

AGING IN ATLANTA

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JOIN US AS WE EXPLORE WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HAPPY AND HEALTHY BEYOND 55



Mary Price begins her hike at Amicalola Falls State Park about 90 minutes north of Atlanta. COURTESY OF MARY PRICE

When life throws a curveball, love can still be a home run

Taking it one step at a time on iconic Appalachian Trail

Older Americans recall challenge, joy of 2,190-mile hike.

By Judith Garrison
For the AJC

In 1955 at age 67, Emma “Grandma” Gatewood hiked through 14 states and logged 5 million steps in five months. Considered the matriarch of the Georgia-to-Maine’s Appalachian Trail (AT), she wore Keds sneakers, slept beneath a shower curtain and kept warm with an army blanket.

Then, she did it two more times.

Over 3 million have attempted to follow in her footsteps, hiking at least a portion of the trail. They are mostly twentysomethings at the intersection of college and jobs. However, seniors and retirees make up a small but significant portion of the hikers. While many begin as thru-hikers – people doing the entire trail of 2,190-plus miles – life throws curveballs, which becomes one of the biggest trail lessons.

‘Everything I need’

“I have everything I need on my back,” said Asheville’s Carol Mathieson, smiling so beautifully you couldn’t help but believe her. At 64, this daunting revelation kept her focused, putting

one foot in front of the other as a north-south thru-hiker on the trail.

Her first attempt was April 2024 from Daleville, Virginia, hiking north. Having summited the northern terminus, Mount Katahdin (5,269 feet), the southern route beckoned. That fall, she began at the same Virginia trailhead with 700 miles to go and, 70 miles in, Hurricane Helene hit and changed everything.

“I hiked during the day, got to a hostel and was under shelter when (Helene) came through,” said Mathieson. The Appalachian Trail Conservancy pleaded for hikers not to return. The smartest thing to do was delay.

This spring, she got back up and headed south, grateful that at this stage of life, she can take a half-year and just walk through the woods and meet cool people.

Although scared at first, the experience shaped the mindset of one day at a time.

“The first night I pitched a tent in the middle of nowhere,” she said. “I didn’t sleep great, but I slept. You do it over and over again, and all the fears drop away.”

A solo journey ends early

Miles from Michigan, Mary Price, age 68, set

Hiking continued on S2



There’s a thriving community of happy, healthy, emotionally stable people at this age, and now is the time to enjoy it. MONKEY BUSINESS IMAGES/DREAMSTIME/TNS

‘My swipe turned into a 15-year marriage with the best yet to come.’

By Judith Garrison
For the AJC

Growing up in the 1960s, I expected my universe to revolve as my parents’ world had, which included finding and keeping – *for life* – a mate.

My search began in elementary school when my eyes wandered toward the cutest boy I wanted to “go with” – *to this day, no idea what that meant or if, in fact, we were actually going anywhere.*

High school brought serious quarterback infatuations, but no one kept my attention.

Right on time at UGA, my true love arrived, scooped me up, and my soulmate era began. Then, one day, it broke.

Three children and 24 years later, I was single again. My curveball manifested in a long-overdue divorce, following years that had beaten me down so that I barely recognized the woman I had become. Starting over, I wondered, “Do I know how to do this? Who in the world will want me at this

Dating continued on S2



Lisa Lyngos and Leisha Murphy are matchmakers. COURTESY

Set realistic fitness goals as you age; focus on safety

These expert tips will help create a workout routine that will last.

By Morayo Ogunbayo
morayo.ogunbayo@ajc.com

Throughout life’s many stages, finding – and sticking to – a fitness routine can be complicated. Whether you struggle to find the right time or place, it seems like there’s always something hindering you from getting that perfect schedule down.

As you age, this can become even more complicated. The workouts may not come as easy as they used to. Certain times of day that used to be optimal now lead to extreme discomfort. And one major drawback may be finding a new spot to workout after a move from your longtime community.

These problems, however, should never stop you from pursuing your fitness goals.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the benefits of a consistent workout routine may be even greater for people 65 or older. In the short term, it can improve older adults’ sleep quality, anxiety levels and blood pressure. As the years go on, the CDC says consistent fitness can assist in cancer prevention, maintaining a healthy weight and living independently longer.

While your body changes, your fitness routine should change along with it. Follow these tips to make sure you continue to have the safest and most productive workouts.

