

# Combating Ageism in the Healthcare System



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# What is ageism?

**Discrimination**

or how people act

**Prejudice**

or how people feel

**Stereotyping**

or how people think

**BASED ON AGE**

# AGEISM...

- begins in childhood and is reinforced over the course of one's life
- is something that everyone will face at some point, especially in older age



# Types of Ageism

**Explicit**

or  
**observable**

**External**

or  
perpetuated by  
others

**Compassionate**

or  
meaning well

**Implicit**

or  
without  
conscious  
awareness

**Internalized**

or  
perpetuate by  
self

**Institutional**

or  
practices &  
policies

# Why are we ageist? Implicit Bias

**Implicit biases are attitudes and stereotypes we are not aware of.**

We form these subconscious negative judgments about many things, including age.

**Pervasive misperceptions about aging**

These shape our thoughts and actions, often without us realizing it.

**How prevalent is ageism?**



NATIONAL POLL ON  
HEALTHY AGING  
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

# Experiences with everyday ageism

AMONG ADULTS AGE 50–80

**82%**

Experienced one or more forms of everyday ageism in their day-to-day lives



**65%**

Exposure to ageist messages

**45%**

Ageism in interpersonal interactions

**36%**

Internalized ageism

\*Note: Percentages reflect responses of either often/sometimes or strongly agree/agree to forms of ageism.

Learn more: [www.healthyagingpoll.org](http://www.healthyagingpoll.org) | Contact us: [healthyaging@umich.edu](mailto:healthyaging@umich.edu)

**20% of older  
adults reported  
ageism**

**in healthcare encounters**

# Medical Ageism



# Ageism in Healthcare Settings

## Age is used as threshold

Higher rates of withholding  
treatment or preventive care

## Lack of knowledge

in disease presentation in  
older adults and interest in  
geriatrics

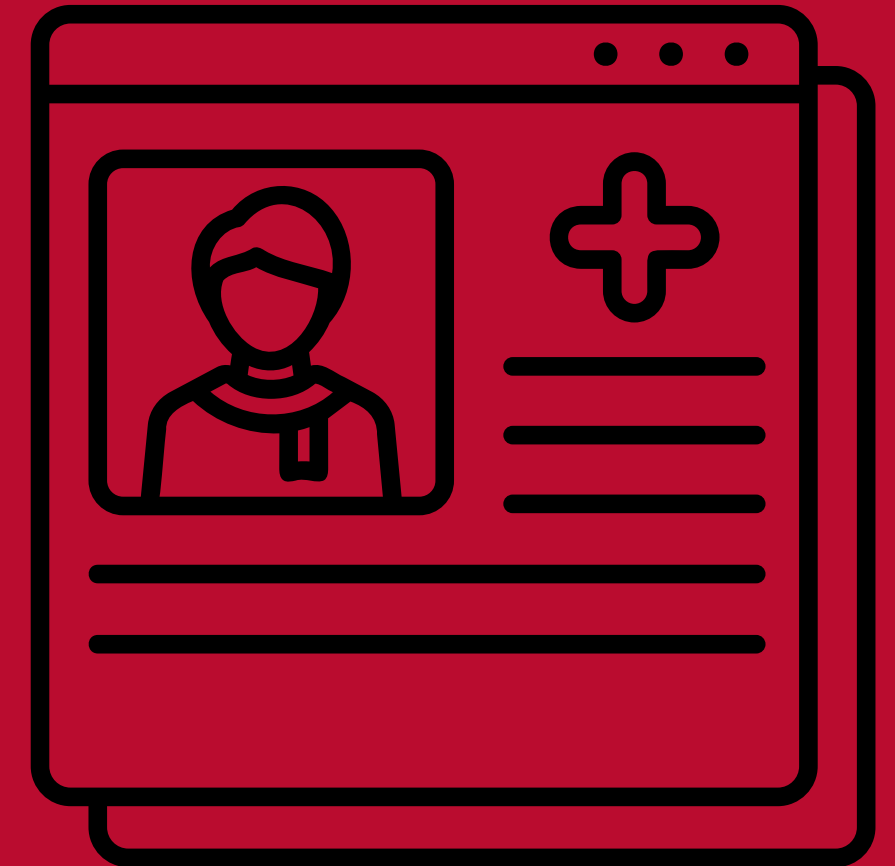
## Age-based exclusions

in clinical trials

# AGE DISCRIMINATION

# AGE AS THRESHOLD

- Withhold ventilator treatment, dialysis or surgery solely because of age
  - Even after or despite controlling for prognoses and care preferences
- Less often offered testing for sexually transmitted diseases
- Brush symptoms off as “normal” aging without exploring further



