

Mugabe's health, the missing message

Categories : [Health talks with Dr Chireka](#)

Date : 22nd June 2016

Mugabe's health the missing message

Your one stop centre for information about health.

<http://docheecee.co.uk>

how to prepare for the health issues we face as we reach the age of President Mugabe

By Dr Brighton Chireka

President Robert Gabriel Mugabe is the world's oldest leader. He turned 92 years in February this year and despite his age, he continues to give lengthy speeches in public. However he has had at least a couple of incidences that brought his health into question. One incident was the tripping and another was the reading of the same speech that he had delivered a month before. When these incidents occur I get worried with the debate that follows, as those on the side of the president try to deny that these incidents ever occurred and those on opposition seizing the opportunity to call for his stepping down.

The political debate has and is still taking place and this article will not dwell on that but will try to focus on health of the elderly. I have personally tripped on carpet before and fallen down, my 3 year old son falls a lot and at work, I refer several elderly people to the falls clinic. My message is that we all fall sick one day and the sooner we prepare for it the better.

In our excitement about President Mugabe's health, we must not forget the health challenges of aging. We must remember that just as planning for future financial needs or burial is important, so is planning for optimum health in old age. We may have lots of money but that money can make us go to the grave early if we do not pay extra attention to our health. We may be struggling to make ends meet but there are things within our control that we can do to have a better chance of reaching old age.

My encounter with President Mugabe

President Robert Mugabe was born on the 21st February 1924 and has outlived all his siblings and first wife. I first shook President Mugabe's hand in 1986 when he visited Nyava show grounds in Musana area. He was 62 years then and his hand shake was so strong that I can still remember it. The next encounter was when he visited Kutama College in 1991 with Australian officials. My last encounter was in February 1992 when I shook his hand again as I was paying my last condolences for the death of his first wife Sally Mugabe. The body of Sally Mugabe was brought to Kutama rural area for the traditional send off and that year I was finishing my advanced level studies at Kutama college . In all these encounters I saw a fit elderly person whose health was defying his age.

How should we prepare for old age?

It would have been better if I had managed to personally interview President Mugabe about his health as young person. I would have liked to look at what he did or did not do and how it is impacting on his health as an elderly person. A great number of diseases can be prevented, forestalled, or minimized with a healthy lifestyle and regular health screenings. We all know that Mugabe was once in prison and also in the bush fighting but despite these experiences he is still going reasonable strong. Sadly though is that if the conditions in our prisons today were the same when Mugabe was detained , he would not be alive today. Sending anyone to our prisons is becoming like death sentence as the chances of dying are high.

This subject may seem irrelevant now to those in their teens but believe you me I was also a teenager and never thought that I will reach 40. Life expectancy in Zimbabwe was estimated to be 33 and then I just lived a day at a time . There are things that I wished I had done better but I am glad that I am working on those areas. I urge each one of you reading this article to reflect on your lifestyle and see if it can lead you to a good old age. We must know that old age is what lies ahead of us so we have to prepare for it . Failure to prepare for it means two things for us , it's either we die young from preventable diseases or we die old but severely suffering that we wish we had died long ago.

Let me digress a bit

I remember going back to Zimbabwe in 2008 after being away from Zimbabwe for 8 years . I was eager to meet my old friends and was saddened each time I asked for their whereabouts . My question was always followed by a pause and then same answer kept coming - he /she is now at "kumbudzi" (name of a burial place in Harare). I was taken aback when I asked about a certain person who was very close to me .

He looked after me and offered me shelter but was not so luck with women. I remember talking to him as a medical student about the risk he was putting himself in by his lifestyle. Each time I came to see him when I was on my break from college I was certain to find him nursing a new sexual transmitted infection. He trusted me so he would confide in me and I made sure that I took him to see a doctor . At one point the doctor had to be blunt and said in Shona , " Pawakabuda napo ndipo pachakuraya" meaning that "he will die of sexual transmitted infection" . If I am to write about all the things that he did, most readers will think that I am now a fiction writer. I cannot reveal

more details as I respect his confidentiality but even when he was alive he was not ashamed to tell all his friends that he had a new sexual transmitted infection. He told a group of us about what he did when he developed pubic lice . He went to buy an insecticide called " killem" and sprayed it on his genitals and then used a comb to remove the dead lice on his genitals. He did the same to his partner and when he told me I was saddened by it and took him to see his usual doctor . He was treated and recovered from it .