Monitor your condition closely

If the workouts you have always done seem harder now, that may be a sign that your body can no longer do the same things safely. To continue working your body in similar ways, monitor your condition as you



A senior water aerobics class like this one at Roswell Area Park Pool is a fun way to exercise while minimizing the impact on your joints. AJC 2023

workout.

One simple way to properly check on yourself during a workout is with a simple talk test, as described by Dr. Michael Kraft, assistant professor in the Department of Family and Preventive Medicine at Emory University.

“Making sure that you’re able to talk throughout the activity is super important,” Kraft told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. “If you start to become breathless, you’re starting to go up into the higher heart rate zones.”

It is best to start any physical activity slowly and gradually work your way up to your limit, rather than the other

way around. According to the National Institute of Aging, this can reduce injury and help to “build confidence, motivation and a regular routine.”

Take your medical conditions into account

Throughout life, medical conditions or injuries have likely affected your workout routine in some way. As you get older, you may have to start taking those conditions into account even if you are presently feeling better.

One unexpected change many older adults face are the new ways their body reacts to heat, particularly because of

Fitness continued on S2

Decatur native builds senior fitness empire

DaShaun Johnson is honoring his grandparents by helping thousands of seniors get moving.

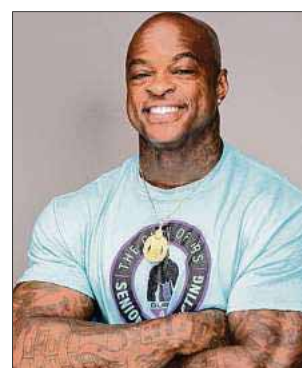
By Elizabeth Green
For the AJC

Each week at various locations across Atlanta, hundreds of seniors gather to sweat and stretch, while thousands more follow along online. This is the audience of the Guru of Abs, DaShaun Johnson.

“I teach seniors and other individuals how to work their abs safely and effectively from the seated or standing position,” Johnson told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

The 41-year-old Decatur native conducts free in-person fitness classes that cater to the over-55 set, and he’s maximized his visibility by livestreaming these workouts online.

The result has been a jump in fitness awareness among participants and wildfire popularity.



DaShaun Johnson leads a senior body-sculpting class. The Georgia-based fitness professional has grown a following of senior participants through the targeted use of social media. COURTESY OF DASHAUN JOHNSON

Passion for teaching seniors

Johnson’s unusual moniker originated with a comment from a social media follower.

“This young lady said, ‘You kind of remind me of a guru,’” he said. “I Googled it. The definition of a guru is an individual who obtains knowledge in a certain area but uses it to guide others. I took that

Johnson continued on S2

AGING IN ATLANTA

Dating

continued from S1

stage of my broken life?"

The world was different, and navigating it petrified me. Focusing on the positive, I realized this was the time to create the life I had imagined. So, for better or worse, I learned to swipe. (Stay tuned for my results.)

Matchmaking and the era of online dating

Computer-assisted matchmaking began in 1965. With the pitch of "Your business is our pleasure. Your pleasure is our business," Operation Match launched in a Harvard dorm room with two men, a few basic questions and IBM punch cards, in hopes a computer could find their ideal match.

The concept took a while to catch on, but it is going gangbusters now.

A success, it energized alternatives to the current dating climate. Enter the World Wide Web, the unmistakable dial-up tone and the movie "You've Got Mail (1998)," which jump-started online dating. Apps invigorated dating at all stages and ages, finding connections that might have, otherwise, been impossible.

Making it easier to enter

the fray, the online setting allowed people to disclose only what they wanted to, increasing the pool of prospective people while maintaining a degree of control. But with the positives came a bundle of negatives, including a lack of social interaction and the rise of scam artists. Yet, according to the Pew Research Center, 3 in 10 adults have used a dating site, with the highest frequency being adults who have never been married and those who have been divorced or widowed.

As they say, the rest is history. Regardless of your type, there's an app. All it takes is a download and a profile.

Go to the mountaintop with me

Never scoff at a century's old tradition. Every September in Lisdoonvarna, Ireland, thousands travel from all over the world looking for love at the Matchmaker Bar. Legend claims that if you touch the matchmaker's "lucky book" with both hands, you'll be married in six months.

Give it a go, but there is a closer alternative.

The powerhouse duo of Atlanta Matchmakers transforms lives, one date at a time, removing fear and replacing it with hope. Lisa Lyngos and her

twin sister, Leisha Murphy, have matched people for nearly 30 years with heart, humor and respect, and whether or not this is your avenue for finding a relationship, their excitement is contagious.

