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# **Patient Responsibility in Health Care: An AARP Bulletin Survey**

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# **Patient Responsibility in Health Care: An AARP Bulletin Survey**

**Data Collected by SSRS  
Report Prepared by Teresa A. Keenan, Ph.D.**

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The views expressed herein are for information, debate, and discussion, and do not necessarily represent official policies of AARP.

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## **Executive Summary**

With an interest in learning more about what midlife and older adults think (and do) about taking responsibility for their own health care, on behalf of the *AARP Bulletin*, in March 2011, AARP Research & Strategic Analysis fielded a short telephone survey among a nationally representative sample of 1,014 individuals ages 50 and older.

## **Key Findings**

With roughly three-quarters of respondents reporting that they “lead a healthy lifestyle,” it is not surprising that their reported behaviors generally support this assertion. However, as with many health-related activities, respondents appear to be taking better care of themselves in certain respects while shortchanging others.

- Nearly nine in ten respondents say that they have had a vision test within the past five years, more than eight in ten women say they’ve had a mammogram, and slightly more than two-thirds of men say they’ve had a prostate exam within the same time period.
- But, only about half of the respondents report that they have had a colonoscopy in the past five years (even though the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend that healthy adults begin having the exam at 50 years of age), only about half say that they have had their hearing test as an adult, and only about four in ten say they have compiled a family health history.

Respondents also appear to be coordinating with their health care professionals, with more than nine in ten reporting being either *extremely* or *very honest* with their doctor about their health history, a similar percentage saying they are *extremely* or *very comfortable* in asking their doctor questions about medications and treatment options, and more than three-quarter noting that they follow their doctor’s advice *extremely* or *very closely*.

## **Conclusions**

According to our results, a number of societal messages encouraging midlife and older adults to lead healthier lives seem to be reaching their targets. But, clearly more still needs to be done to encourage them to schedule a colonoscopy, have a hearing test, or take the reins of their own or their family’s health by compiling and regularly updating a family health history. By taking responsibility for their own health—as patients—and working closely with their health care professionals, many midlife and older adults can remain healthy and independent for years to come.

## **Background**

In March 2011, on behalf of the *AARP Bulletin*, AARP Research & Strategic Analysis contracted with Social Science Research Solutions (SSRS) to field a short telephone survey among a nationally representative sample of adults ages 50 and older to learn more about what midlife and older adults think (and do) about taking responsibility for their own health care<sup>1,2</sup>.

Respondents were asked whether they lead a healthy lifestyle, which health screenings (if any) they have had in the past five years, and whether they have compiled a family health history. They were also asked how closely they follow their doctor's advice or treatment recommendations, how honest they are with their doctor about their health history, how comfortable they feel asking their doctor questions about their medications and treatment, and whether they research their health symptoms prior to a visit to the doctor. Finally, they were asked about their primary source of health information, who they believe has the responsibility for treatment decisions about their health, and what they believe the effect of individuals taking better care of themselves would have on the nation's health care costs.

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<sup>1</sup> The survey was fielded from March 30—April 10, 2011. At the conclusion of the fielding period, responses had been received from 1,014 adults ages 50 and older. The sampling error is +/- 3 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. This means that in 95 out of 100 samples of this size, the results would fall in a range of no more than three percentage points of what would have been obtained if every person age 50 or older had been surveyed.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the report, results are presented using weighted data figures.



## **Detailed Findings**<sup>3</sup>

### ***Healthy Lifestyle***

When asked if they would say they lead a healthy lifestyle, such as eating the right foods, exercising regularly, and going for health screenings, more than three-quarters (76%) of respondents say that they do.

- Notably, older respondents are more likely than younger ones to answer in the affirmative (81% vs. 74%). Additionally, while there are no gender differences in responses to this question, the most affluent respondents are more likely than the least affluent ones to say they lead a healthy lifestyle (83% for those with incomes of \$75,000 or more vs. 70% for those with incomes of less than \$25,000).

### ***Screenings in Past Five Years***

Nearly nine in ten (86%) respondents reported that they have had a vision test in the past five years, while roughly half (49%) said they have had a colonoscopy in the same time period. More than eight in ten (82%) women reported having a mammogram in the past five years, while slightly more than two-thirds (69%) of the men reported having a prostate exam.

