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HEALTH

## The Surprising Truth About Aging: New Study Challenges the Idea of Inevitable Decline

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*A long-running national study of older Americans suggests that aging may be far more dynamic than commonly assumed. Rather than following a uniform path of decline, many individuals experience measurable improvements in physical or cognitive abilities over time. Credit: Stock*

## **A large longitudinal study challenges the idea that aging inevitably brings decline, revealing that many older adults improve in key measures of physical and cognitive health.**

Aging later in life is often described as a gradual decline in both body and mind. However, new research from scientists at [Yale University](#) suggests a different possibility. The study indicates that many older adults actually improve over time, and that their attitudes about aging may strongly influence those outcomes.

The research analyzed more than a decade of information from a large, nationally representative study of older Americans. Lead author Becca R. Levy, a professor of social and behavioral sciences at the Yale School of Public Health (YSPH), reported that nearly half of adults age 65 and older showed measurable gains in cognitive ability, physical ability, or both during the study period.

Importantly, these improvements were not limited to a small number of unusually healthy individuals. The researchers also found that progress was closely associated with a factor that often receives little attention: how people think about the aging process itself.

“Many people equate aging with an inevitable and continuous loss of physical and cognitive abilities,” said Levy, an international expert on psychosocial determinants of aging health. “What we found is that improvement in later life is not rare, it’s common, and it should be included in our understanding of the aging process.”

The findings are published in the journal *Geriatrics*.

### **Tracking Changes Over Time**

The research team followed more than 11,000 participants in the Health and Retirement Study, a federally supported long-term survey that tracks the health and lives of older Americans. Cognitive performance was evaluated using a global assessment of mental functioning. Physical ability was measured by walking speed, which geriatric specialists often describe as a “vital sign” because it is closely connected with disability risk, hospitalization rates, and mortality.

Over a follow-up period that lasted as long as 12 years, 45 percent of participants showed improvement in at least one of the two categories. About 32 percent demonstrated cognitive improvement, while 28 percent improved in physical performance. Many of these gains exceeded levels considered clinically meaningful.

When researchers also counted participants whose cognitive scores remained stable rather than declining, the results became even more striking. More than half of the group did not follow the

commonly held expectation that cognitive ability inevitably worsens with age.

“What’s striking is that these gains disappear when you only look at averages,” said Levy, author of the book “Breaking the Age Code: How Your Beliefs About Aging Determine How Long & How Well You Live.” “If you average everyone together, you see decline. But when you look at individual trajectories, you uncover a very different story. A meaningful percentage of the older participants that we studied got better.”

The researchers also explored why some individuals improved while others did not. They proposed that one possible explanation might lie in participants’ beliefs about aging at the start of the study. In other words, people who held more positive views about growing older might experience different outcomes than those who held more negative beliefs.

Their analysis supported this idea. Participants who began the study with more positive age-related beliefs were significantly more likely to improve in both cognitive performance and walking speed. This relationship remained even after accounting for factors such as age, sex, education, chronic illness, depression, and the length of the follow-up period.

## **The Power of Age Beliefs**

The results add to a body of research connected to Levy’s stereotype embodiment theory. This theory suggests that cultural messages about aging, which people absorb through sources such as social media and advertising, can eventually influence biological processes once those beliefs become personally relevant.

Earlier work by Levy has shown that negative views about aging are linked to poorer memory, slower walking speed, increased cardiovascular risk, and biological markers associated with Alzheimer’s disease.

According to Levy, the new findings highlight the opposite effect. Individuals who internalize more positive beliefs about aging are more likely to experience improvements over time.

“Our findings suggest there is often a reserve capacity for improvement in later life,” she said. “And because age beliefs are modifiable, this opens the door to interventions at both the individual and societal level.”

The improvements observed in the study were not restricted to people who began with health problems. Even among participants who started with normal levels of cognitive or physical function, a considerable number still improved during the study period. This challenges the assumption that

gains in later life occur only when people recover from illness or rebound from earlier health setbacks.

The researchers hope their results will help change the widespread belief that aging inevitably involves continuous decline. They also suggest the findings could encourage policymakers to expand support for preventive care, rehabilitation, and other programs designed to promote health and resilience among older adults.

Reference: "Aging Redefined: Cognitive and Physical Improvement with Positive Age Beliefs" by Becca R. Levy and Martin D. Slade, 3 March 2026, *Geriatrics*.

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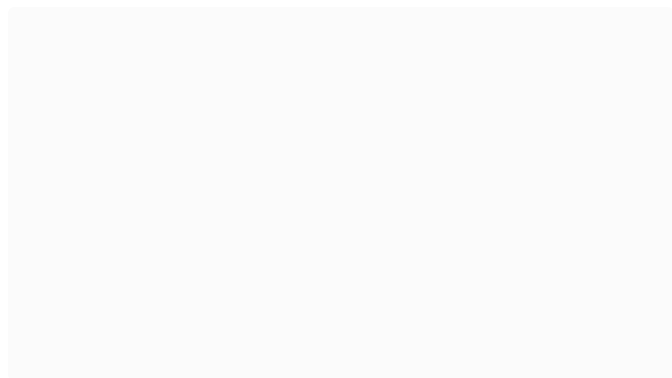
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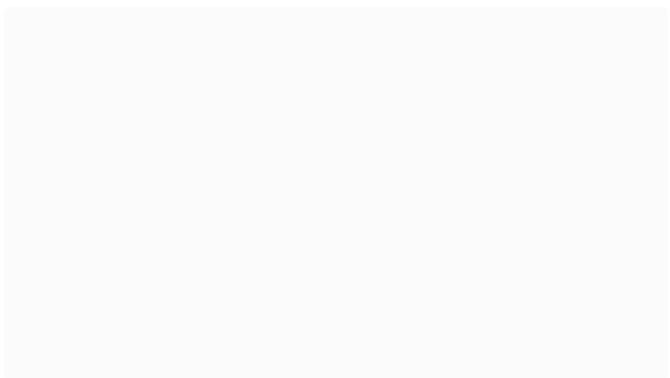
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