This is not a hobby, explains Lyngos. In the late 1990s, they purchased the largest phone book Yellow Pages ads possible and filled mailboxes with tens of thousands of direct mailers. Potential clients learned of them through ads in Atlanta Magazine or via airwaves on the Delilah Radio Show. Print and voice carried their message to the booming, post-Olympic Atlanta area.

One of their first clients, a 30-year-old man who traveled for work during the week and returned home on weekends, was tired of Saturday night watering-hole conversations. He needed direction. Lyngos worked on his match, and after his first date, the required follow-up was enlightening. "She was hotter than a two-dollar pistol," he declared and asked, "Who else you got?"

A connection, yes, but not the kind the duo wanted for their clients. And it was at that point, they honed in on their ideal client and the intended result.

"There's a pleasure cen-

ter in the brain," explains Lyngos. Along with pleasure, a dream factor. Understanding these concepts, coupled with fierce business skills mastered from strong women, 63-year-old twins Lyngos and Murphy created an alternative for ubiquitous barhopping.

People engage them to curate matches, and in the process of vetting, screening and developing a dating personality, a deeper understanding develops.

"We're experts because we have put the time in," shares Lyngos.

While this approach isn't for everyone, online dating becomes an alternative. To Lyngos, it's a predatory place and going to get worse because of artificial intelligence.

"We have had children come to us with a parent and say, 'Please help my mother or father. They believe this is real.'" When you're lonely, it's amazing to wake up every day to that text that tells you how wonderful you are.

Most arrive at Atlanta Matchmakers as a result of death or divorce or other life-altering circumstances such as family, career or personal loss. Regardless of the circumstance, they instill in clients that their strengths lie in who they are now. The majority of

their clients are 50 and older, proving that love is truly ageless with 65 and older the fastest growing audience.

People want companionship, privacy and discretion. While most are relationship-ready, the busy, educated professionals don't want the bar life or online uncertainty. They want a committed, long-term relationship and value compatibility over being alone. Even if a career remains in full swing, there's alone time between 5 p.m. and 9 a.m. Speaking as someone who has shared her entire life with another, life is more fun when shared. It's the power of two.

Lyngos understands the fear of reentering dating scenarios and believes what they do transcends matchmaking. "Older singles tell us they feel invisible in today's dating landscape. They want to be seen again."

Clients run the gamut between a horrible past experience to a deliriously happy one, which Lyngos deems as the best "because they already know how to do it. They've been good at the nuances of a long-term relationship and want to re-create that. They aren't trying to replace the spouse; they know they are better when they are

in a relationship."

On the flip side, a 70-year-old gentleman explained that he had lost his spouse. Offering sympathy, Lyngos listened to his reply. "Don't be too sorry. I was a saint. She was a horrible, mean woman. I took a vow, and I took it seriously. We joined a dinner club, and it was our week. I was going all out, and she told me just go get a Stouffer's lasagna. 'Why do we have to go to all this effort?' She rained on everything. We would take a hike and just getting to the top where the view was great, she says, 'I'm too tired to make it, take a picture and show it to me later.' Lisa, find me somebody excited about cuisine. Find somebody who will go to the mountaintop with me.' And she did."

The advice on dating again: Be happy and hopeful. Put yourself out there. Be curious, optimistic and excited. There's a thriving community of happy, healthy, emotionally stable people at this age, and now is the time to enjoy it.

Whether or not you choose a matchmaking service, don't be afraid to take a chance. My swipe turned into a 15-year marriage with the best yet to come.

After all, 70 is the new 50.



Carol Mathieson repacks her belongings as she heads south after an overnight stay at Uncle Johnny's Nolichucky Hostel in Erwin, Tennessee. The Appalachian Trail Conservancy ferried hikers across the Nolichucky River after the bridge was destroyed by Hurricane Helene. COURTESY OF LEN GARRISON

Hiking

continued from S1

out on a solo journey as a thru-hiker. Inspired by Cheryl Strayed's book "Wild," Price couldn't get the AT out of her head. With many day hikes in national parks under her belt, being a thru-hiker was not out of reach.

"As an older hiker," said Price, "I worried about being underestimated. I will absolutely not be able to mountaintop the trail like the youngsters. I plan on slow and steady." Her biggest fear was a hike-ending injury at her age, because "next year" isn't always an option.