# LACK OF KNOWLEDGE

- Less than 3% of medical students choose to take electives focusing on geriatrics
- Only 4% of social workers receive geriatrics training
- Only 3% of psychologists treat older patients as their primary professional population
  - 60% have older patients



# AGE -BASED EXCLUSIONS

- **Prior to 2019 NIH policy, adults age 65 and over were excluded from the majority of clinical trials**
  - Exclusions for severe or uncontrolled comorbidities are essential
  - not exclusions based solely on age, compliance concerns or technology requirements
- **Recent study of an internal registry of Parkinson's disease clinical trials found 49% excluded older persons**
- **Recent health panel recommends anxiety screening for all adults UNDER 65**
  - Stating no clear evidence regarding the effectiveness of screening tools in older adults because anxiety symptoms are similar to normal signs of aging (fatigue, pain)

# What is your experience?

**Have you seen ageism directed toward others?**

**Have you experienced ageism in healthcare?**

**Have you been ageist to others?**

**Have you had ageist thoughts about yourself?**

# Ageism Impacts Us All



# \$63

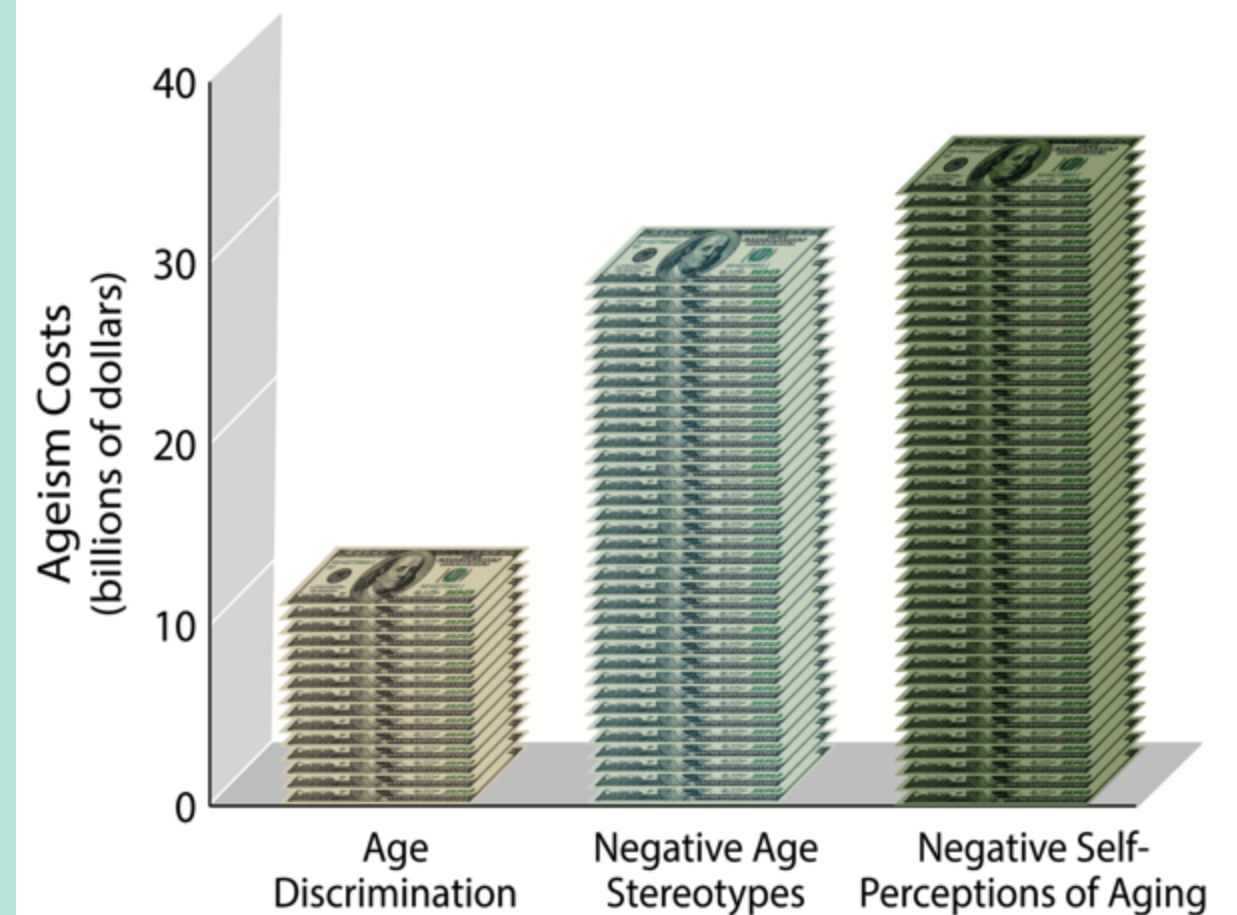
# Billion

## One year cost of ageism

Ageism has a huge impact on health. It accounts for \$1 in every \$7 spent on the top 8 most expensive health conditions in older adults.

Negative attitudes and beliefs can be a predictor of the development of Alzheimer's Disease and decrease lifespan by 7.5 years.

**Figure 1.** Health care costs of age discrimination, negative age stereotypes, and negative self-perceptions of aging in ...

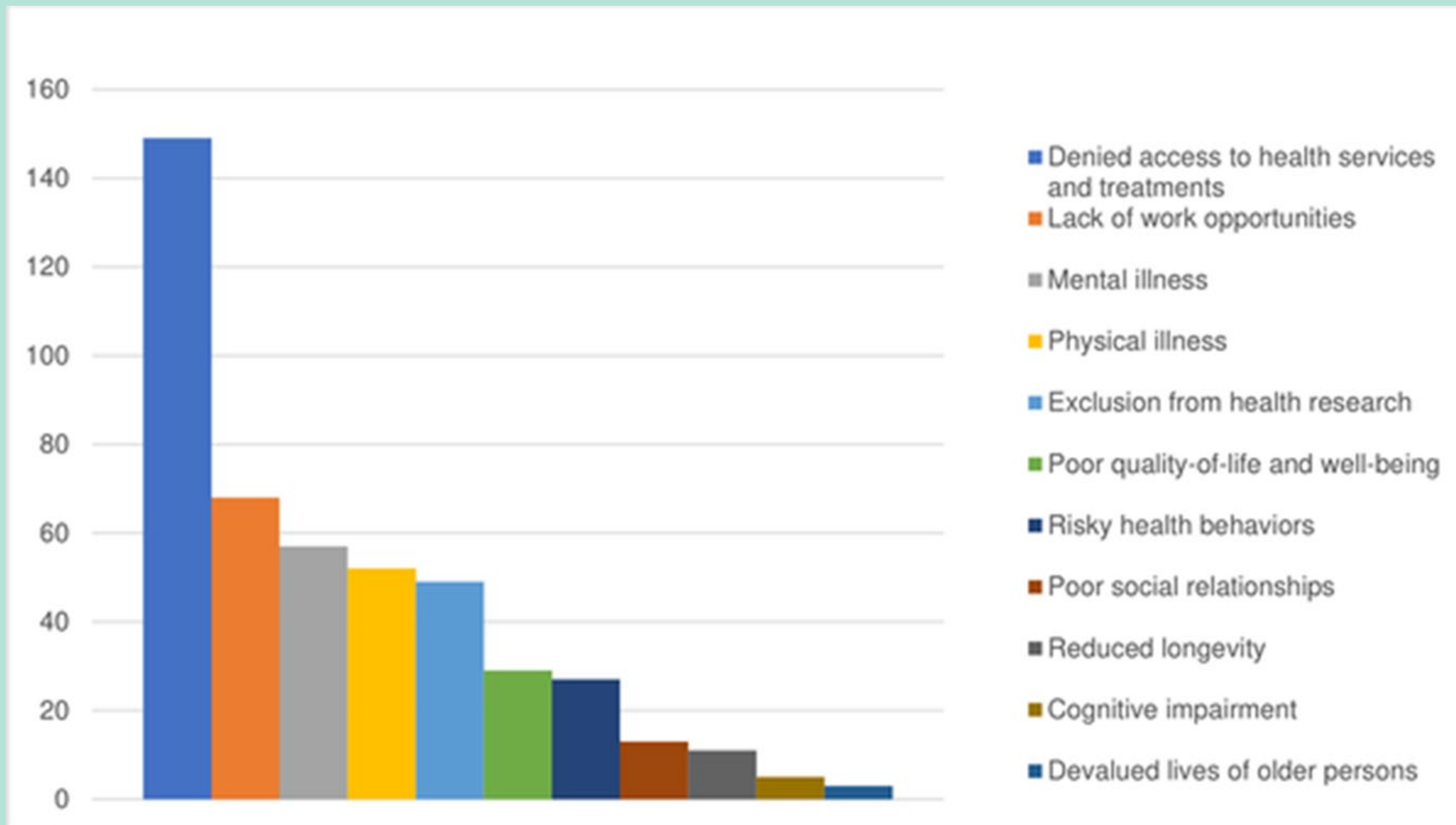


*Gerontologist*, Volume 60, Issue 1, February 2020, Pages 174–181,  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gny131>