- While there are no age differences in respondents' reporting having had a vision test, men are more likely than women (17% vs. 11%) to say they have not had such a test in the past five years. However, the most affluent respondents—those with annual household incomes of \$75,000 or more—are more likely than respondents in the other three income groups to report having had a vision test in the same time period (96% vs. 79% for those with incomes of less than \$25,000; 86% for those with incomes of \$25,000-\$49,999; and 86% for those with incomes of \$50,000-\$74,999).
- Older respondents are more likely than younger ones to say they have had a colonoscopy in the past five years (54% vs. 45%). Notably, there are no gender or income differences in the likelihood of having a colonoscopy in the past five years.

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<sup>3</sup> Respondents in this study are aged 50 and older, with nearly six in ten (59%) between the ages of 50 and 64 and roughly four in ten (41%) ages 65 and older. Slightly more than half are women (53%) and slightly less than half are men (47%). Three in ten (31%) have household incomes of less than \$30,000 per year, while nearly one-fifth (18%) have household incomes of \$30,000-\$49,999 per year. Roughly one-third (32%) of respondents reported an annual household income of \$50,000 or more, with one-fifth (20%) reporting an annual household income of \$75,000 or more.

- Younger men (ages 50-64) are more likely than older men (ages 65 and older) to report not having a prostate exam in the past five years (33% vs. 21%). Also, men with incomes of less than \$25,000 are more likely than those with incomes of \$25,000-\$49,999 or \$75,000 or more to say they have not had a prostate exam in that same time period (47% vs. 24% and 17%).
- Although women of every age are about equally likely to say they have had a mammogram in the past five years, the most affluent ones are more likely than the least affluent ones to report having the exam (93% vs. 76%).

### ***Hearing Test and Family History***

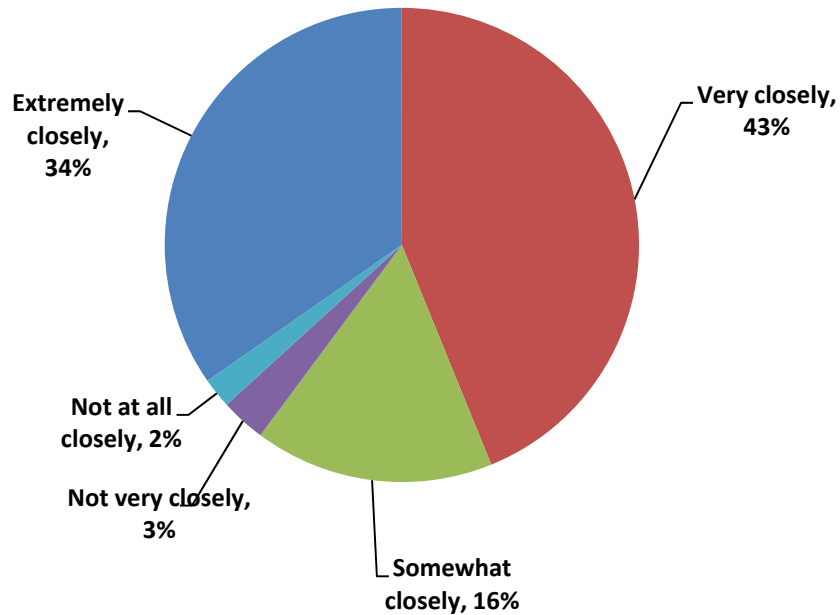
More than half (55%) of the respondents said they have had their hearing tested as an adult and more than four in ten (44%) said they have compiled a family health history.

- While there are no age or income differences in responses to these two questions, men are more likely than women (66% vs. 46%) to report having had a hearing test as an adult. But, they are about equally likely (43% and 45%) to say they have compiled a family health history.

### ***Adherence to Doctor's Advice***

When asked how closely they would say they follow their doctor's advice or treatment recommendations (such as taking medications as instructed or returning for follow-up appointments), more than three-quarters of respondents said they follow it *extremely closely* (34%) or *very closely* (43%) (see Figure 1). Another one in six (16%) said they follow the advice *somewhat closely*. In contrast, five percent of respondents said they follow their doctor's advice or treatment recommendations *not very closely* (3%) or *not at all closely* (2%).