Price began at the southern terminus approach trail, 8.5 miles north of Amicalola Falls. Before completing Georgia's 78 miles, Price left the trail because of an injury.

"There was no way I thought I would go down in flames," she said. For weeks after returning home, she felt desperate to be on the trail, which took a while to shake off.

'The opportunity to do something totally unlike the life I lived, to tackle something barely in my comfort zone — when do we get to do something so powerful, just for ourselves?'

Mary Price

With no regrets, she is not ruling out another try next March.

How to take on the trail

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy, plus trail communities, provide endless resources — and share that preparing the body is paramount for the senior hiker.

The ATC suggests walking every day, then adding exercises focused on stability. Transition to carrying a pack of equal weight to one on the trail (average 33 pounds). Take trail hikes, listen to your body, and never ignore pain. Connect with others, lose the daily goals and embrace the journey.

Eric Champlin co-owner of Trailful Outdoor Co. in Hiwassee, a primary trail stop in North Georgia, has seen over 1,500 thru-hikers this season. His store provides resources for hikers, gear or education, to keep all safe and prepared.

He suggests older hikers not overlook the simple things. A basic first-aid kit can address things like bruises or poison ivy. Don't rely on devices; pack a paper map and compass, and always let someone know where you are.

Being on the trail a short time, Price learned that the little things, like caloric and water intake, matter; however, age meant nothing. "The opportunity to do something totally unlike the life I lived, to tackle something barely in my comfort zone — when do we get to do something so powerful, just for ourselves?"

Mathieson's advice is "to get up every day, and know that whatever happens, I have everything I need."

Fitness

continued from S1

medications that increase dehydration.

"Some of the diuretics that are out there, if you're elderly, can cause us to not be able to dissipate the heat well," Kraft explained.

He implores older adults to take into account if they have conditions or are on medications that predispose them for dehydration or overheating. The NIA recommends speaking with your doctor before starting a new workout and ask how any existing health issues may hinder your abilities.

Lean into the gadgets

Smart watches, heart rate monitors and other fancy workout gadgets can seem drastic, especially if you've watched fitness trends come and go. However, these devices can keep you safe while you exercise.

Invest in a good heart monitoring watch that checks for blood pressure,



Nausheen Quraishy (left), a Rock Steady boxing instructor, teaches a strength training class at the Kennestone Health Place at Kennestone Hospital. AJC 2024

blood glucose and heart rate. With these tools, you can know exactly how your body is reacting to each workout you throw at it.

At-home fitness bikes, treadmills and walking pads can also be beneficial in providing a safe place for you to consistently workout, no mat-

ter the weather conditions.

Don't settle on one activity

There may have been one fitness activity you stuck to throughout your life, consistently training in it until you were your very best. As you age, it's better to diversify your

workouts.

The NIA suggests older adults engage in a "combination of aerobic, muscle-strengthening and balance activities" each week. Everything from swimming to dancing to working in the yard can be classified as a fitness activity — and can develop into a new balanced routine.

Johnson

continued from S1

name, did my research and lived up to it."

Living up to it began eight years ago when Johnson lost his grandparents 30 days apart. He combated the ensuing depression by visiting the Exchange Park Recreation Center in Decatur and collaborating with staff to administer workout classes to a handful of seniors. Friends who he grew up with began sending their parents to work out with him in his Senior Body Sculpting program.

From a class to a movement

"We started with only about eight seniors, and it just started as a community giveback in honor of my grandparents, and week after week after week, the numbers grew," Johnson said. "What started off as a class turned into a movement."

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit and the program shut down, Johnson decided to broadcast on Facebook Live. That first session, he said, garnered 3,000 participants gazing into their screens ready to work out from the comfort of home.

"It was at that moment that I realized this is something special," Johnson recalled.

He continued the momentum by adding Instagram, YouTube and TikTok accounts.

In his attempts to reach his target demographic, he found he was attracting attention from their younger relatives.

"A lot of their kids and grandkids were like, 'Hey, I can use this for my grandparents. My mom can use this. They're sitting around the house,'" Johnson said. "It's kind of like I'm working local and virtual, hand in hand."

Although social media has given his business an undeniable boost, seniors sharing about the benefits of the workouts has gone further. He's hearing participants are able to sit and stand more easily —

and he says they're getting positive feedback from their medical providers.

How it works

As he expanded his social media reach, Johnson began making connections with health care providers, large retailers and community organizations, which helped him grow the program through backing and partnerships.