His views was that he was capable of assessing a person whether she had STI or not. His assessment was pathetic to say the least so I will not dwell on it . I have taken much of your time trying to highlight the lifestyle of one person . He never used a condom even though I used to bring lots of condoms for him.

In 2008 when I asked about his whereabouts I was not surprised by the answer that I got from my friend. My friend said the following , I quote, " If XXX had been alive today then there is no HIV and it does not kill as well". He refused to be tested only to agree when he was on his death bed. He used to brag about how many STIs he had acquired and how fit he was. I remember leaving for UK in 2000 and looking at him from outside , he looked very fit and used to think that he was resistant to HIV. Sadly he died two years later at a young age.

We contract HIV by different means and most of the times it's not our lifestyle but in a few it may be due to our lifestyle. The point is not about how we contracted the infection , the point is our attitude towards the infection. Nowadays if you get early treatment you are guaranteed to reach old age and live a near as normal life as possible. My message is that we must get tested and started on treatment as soon as possible.

As we share the articles talking about President Mugabe's health, I would like us to pause and think what should we do to get to that age. We have the evidence that it can be reached and the good news is that a great number of diseases can be prevented, forestalled, or minimized with a healthy lifestyle and regular health screenings. The more you are like myself in the middle age , the higher the call to prepare for successful aging

I have been writing about our weight and [DIABETES](#) as we know that from research it is reported that about 75% of adults age 60 and older are overweight or obese. Obesity increases the risk of getting type 2 diabetes , cardiovascular diseases , breast and colon cancer, gallbladder disease and [HYPERTENSION](#)

As we grow older we tend to put on weight and this puts us at high risk of diseases . Some studies estimates that more than 40% of adults 60 and older have a combination of risk factors known as **metabolic syndrome**, which puts people at increased risk for developing diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and certain cancers. It is characterized ;

A bigger waist

High fat in our blood (cholesterol)

High blood pressure

Inability to control blood sugar levels (insulin resistance)

Increased risk of developing clots

A tendency to develop inflammation

Looking at our joints

As we mature our joints take the knock from all the sporting activities we engage in , the high-heeled shoes we put on and the injuries we suffer as young kids. About 50% of the elderly populations suffers from arthritis and affects their mobility. Regular exercise now and avoiding overusing our joints is the best way to preserve them. Weight management is still very important for the health of our joints. The Framingham osteoarthritis study showed that a weight loss of just 11 pounds could reduce the risk of developing osteoarthritis in the knees by 50%.

Brittle bone disease (osteoporosis) affect almost 44 million adults age 50 and older, most of them women. Osteoporosis is not part of normal aging and healthy behaviours and treatment should allow us to prevent the condition or reduce its burden.

More than 33% of adults age 65 and older experience a fall in a given year. Almost a third those who fall suffer injuries that decrease their mobility and their independence. Sadly falls are the leading cause of death from injury in this age group.

What can we do to avoid osteoporosis

We need to stop smoking , watch our alcohol intake and get plenty if calcium in our diet . We must not forget the importance of the "sunshine vitamin " -[VITAMIN D](#). It is important to use sunscreens to protect against skin cancer, but sun preens blood the light rays needed by the body to make vitamin D. Remember that as we from older our skin becomes less efficient at making Vitamin D from sunlight.

We need to start exercising from now , it's never too late as exercise helps to keep pour bones healthy . Do not delay , the sooner the better.

Looking at Cancer in older age

The risk of developing most types of cancer increases with age. As for women the rate of [CERVICAL CANCER](#) decreases they age and endometrial cancer increases. As for men the risk of prostate cancer increases with age, and us black men have a higher rate than white men. We need to be aware of symptoms of [PROSTATE CANCER](#) and how to prevent it.

We see a lot of young people smoking tobacco - [HEALTH EFFECTS OF SMOKING](#). yet it causes lung cancer. Lung cancer is said to account for more deaths than [BREAST CANCER](#), prostate cancer, and colon cancer combined. My message to the young people is to stop smoking.