**Figure 1**  
**How closely would you say you follow your doctor's advice?**  
**(n=1,014)**



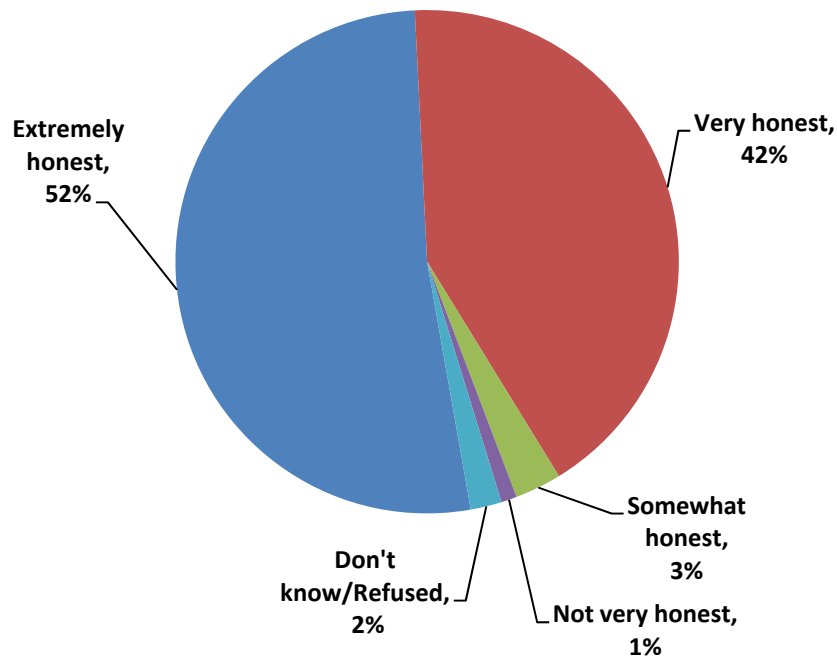
Source: *Patient Responsibility in Health Care*, May 2011

- Younger respondents are more likely than older ones to say they *somewhat closely* follow their doctor's advice or treatment recommendations (20% vs. 12%). Additionally, women are more likely than men to say they follow such advice *very closely* (47% vs. 38%). Finally, respondents with incomes between \$50,000 and \$74,999 are more likely than those with incomes of \$75,000 or more to say they follow their doctor's advice *extremely closely* (43% vs. 28%).

### ***Relationship with Doctor***

More than nine in ten (94%) respondents reported being either *extremely honest* (52%) or *very honest* (42%) with their doctor about their health history (see Figure 2). Similarly, when asked how comfortable they feel asking their doctor questions about their medications and treatment, a similar figure (90%) reported feeling either *extremely comfortable* (49%) or *very comfortable* (41%).

**Figure 2**  
**How honest would you say you are with your doctor about your health history?**  
**(n=1,014)**



Source: *Patient Responsibility in Health Care*, May 2011

- While there are no age or gender differences in the responses to either question, there are differences by income level. Specifically, respondents with annual household incomes of \$75,000 or more are more likely than those with incomes of less than \$25,000 to say they are *extremely honest* with their doctor about their health history (61% vs. 44%).
- Additionally, respondents with incomes of \$25,000 or more are more likely than those with incomes below that figure to say they are *extremely comfortable* asking their doctor questions about their medications and treatment (53% for those with incomes of \$25,000-\$49,999; 52% for those with incomes of \$50,000-\$74,999; and 53% for those with incomes of \$75,000 or more vs. 37% for those with incomes less than \$25,000).

### ***Researching One's Health Symptoms***

As for researching their symptoms prior to a visit to the doctor, respondents were split into two nearly-equally-sized groups, with about half (51%) saying they do the research before the visit and about half (47%) saying they do not.

- Younger respondents are more likely than older ones (56% vs. 43%) to say they research their symptoms prior to a visit to the doctor.
- More affluent respondents are more likely than less affluent ones to also say they research their symptoms prior to a doctor's visit (52% for those with incomes of \$25,000-\$49,999; 63% for those with incomes of \$50,000-\$74,999; and 66% for those with incomes of \$75,000 or more vs. 30% for those with incomes less than \$25,000).

### ***Source(s) of Health Information***

More than half (55%) of the respondents said they get most of their health information from their physician and one-fifth (21%) get it from the Internet. The remaining one-fifth of respondents said they receive most of their health information from magazines or brochures (8%), from a pharmacy or pharmacist (5%), from television (4%), or from some other place (5%).