He currently offers a free weekly class online through AARP Georgia. An AARP membership is not required, but you will need light weights, a towel and comfortable clothing. Once you register online, you will receive an email containing the Zoom link to join

the virtual workout class.

For free in-person classes, Johnson teaches on a rotating schedule at venues throughout Atlanta, including Sampson Health & Fitness Center in Stonecrest. He livestreams these classes as well, which typically boast about 200 in-person participants. To check out his class schedule, visit his website.

Looking toward the future

Moving forward, he's intent on reaching more men. Right now, he estimates participation is at least 80% female. A new class called "Muscles After 50" is designed exclusively for men looking to up their fitness levels and build camaraderie with other participants.

Johnson has already made the body-sculpting program into a social experience, squiring seniors off on local bowling trips, to Costa Rica, and on a cruise.

"I tell people this isn't a class; this is a fitness community that we're building because we don't only just work out. We support one another," he said. "We go to events; they bring their grandkids. We travel. We do a lot together as a community, because if we're spending so much time together, we need to get to know each other outside of class."

'I tell people this isn't a class; this is a fitness community that we're building because we don't only just work out. We support one another. We go to events; they bring their grandkids. We travel. We do a lot together as a community, because if we're spending so much time together, we need to get to know each other outside of class.'

DaShaun Johnson

AGING IN ATLANTA

Mindfulness helps promote healthy aging

Reduce stress and tension by focusing on your well-being.

By Lesly Gregory
For the AJC

Although stress can feel like a daily companion, seeking out opportunities for mindfulness is one way to reduce tension and enhance your well-being.

“As we age, our physical, emotional and cognitive needs evolve, and so should our approach to self-care,” Dr. Chris Mosunic, chief clinical officer at Calm, told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. “One of the most significant barriers to mental wellness practices is accessibility and understanding where to start.”

From breathing exercises to relaxing meditation apps to ice baths, there are plenty of ways to practice mindfulness – and promote healthy aging.

Combine breath work and mindset

Bringing together breath work, mindset and cold exposure, the Wim Hof Method can enhance your mental health and strengthen your immune system. It’s a mindful option for those dealing with stress, chronic pain, anxiety or depression and is adaptable for most healthy adults.

“We think about quality of life as we grow older, and I understood that the Wim Hof Method is a tool that can help improve and maintain quality of life,” said Don Neder, WHM

instructor at FlowGeivity in Alpharetta.

Not for the faint of heart, this practice requires you to intentionally get into an ice bath or a cold shower, where you learn to hold your breath for longer than normal.

“The Wim Hof Method taught me to live in the present moment, and that changed everything,” said Neder, who began practicing before training as an instructor.

Neder feels the biggest benefit of this practice is the change to his mindset. Having started at age 64, he now looks at life with a growth mindset and experiences less stress.

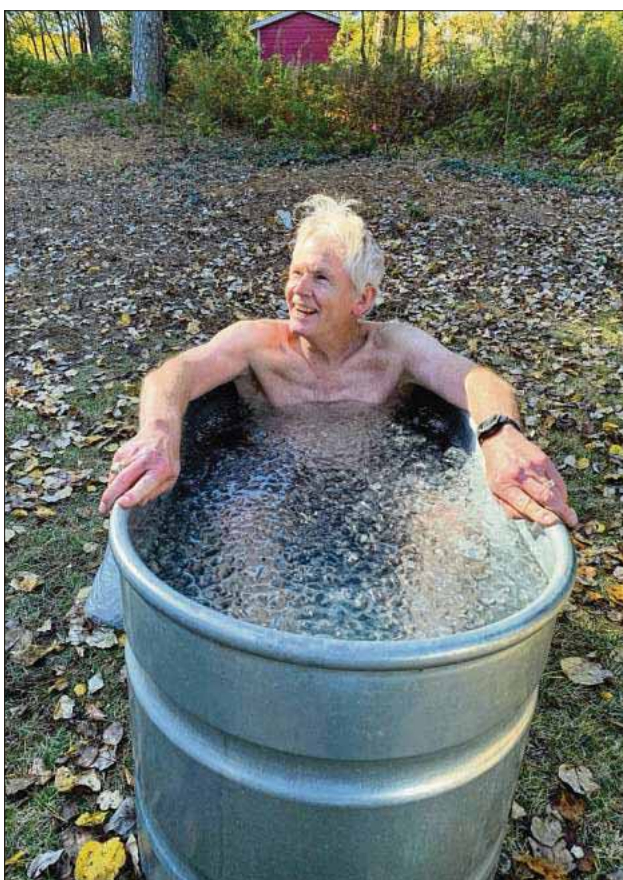
“The Wim Hof Method has had an incredible impact on my life, and I highly recommend it to all because in everyone, there is some level of positive impact it can have,” he explained.