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# Impact of ageism on health in 11 health domains



Chang ES, Kanno S, Levy S, Wang SY, Lee JE, et al. (2020) Global reach of ageism on older persons' health: A systematic review. PLOS ONE 15(1): e0220857.

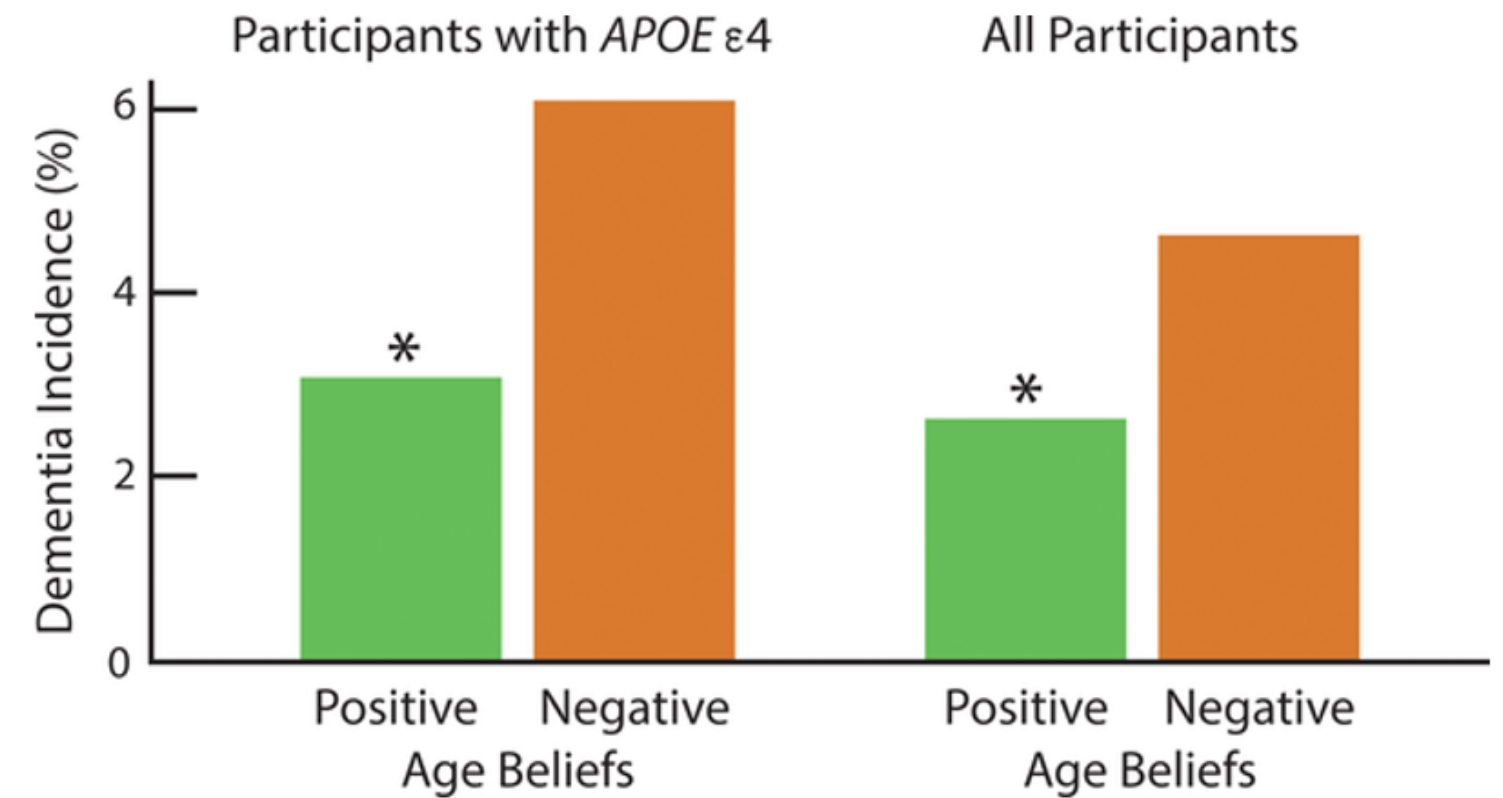
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0220857>



# The Good News

- Positive self-perception leads to 7.5 years longer and healthier lifespan
- Older persons with positive age beliefs who carry one of the strongest genes for developing dementia were nearly 50% less likely to develop the disease than their peers who held negative beliefs

Fig 1. Positive age beliefs associated with resisting dementia among participants with APOE  $\epsilon$ 4 and all participants.

