



## **Baby boomers face doctor shortage**

By: Steve Vernon | October 6, 2014

There's much the government and private sector can do to address the rising health care needs resulting from the aging U.S. population, according to a recent report by Merrill Lynch and Age Wave. And there's a lot individuals can do as well.

Our medical system does a good job of handling the medical challenges of younger adults and children, who tend to be more prone to short-term acute issues such as the flu and non-critical injuries. But the diseases and disabilities in older adults, such as hypertension, heart diseases, cancer, Alzheimer's, or arthritis are typically more difficult and costly to treat. And Geriatrics is a medical specialty that focuses on the health care of elderly people, aiming to prevent and treat their chronic, long-term conditions.

The trouble is that for every 9,400 adults age 65 and over in the U.S. today, there is only one physician trained and certified as a geriatrician. By comparison, there is currently one pediatrician for every 1,200 children age 15 or younger. In spite of the tremendous growth of America's older population, only 14 of 159 medical schools surveyed in the U.S. have a full department of geriatrics.

The Merrill Lynch/Age Wave report suggests that more research and attention to the diseases of old age, particularly Alzheimer's, is needed. The report shows people of all ages expressing overwhelming interest in a wide range of medical innovations to help them age with greater health and vitality. Potential therapies that slow the aging of your brain and body were supported by 80 percent or more of the population surveyed.

### **What can you do today?**

While the medical innovations cited above would clearly be good news, they might be years away from being a reality. Even if research funding on these conditions increased significantly in the next few years, viable innovations might not be ready in time to be of much help for people currently in their sixties or older.

The Merrill Lynch/Age Wave report identifies five action steps that individuals of any age can take to reduce the odds of incurring the expensive and debilitating conditions of the elderly:

- Exercise
- Eat a nutritious diet
- Maintain a health weight
- Stay socially connected
- Avoid unhealthy habits, such as smoking and excessive drinking

If you make these healthy lifestyle choices, you can significantly reduce the odds of incurring an expensive and debilitating condition in your later years. Of course, there's no guarantee. In fact, you may know people who've taken care of their health and still experienced an expensive medical condition. (That happened recently to both me and my wife despite our healthy lifestyles.) But that's no reason to give up on a healthy lifestyle. In my wife's case, if she hadn't been in such good health, she may not have survived her medical crisis, and we both recovered from our health crises more rapidly due to our good health.

And the benefits of healthy lifestyles don't stop with the prevention of debilitating conditions later in life. The number of 65-year-olds will grow by 80 percent between 2010 and 2030, and will impose a tremendous strain on our medical system. If we collectively took all the steps listed above, we'd significantly reduce the overall load on our medical system. This would help our doctors and medical system focus on people who incur conditions that are truly unavoidable.

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