Try yin yoga to ground yourself

There are many different types of yoga, but yin is unique. It requires you to hold poses longer to get deep into the connective tissue of the body. This allows for a more impactful release as you move through the practice.

“Yin, in my humble description, offers a different approach and pace that targets different parts of the body,” said Alena Levine, an experienced registered yoga teacher (E-RYT).

With both physical and mindful benefits, yin helps with circulation and mobility while also allowing you space to ground



Don Neder sits in a cold bath while focused on his breathing for the Wim Hof Method. COURTESY OF DON NEDER

yourself.

“Yin is a chance to tune out noise to look inward, using the breath as an anchor for the mind,” Levine said.

This form of yoga is not for everyone, according to Levine. It requires commitment and discipline and can also put stress on joints.

Meditate while using an app

Having guided meditation on your phone allows you to take the practice wherever you go, so you don’t have to miss an opportunity for a mindful moment when you need it.

“Research shows that mindfulness and meditation can help reduce feelings of stress and anxiety, even after just a few weeks of regular practice,” Mosunic said.

With apps like Calm, you don’t need any prior

experience with meditation. There’s no special equipment, and you can literally do it anywhere.

“Meditation is a powerful tool that helps us navigate life’s transitions with more ease, presence and resilience,” Mosunic said. “It’s a simple way to nurture the mind and body each day.”

Find purposeful mindfulness

It’s important you consult your doctor before trying any new physical routine, even one that focuses on mindfulness.

Once given the green light, Mosunic suggests adding to your practice by optimizing a few other habits like sleep, nutrition and exercise.

“These small lifestyle choices can reinforce each other, creating a strong foundation for healthy aging, both mentally and physically.”

Expert: ‘Everyone has a driving life expectancy’

An assessment of your skills can help plan for the future.

By Lesly Gregory
For the AJC

The number of licensed drivers over 65 is increasing. While most of these drivers are capable of safely being on the road, there comes a time in everyone’s life when it’s worthwhile to consider retiring from driving.

Dr. Dana Norall, who specializes in physical medicine and rehabilitation at Wellstar, relates driving aptitude to falling. Sometimes, it’s a minor issue; sometimes, it’s serious.

“Maybe we can do some rehab to address the problem for now, but it’s also a good time to talk about when driving retirement will happen,” Norall told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

Checking ability

According to the CDC, drivers aged 70 and over have higher crash death rates than middle-aged drivers. This can be because of a number of issues, but common red flags include general confusion while on the road and vision and sensory changes.

“With older adults, co-piloting concerns come up, where family members notice them making errors while driving,” Julia McVicker, OTR/L (Occupational Therapist Registered and Licensed), a driving rehab professional at Adaptable Driving, told the AJC. Changes don’t mean you have to stop driving, but they’re a telltale sign that some follow-up is a good idea.

Assessing conditions

that might impair your driving begins with a visit to your doctor. They will then refer you to someone who can check your driving abilities.

The process at Adaptable Driving starts with a medically-based OT assessment focused on driving. All body systems are evaluated, including hearing and mobility. Physician concerns and medical history are also taken into account. This clinical piece can lead to additional testing, but what always comes next is a road test.

This list can include how easily you get in and out of your car, whether you check your mirrors, how you use the brake and how to distance yourself from other cars. This is all done in an environment familiar to you rather than on a course.

A hard decision

Results from this process don’t always lead to the recommendation to stop driving. Some are considered still fit to drive, while others may need an additional evaluation down the road.

Others get the green light to keep driving as long as certain adaptations are made to their vehicle, such as additional mirrors being added for better visibility. Loved ones might consider discussing the issue before driving abilities come into question.

“Everyone has a driving life expectancy. You’ll eventually lose the ability to drive and need to plan for when that happens,” Norall said.

Going over how to use ride-share apps or seeing what community services are available can get this conversation started.

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ASK THE EXPERT SHANNON PAWLEY

Medicaid planning now means less worrying later

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Long-term care isn't just about nursing homes; it's about protecting your future. Whether you or a loved one needs care at home or in a facility, the costs can be overwhelming. Without proper planning, long-term care can wipe out everything you've worked hard to build: your retirement savings, your home and your children's inheritance.