- Older respondents are more likely than younger ones to report getting most of their health information from their doctor (63% vs. 49%). In contrast, younger respondents are more likely than older ones to say they get most of their health information from the Internet (27% vs. 13%) or television (6% vs. 2%).
- In terms of income differences, less affluent respondents are more likely than those in the highest income group (with incomes of \$75,000 or more) to report getting most of their health information from their doctor (59% for those with incomes less than \$25,000 and 58% for those with incomes of \$25,000-\$49,999 vs. 45% for those with incomes of \$75,000 or more). They are also more likely than their more affluent counterparts to report getting such information from television (7% and 7% vs. 2%).
- In contrast, respondents in the highest income group are more likely than those in the other three income groups to report getting most of their health information from the Internet (42% vs. 6%, 20%, and 22%). Further, those with incomes in the middle of the range—with incomes between \$25,000 and \$74,999—are also more likely than those in the lowest income group to get most of their health information from the Internet (20% and 22% vs. 6%).

### ***Responsibility for Treatment Decisions***

Nine in ten (91%) respondents said they believe treatment decisions should be decisions made by doctor and patient, with one in twenty (5%) saying such decisions are the sole responsibility of the patient and one in thirty (3%) saying they are the sole responsibility of the doctor.

- Although the percentages in the two age categories (ages 50-64 and ages 65 and older) are small, there is still a difference between them, with older respondents more likely than younger ones (4% vs. 1%) to say that treatment decisions should be the sole responsibility of the doctor.
- Men are more likely than women (4% vs. 1%) to say that treatment decisions should be the sole responsibility of the doctor. However, women are more likely than men (93% vs. 88%) to report that they believe such decisions should be a combination, made by both doctor and patient.
- Notably, there are no income differences in respondents' opinions of how treatment decisions should be made.

### ***Effect of Taking Better Care of Self***

Respondents overwhelmingly believe that if people took better care of themselves, the nation's health care costs would decrease, with eight in ten (80%) respondents saying yes to the statement. The remaining fifth are split between those who do not agree (15%) and those who do not know (5%).

- There is no age, gender, or income variation in responses to this question.

## **Summary**

According to our results, a number of societal messages encouraging midlife and older adults to lead healthier lives seem to be reaching their targets. But, clearly more still needs to be done to encourage them to schedule a colonoscopy, have a hearing test, or take the reins of their own or their family’s health by compiling and regularly updating a family health history. By taking responsibility for their own health—as patients—and working closely with their health care professionals, many midlife and older adults can remain healthy and independent for years to come.

**Table 1**  
**Summary Table<sup>4</sup>**  
**Percentages of Respondents Who Answered “Yes” to Selected Questions**  
**By Age, Gender, and Income**

	Men	Women	50-64	65+
	N=474	N=540	N=604	N=410
	A	B	C	D
Lead a healthy lifestyle	73%	79%	74%	<b>81%</b> <sup>c</sup>
Had vision test in past 5 years	83%	88%	84%	89%
Had a colonoscopy in past 5 years	50%	48%	45%	<b>54%</b> <sup>c</sup>
Had a mammogram in past 5 years	-----	82%	82%	82%
Had a prostate exam in past 5 years	69%	-----	66%	75%
Had hearing test as an adult	<b>66%</b> <sup>b</sup>	46%	54%	57%
Have compiled a family health history	43%	45%	46%	41%
Believe treatment decisions are shared	88%	<b>93%</b> <sup>a</sup>	93%	88%
Have researched symptoms	48%	53%	<b>56%</b> <sup>d</sup>	43%

	<\$25K	\$25,000- \$49,999	\$50,000- \$74,999	\$75K+
	N=244	N=268	N=126	N=199
	E	F	G	H
Lead a healthy lifestyle	70%	77%	75%	<b>83%</b> <sup>e</sup>
Had vision test in past 5 years	79%	86%	86%	<b>96%</b> <sup>efg</sup>
Had a colonoscopy in past 5 years	46%	51%	41%	48%
Had a mammogram in past 5 years	76%	84%	<b>93%</b> <sup>e</sup>	85%
Had a prostate exam in past 5 years	51%	<b>75%</b> <sup>e</sup>	66%	<b>80%</b> <sup>e</sup>
Had hearing test as an adult	51%	57%	61%	53%
Have compiled a family health history	37%	46%	44%	48%
Believe treatment decisions are shared	88%	92%	95%	92%
Have researched symptoms	30%	<b>52%</b> <sup>e</sup>	<b>63%</b> <sup>e</sup>	<b>66%</b> <sup>ef</sup>

<sup>4</sup> **How to Read the Table:** Bold face percents in columns (which represent demographic subgroups) are significantly higher than percents in adjacent columns. Superscripts (<sup>a/b, c/d, e/f/g/h</sup>) indicate those columns in which there is a statistically significant difference.



