enough that I can do that and I haven't lost interest in things. You go one place and you find things are different, and you go to another place. But if you go with the idea that everything is the same, you might just as well stay home. Save your money.

Q: What are your favorite things to eat?

A: Oh, chocolate. I love chocolate. Chocolate's my favorite food. I like Cheerios, Cream of Wheat. I eat just about everything. Other than coconut – I don't eat coconut.

Q: Do you have any physical problems?

A: No, I'm in pretty good health right now. I get a pain every now and then – just an ache or something, but I haven't been sick for a long time.

She takes no medicine except an inhaler for the asthma she's had since she was a small child. So for Aunt Virginia, the secret of longevity is activity, exercise, travel and a positive attitude. And, of course, a little chocolate each day. Time marches on, but for Aunt Virginia, it's been the time of her life! ■



Aunt Virginia today.

Ability to walk predicts future health

As people age into their 70s, their ability to walk a quarter mile becomes an important predictor of overall health and even how long they might live, according to study findings published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

Of nearly 3,000 healthy seniors studied, those who were able to complete a quarter-mile extended walking test were three times as likely to live longer and were less likely to suffer from cardiovascular disease and physical infirmity as they aged, said Marco Pahor, M.D., director of Institute on Aging and the multi-institutional study's co-principal investigator at its Memphis site.

Cutting calories can reduce aging damage

A lifelong habit of trimming just a few calories from the daily diet can do more than slim the waistline – a new study shows it may help lessen the effects of aging.

Scientists from UF's Institute on Aging have found that eating a little less food and exercising a little more over a lifespan can reduce or even reverse aging-related cell and organ damage in rats. The discovery, described in the journal *Antioxidants and Redox Signaling*, builds on recent research in animals and humans that has shown a more drastic 20 percent to 40 percent cut in calories slows aging damage.

Stroke rehabilitation under study

UF Institute on Aging scientists are leading a national group of researchers to study rehabilitation techniques designed to improve walking in the first year after stroke.

Difficulty walking is the most common disability associated with stroke, said Pam Duncan, Ph.D., the study's principal investigator and the institute's associate director.

The focus of the study, known as the Locomotor Experience Applied Post-Stroke trial, or LEAPS, is a clinic-based program in which patients practice walking on a treadmill.

The multi-site, randomized trial will assess whether there is a difference in the proportion of subjects who successfully recover walking ability using this therapy versus a group given a therapist-supervised, home-based exercise program.

Volunteer Opportunities

Why volunteer for clinical research studies?

Clinical trials are scientific studies in which people help doctors find ways to improve health and health care. Many current treatments for illness are based on the results of past clinical trials. Simply put, clinical studies are how researchers find out “what works.”

Before medications and procedures are ever tested on humans they must be exhaustingly tested in the laboratory. Then, when a medication passes these tests, researchers have a clear idea whether it can be tested in humans and in what amounts.



Clinical trials enroll people who are alike in certain ways, depending on the study’s purpose. The study’s protocol tells who can join the study and spells out the characteristics that volunteers should have in order to participate. Testing in humans is permitted only if a person volunteers for participation. The person is informed of all the risks and benefits of taking part in the study, including details about the study approach and any tests that may be performed. When a person decides to participate, he or she signs a consent form. A volunteer can choose to withdraw from a study at any time.

Participating in studies is not for everyone, but for

many people the benefits far outweigh the possible disadvantages. It presents an opportunity to be part of medical history, many times helping to find treatments and cures for those diseases, conditions and syndromes that can negatively affect our successful aging. The National Institutes of Health has developed a consumer-friendly database, www.ClinicalTrials.gov, to provide patients, family members and members of the public current information about clinical research studies.

In upcoming issues, we will list participation opportunities with IOA-affiliated studies. ■

Resources

Heart-healthy tip: put down that salt shaker

Research shows that excessive sodium intake is linked with high blood pressure or hypertension in some people.

- Dietary recommendations suggest avoiding too much sodium. The suggested range is 1,100 to 3,300 mg per day.
- Limit prepackaged, canned and frozen foods often contain high amounts of sodium.
- High-sodium food include those that are pickled, in cocktail sauce, smoked, in broth or au jus, in a tomato base or in soy or teriyaki sauce. When preparing your food, consider replacing salt with these flavorful herbs and spices:

HERB/SPICE	ENHANCES
Basil	Tomato-based sauces and dishes
Bay leaf	Braised and stewed dishes
Chives	Salads, stews and soups
Cinnamon	Desserts and beverages
Cloves	Meats and vegetables
Cumin	Marinades, chili and tomato sauce
Curry	Meats, fish, poultry and vegetables
Dill	Seafood, salads, sauces, dips and spreads
Ginger	Stir-fried poultry, lamb or meat
Marjoram	Meats, fish, and vegetables
Mustard	Marinades and fish stews
Paprika	Potatoes, chicken and fish
Parsley	Stocks and soups
Rosemary	Roasted or grilled lamb, chicken or fish
Sage	Fish, lamb, pork or poultry
Savory	Beans, stews and lamb dishes

Ask the Doctor

George J. Caranasos, M.D.,
professor emeritus, University of Florida



Q: Dear Dr. Caranasos: Aside from the obvious ones such as exercise and good nutrition, what are some of the lesser known keys to successful aging?

A: Well, first of all, don't forget to stop smoking! Very few centenarians are also smokers. So, exercise, nutrition and smoking cessation are the top three. But, the next three are just as essential to successful aging:

1. Social Involvement. Without social involvement, seniors can become isolated. However, interaction with friends and family on a frequent basis, including gatherings at churches, clubs and organizations, provides a network of emotional, physical and logistical support that affords a sense of security.

2. Participation in work or activities considered valuable, important or productive. A surprising result of studies is that seniors involved in volunteerism or productive work aren't considered "old" or "elderly," either by society or by themselves. This provides a sense of purpose.

3. Autonomy. The ability to make decisions and have control over one's life is crucial to healthy, successful aging. Autonomy gives a sense of power.

All these are elements of successful aging and "aging in place," with the ultimate goal of allowing seniors to remain in their own homes living happy, active and productive lives for as long as possible. ■



PHOTO BY SARAH KIEWEL

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