That's why Medicaid planning needs to be a key part of your estate planning strategy. The time to start is now, not later.

The reality: Long-term care is expensive

The cost of care is staggering. In metro Atlanta, skilled nursing facilities range from \$5,000 to \$16,000 per month. Most families can't afford this long-term, especially when care is needed for several years.

Adding to the urgency, 1 in 4 adults over age 70 will develop dementia or Alzheimer's, and more than half of them will need long-term care. The financial and emotional strain is real – and all too common.

Without planning, families are often forced to spend down nearly everything before Medicaid steps in. This puts your financial future, and your family's security, at serious risk.

What is Medicaid?

Medicaid is a government program that helps people with limited income and assets pay for health care, including long-term care services like nursing homes and in-home assistance. It's not the same as Medicare, which in most cases only covers short-term care.

But Medicaid has strict rules. To qualify, your countable assets must be under a very low limit – \$2,000 for an individual in Georgia. That means most people with a home, savings or retirement account may not qualify unless they plan.

Medicaid planning: A smart estate strategy

Medicaid planning is a type of estate planning that helps protect your assets while ensuring you qualify for Medicaid when you need care.

Without a plan, your savings may be spent entirely on long-term care. With the right strategy, you can preserve what you've worked for and still receive necessary benefits.

Here's how it works:

Irrevocable trusts

You can transfer assets, like your home or savings, into a Medicaid Asset Protection Trust (MAPT). If done five years before applying, those assets won't count against Medicaid limits. You may qualify without losing everything. Special Needs Trusts (SNTs) can also help disabled loved ones qualify for Medicaid while still receiving financial support.



OUR EXPERT

Shannon Pawley, owner and CEO of The Estate & Asset Protection Law Firm, is a dedicated advocate for those whose voices are often unheard or silenced. Her passion for legal advocacy began in high school as a U.S. House of Representatives page, where she learned the importance of diverse perspectives. Shannon pursued law to guide clients through life's most challenging moments, earning degrees from North Carolina Wesleyan College, Michigan State University College of Law, and an LL.M. from Wayne State University. She is committed to protecting the dignity and independence of her clients, especially the most vulnerable.

Gifting (plan ahead)

Gifting assets might seem easy, but Medicaid's five-year look-back rule means transfers during that time can lead to penalties or delays in coverage. That's why it's crucial to plan early with a qualified attorney.

Spousal protections

If one spouse needs

care and the other does not, Medicaid allows the healthy spouse to keep some income and assets. Tools like the Community Spouse Resource Allowance (CSRA) and Minimum Monthly Maintenance Needs Allowance (MMMNA) help avoid financial hardship.

Medicaid-compliant annuities

These special annuities turn extra assets into income, helping applicants qualify for Medicaid while keeping some financial stability. They must be carefully structured to meet legal standards.

The five-year look-back period

Medicaid reviews your finances going back five years. If they find that you gave away or transferred assets for less than market value, you may face a delay in benefits.

This is why early planning is critical. Waiting until a health crisis hits often means fewer options, more stress and higher financial risk.

What if you have too many assets?

If your assets exceed the Medicaid limit, you may need to "spend down," which means using the extra funds for approved expenses like care, home improvements or medical bills.

Legitimate, spending down without a strategy can leave you with nothing for your spouse, children or

grandchildren. Medicaid planning helps avoid this by preserving assets legally and strategically.

Why do you need legal guidance?

Medicaid rules are complicated, and they vary by state. Mistakes – like transferring assets too late or using the wrong type of trust – can disqualify you or delay your benefits.

Working with an experienced elder law attorney can help you:

- Choose the right type of trust.
- Time your transfers correctly.
- Protect your spouse and family.
- Navigate Medicaid's strict income and asset limits.
- Avoid costly errors and penalties.

Don't wait until it's too late

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2 of the best 'wellness walks' are in Georgia

By Avery Newmark
avery.newmark@ajc.com

Mental health lap. Just getting some fresh air. Call it what you want – walking is having a moment. And according to a new national survey, two of the best places to get your steps in are right here in Georgia.

Main Street in Dahlonega ranked No. 12, and East Main Street in Blue Ridge came in at No. 35 on Assisted Living Magazine's list of the top 50 "wellness walks" in the U.S. The rankings are based on a survey of more than 3,000 Americans who shared their favorite streets to stroll for both scenery and well-being.