## **Appendix A: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

<b>Patient Responsibility in Health Care</b>		
<b>N=1,014</b>		
<b>Age</b>		
	50-64	59%
	65+	41%
<b>Gender</b>		
	Men	47%
	Women	53%
<b>Employment Status</b>		
	Employed Full-Time	29%
	Employed Part-Time	10%
	Retired	44%
<b>Educational Level</b>		
	Less than high school graduate	15%
	High school graduate	48%
	Some college	21%
	College graduate or technical school	20%
	Post-graduate or professional	11%
<b>Marital Status</b>		
	Married	59%
	Widowed	15%
	Divorced	11%
	Single or single, with partner	13%
	Separated	3%
<b>Race or Ethnicity</b>		
	White, non-Hispanic	78%
	Black, non-Hispanic	11%
	Hispanic of any race	7%
	Other	3%
<b>Annual Household Income</b>		
	Less than \$30,000	31%
	\$30,000-\$49,999	18%
	\$50,000-\$74,999	12%
	\$75,000+	20%

**Appendix B: Annotated Questionnaire**

## Annotated Questionnaire

The study was conducted for AARP via telephone by **SSRS**, an independent research company. Interviews were conducted from March 30 – April 10, 2011 among a nationally representative sample of 1,014 respondents 50 years of age or older. The margin of error for total respondents is +/-3.08% at the 95% confidence level. More information about **SSRS** can be obtained by visiting [www.ssrs.com](http://www.ssrs.com).

HB-1 Would you say you lead a healthy lifestyle (that is, eat the right foods, exercise regularly, go for health screenings, and so on)?

	Yes	No	Don't know	Refused
4/10/11	76	23	*	*

**(Item b asked of total males age 50+; n = 432)/ (Item c asked of total females age 50+; n = 582)**

HB-2 Which of the following health screenings have you had in the past 5 years?

Have you had (INSERT ITEM)?

	Yes	No	Don't know	Refused
a. A colonoscopy	49	50	1	*
b. A prostate exam	69	29	2	*
c. A mammogram	82	16	*	2
d. A vision test (eye exam)	86	14	*	*

HB-3 Have you ever had your hearing tested as an adult?

	Yes	No	Don't know	Refused
4/10/11	55	44	*	*

HB-4 How closely would you say you follow your doctor's advice or treatment recommendations (such as, taking medications as instructed, returning for follow-up appointments, etc.)? Do you follow it ...?

	CLOSELY				NOT CLOSELY			Don't know	Refused
	NET	Extremely	Very	Somewhat	NET	Not very	Not at all		
4/10/11	93	34	43	16	5	3	2	1	1

HB-5 In general, do you believe that treatment decisions should be the sole responsibility of the doctor, the sole responsibility of the patient, or a combination: a decision made by doctor and patient?

	Sole responsibility of doctor	Sole responsibility of the patient	Combination: a decision made by doctor and patient	Don't know	Refused
4/10/11	3	5	91	1	1

HB-6 How honest would you say you are with your doctor about your health history? Would you say you are...?

	HONEST				NOT HONEST			Don't know	Refused
	NET	Extremely	Very	Somewhat	NET	Not very	Not at all		
4/10/11	98	52	42	3	1	1	*	1	1

HB-7 Have you compiled a family health history?

	Yes	No	Don't know	Refused
4/10/11	44	52	4	*

HB-8 How comfortable do you feel asking your doctor questions about your medications and treatment? Would you say...?

	COMFORTABLE				NOT COMFORTABLE			Don't know	Refused
	NET	Extremely	Very	Somewhat	NET	Not very	Not at all		
4/10/11	97	49	41	7	2	1	1	1	1

HB-9 Have you ever researched your symptoms before a doctor visit?

	Yes	No	Don't know	Refused
4/10/11	51	47	1	*

HB-10 Where do you get most of your health information? Would you say...?

	4/10/11
From your doctor	55
From a pharmaceutical company ("drug" company)	*
From a pharmacy / pharmacist	5
From the Internet	21
From the television	4
From magazines, brochures, etc...	8
Some other place/None of these	5
Don't know	1
Refused	*

HB-11 Do you think that if people took better care of themselves, the nation's health care costs would decrease?

	Yes	No	Don't know	Refused
4/10/11	80	15	5	*

AM-1 Are you or your spouse or partner currently a member of A-A-R-P?

	Yes	No	Don't know	Refused
4/10/11	40	57	1	2



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