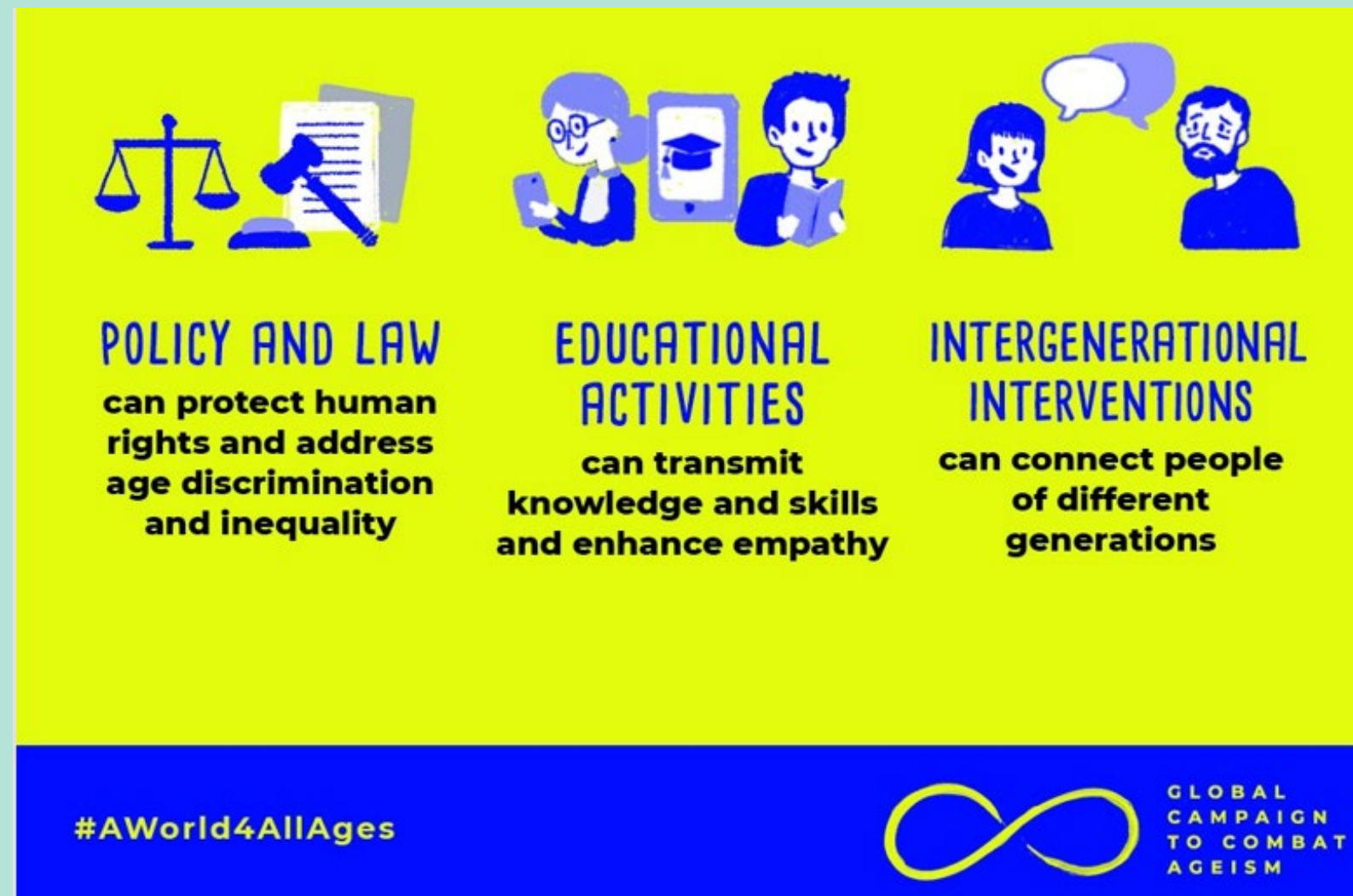


Levy BR, Slade MD, Pietrzak RH, Ferrucci L (2018) Positive age beliefs protect against dementia even among elders with high-risk gene. PLOS ONE 13(2): e0191004.