Looking at cardiovascular diseases (diseases of the heart or blood vessels) as we grow old .

The incidents of cardiovascular diseases increases with age and are the leading cause of death in countries like America and studies are also showing that it will be the case very soon in Africa.

I am an advocate of [HEALTHY EATING](#) and there is evidence to back me on that. A healthy lifestyle can reduce the risk of heart disease by as much as 80%, according to data from the Nurses' Health Study, an extensive research effort that followed more than 120,000 women aged 30 to 55 starting in 1976. Looking at data over 14 years, the researchers showed that women who were not overweight, did not smoke, consumed about one alcoholic drink per day, exercised vigorously for 30 minutes or more per day, and ate a low-fat, high-fibre diet had the lowest risk for heart disease.

I have covered the topic of high blood pressure and highlighted the need to have it under control as it will reduce the rate of stroke and heart attacks. We need to cut done on salt and stop eating canned or frozen food or fast foods. Remember we are what we ate and do after eating.

Looking at vision and hearing loss as we age

The incidence of eye diseases such as cataracts and glaucoma increases with age. Smokers have been noted to have high risk of developing macular degeneration.

High-frequency hearing loss is common in old age and made worse by a lifestyle that includes exposure to loud sounds. The loud music that we subject ourselves in the night clubs is not good for us in the long run. Another factor is working in a noisy environment such as airports or factories . People at any age are advised not to put iPods directly into their ears.

Teeth and aging

We need to brush our teeth twice a day with fluoridated toothpaste , flossing daily and visiting a dentist regularly. Failure to do this will result in us losing our teeth.

Mental health and aging

We see a lot of senior people having problems with their memory and we even joke that we are having a senior moment when we forget things. Advice is the same , doing things that keep our hearts healthy will also keep our brain healthy. Exercising , controlling blood pressure, quitting smoking, and if we have diabetes, keeping it under control will help our brain and heart as well. Many people that are of the same age as Mugabe cannot even remember their names or their homes. The reason is that most of them retired and stayed at home doing nothing. We know that staying mentally active is as important as staying physically active. It has been found that joining a book club, staying up to date on current events, engaging in stimulating conversations, and doing crosswords puzzle will help our mental wellbeing.

Preparing for retirement

Not everyone will be fortunate enough to be working at 92 years so we need to prepare for retirement. One of the biggest life changes is retirement. Many people have their sense of worth tied up with work. In retirement, depression and suicide rates rise. There are several voluntary projects that one can get involved with after retirement.

People tend to think that exercise is for young people , it is common knowledge that heads of states do have personal trainers to help them keep fit . We may not afford that we need to keep ourself active by even taking regular walks and or swimming .

In retirement we may need to make new friends , move to a new area , accept that family and friends may be gone or distant . Loneliness is inevitable but we have to prepare for it .

We must not forget about religion . For those who are Christians they know that Psalm 122 is always there for them . You should be glad to go to the house of the Lord. Old age may be the time to reconnect and focus on life after death

We know our lives today and we know our challenges , we need to make some strategic decisions about how we want to live our lives .

We know that much of the illness, disability, and deaths associated with chronic disease are avoidable through known prevention measures, including a healthy lifestyle, early detection of diseases, immunizations, injury prevention, and programs to teach techniques to self-manage conditions such as pain and chronic diseases. We have to take care of our parts as we do not know what the future hold for us. Hopefully we can reach the same age as Mugabe and still raring to go.

This article was compiled by Dr Brighton Chireka , who is a GP and a blogger based in Kent in the United Kingdom. Feel free to contact him at info@docbeecee.co.uk and you can read more of his work on his blog at [DR CHIREKA'S BLOG](#)

Disclaimer: This article is for information only and should not be used for the diagnosis or treatment of medical conditions. Dr Chireka has used all reasonable care in compiling the information but makes no warranty as to its accuracy. Consult a doctor or other healthcare professionals for a diagnosis and treatment of medical conditions. Views expressed here are personal and do not in any way , shape or form represent the views of organisations that Dr Chireka work for or is associated with.