

Age-Inclusive Language

It is important to use **respectful and inclusive language** when referring to older adults. Language shapes how people understand aging and the conditions that may occur later in life. Small changes in word choice can help **avoid stereotypes**, **recognize diversity**, and **support inclusivity**.

General Guidance

- Consider whether age is relevant before mentioning it
- When age is relevant, use specific ages or age ranges rather than broad or vague labels
- Use age-neutral wording when age does not matter in the message
- Use the terms people prefer for themselves whenever that information is known
- Use person-first or identity-first language as appropriate, and avoid wording that defines people by conditions or limitations
- Choose terminology that fits the context, recognizing that policy, research, and everyday language may require different terms

Referring to Older Adults

Some commonly used terms for older adults carry negative or outdated connotations. Others can present older adults as a single, uniform group rather than as individuals with diverse experiences. Use neutral language that refers to a life stage without implying assumptions about ability or dependency.



Less Inclusive

- the elderly, the aged, seniors



More Respectful

- older adults, older persons, the older adult population

Also consider **contextual meaning**. For example:

- **Senior** can refer to a person in a certain age group or to a position or hierarchy (e.g., senior staff). Use it only when required by the context or when an individual self-identifies with the term.
- **Elder** has a specific cultural meaning in many Indigenous communities, referring to a respected knowledge keeper. Use this term only when that cultural meaning applies.



Using Specific Ages and Age Ranges

Some phrases used to refer to specific older adults can reinforce stereotypes or carry judgment. They may also feel dismissive or reduce individuals to their age alone. Use specific ages or age ranges to improve clarity and accuracy, especially in teaching, research, and policy contexts.



Less Inclusive

- old man, old woman, old person



More Respectful

- older man, older woman, older person
- adults aged 65-75, people in their 70s, octogenarians, centenarians

Talking About Health and Disability

Language used to describe health or functional differences can unintentionally imply decline, victimhood, or helplessness. Less inclusive phrasing may reduce a person to their condition or suggest they should be pitied. Focus on the person rather than the condition, and avoid portraying them in a passive or negative role.



Less Inclusive

- “suffering from,” “afflicted with,” “stricken with”
- “confined to a wheelchair,” “wheelchair bound”



More Respectful

- experiencing, living with, diagnosed with
- uses a wheelchair

Some individuals and communities prefer person-first language (e.g., person living with dementia), while others prefer identity-first language (e.g., disabled person). When possible, use the terminology preferred by the individual or community you are referring to.

Want to Learn More?

This summary is adapted from the Centre on Aging’s Age-Inclusive Guide. Explore the full guide to learn more about age-inclusive practices and to access a list of recommended resources.

References:

American Psychological Association. 2024. General Principles for Reducing Bias.

Public Health Agency of Canada. 2011. Age-Friendly Communication: Facts, Tips and Ideas.