<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0191004>

<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0191004>

# Ageism can be combatted



**POLICY AND LAW**  
can protect human rights and address age discrimination and inequality

**EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES**  
can transmit knowledge and skills and enhance empathy

**INTERGENERATIONAL INTERVENTIONS**  
can connect people of different generations

#AWorld4AllAges

GLOBAL CAMPAIGN TO COMBAT AGEISM

Instead of these words and cues:	Try:
"Tidal wave," "tsunami," and similarly catastrophic terms for the growing population of older people	Talking affirmatively about changing demographics: "As Americans live longer and healthier lives . . ."
"Choice," "planning," "control," and other individual determinants of aging outcomes	Emphasizing how to improve social contexts: "Let's find creative solutions to ensure we can all thrive as we age."
"Seniors," "elderly," "aging dependents," and similar "other-ing" terms that stoke stereotypes	Using more neutral ("older people/Americans") and inclusive ("we" and "us") terms
"Struggle," "battle," "fight," and similar conflict-oriented words to describe aging experiences	The Building Momentum metaphor: "Aging is a dynamic process that leads to new abilities and knowledge we can share with our communities."
Using the word "ageism" without explanation	Defining ageism: "Ageism is discrimination against older people due to negative and inaccurate stereotypes."
Making generic appeals to the need to "do something" about aging	Using concrete examples like intergenerational community centers to illustrate inventive solutions

# We need to tell the whole story of aging

## **Age is a social construct**

Ideas about aging are created  
by society, more than biology

## **There is heterogeneity**

There is great variation within  
the older 65+ population

## **There are multiple determinants of health**

30% of factors contributing to  
premature death are genetic

## **Age interacts with other risk factors**

SES, gender, ethnicity, sexual  
orientation affect life experiences  
and outcomes

# Policy Changes

**Enacted by AMA  
House of Delegates  
in 2024**

**AMA is to establish of  
definition of age equity-  
rights throughout the  
life course are to be  
respected**

**Review and amend  
policies regarding  
discrimination to add age  
or ageism during sunset  
review process**

**Conduct ongoing  
advocacy for hospital  
and regulatory policy  
changes**

# Educational & Intergenerational Activities

**Older adult mentoring & shadowing added to nursing, medical, & PT courses**

**Studies find improved attitudes toward older patients from these earlier exposures**

What is  
*old?*



# What can we do?

To end ageism?

To stop ageism in healthcare settings?

How can we advocate for older adults in the healthcare system?

How can we be better advocates for ourselves as we age?

# AGEISM

HOW IT AFFECTS US ALL

## Where Does Ageism Happen?<sup>1</sup>

### WORKPLACE

Workplace ageism exists throughout the work cycle including during recruitment, employment, and termination and retirement processes.



### HEALTHCARE

Ageism in our healthcare system results in age-based healthcare rationing and the systematic exclusion of older people from health research.



### MEDIA

People aged 50-plus in images are represented homogeneously, with similar clothing, hair color and other stereotypical characteristics.



### HOUSING

Age discrimination in housing happens when potential tenants are evaluated based on their age, and there are different expectations and rules applied to tenants of different ages.



## What is Ageism?

According to the World Health Organization, ageism is "the stereotypes (how people think), prejudice (how people feel) and discrimination (how people act) directed towards others or oneself based on age."<sup>1</sup>

## Types of Ageism

**Everyday ageism:** age discrimination through daily interactions and exposure to ageist messaging.<sup>2</sup>

Advertisements targeted toward women implying that the natural signs of aging are undesirable.

**Self-directed ageism:** when an individual is exposed to ageist messages and then believes that these biases are true of them.

An older adult believing that they are too "old" to keep up with technology.

**Personal ageism:** an individual's ideas, attitudes, beliefs, and practices that are biased against people or groups based on their age.<sup>1</sup>

An admissions counselor suggesting to a prospective student that they're too old to go back to school.

**Institutional ageism:** age discrimination as a result of the laws, rules, social norms, policies and practices of institutions.<sup>1</sup>

A company only offering management training to younger employees.

# Resources

Visit

[publichealth.wustl.edu/centers/aging/aging -resources](http://publichealth.wustl.edu/centers/aging/aging/aging-resources)



Thank  
you very  
much!



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