"Too often, wellness gets boxed into gyms and gadgets," Jeremy Clerc, CEO of Assisted Living Magazine, said in a news release. "But the simple act of walking – especially in places that are beautiful, social, and full of charm – can be just as powerful."

The Georgia streets that made the cut offer more than just steps – they offer atmosphere.

Dahlonega's Main Street winds through a historic district in the foothills of the Southern Appalachian Mountains, with 19th-century architecture, farmers markets, a calendar full of events and boutiques.

Meanwhile, East Main Street in Blue Ridge captures the essence of a small mountain town, where antique stores, cozy cafes and art galleries line a walkable corridor rooted in the town's railroad past. You can even still take the train on the Blue Ridge Scenic Railway anytime between March and December.

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AGING IN ATLANTA

Find luxury, tranquility in Florida

Skip the theme parks but still enjoy adventures at these three resorts.

By Karon Warren
For the AJC

Like vacationing in Florida but want to avoid the crowds at Disney and Universal? Not a problem.

In fact, you can take your vacation up a notch beyond the theme park hotels and character meet-and-greets with a variety of luxury options in Central Florida.

Conrad Orlando

During a recent visit to the area, my son and I stayed at the Conrad Orlando at Evermore. Overlooking a man-made lagoon – Evermore Bay – we enjoyed luxurious accommodations at this Hilton property that included views of the nightly fireworks at both Epcot and the Magic Kingdom right from our balcony.

The hotel also features five on-site restaurants, so we didn't have to travel far to eat. For instance, while spending the day at the pool, we ordered pizza that was delivered right to our lounge chairs.

For dinner, we dined at Ceiba, where we enjoyed a fusion of traditional and contemporary Mexican cuisine. Think quesabirria tacos and arrachera (skirt steak with maneado beans and charred corn). Even if you don't go for dinner, come check out the view from this rooftop restaurant.

You'll also have beach access on the lagoon behind the hotel, where you can enjoy kayaking or standup paddle boarding. There's a paved sidewalk around the entire lagoon, perfect for an evening stroll. Additional amenities include two 18-hole, Jack Nicklaus-designed golf courses and Conrad Spa Orlando, home to the only outdoor water garden in Florida.

"Conrad Orlando at Evermore is an exceptional destination for travelers age 50 and older, providing a sophisticated design, thoughtful ADA-friendly accommodations, world-class amenities and more," general manager Sean McCarron said. "Located inside the lush 1,000 acres at Evermore Orlando Resort, our luxury hotel offers a tranquil and accessible environment with a plethora of amenities, including a spacious zero-entry pool and exclusive access of Evermore Bay,



In addition to swimming in Serenity Bay or floating in the Wind-Away River (above), you can sign up for a dolphin encounter or go underwater with schools of fish at Discovery Cove. PHOTOS COURTESY OF KARON WARREN



The view from the balcony at Conrad Orlando includes not only Emerald Bay but also nightly fireworks at both Epcot and the Magic Kingdom.

perfect for unwinding."

Mission Inn + Club

A short drive from Orlando, the Mission Inn + Club in Howey-in-the-Hills is another resort that offers plenty of activities to keep you on the go.

This property features two championship golf courses, plus tennis, pickleball and beach tennis courts, as well as a swimming pool, fitness center and spa. My son loved practicing on the tennis courts, but my preferred activity was relaxing by the pool and hot tub. Of course, given the property's expansive landscape with ancient live oaks and palm trees, I also enjoyed taking walks to enjoy the views.

Mission Inn + Club offers three on-site restaurants, so you can choose one that suits your mood. For example, start your day with the buffet at La Hacienda, enjoy a burger or salad at Grove House overlooking one of the golf courses, and finish at La Margarita with steak or salmon.

When you're ready to retreat to your own private space, the resort features both traditional guest rooms and suites with plenty of room to move around. If you're traveling with kids or grandkids and want more room, the resort also

offers villas complete with two or three bedrooms, living rooms and full kitchens. These are ideal for multigenerational vacations.

"Mission Resort + Club offers a peaceful retreat steeped in history and surrounded by natural beauty," said Cindy Staley, resort general manager. "Our grounds are rich with heritage, and guests love discovering the historical charm of the property as well as nearby landmarks. It's an incredibly relaxing destination – perfect for unwinding amid scenic views and enjoying a slower pace of life."

Discovery Cove

If you can't visit Central Florida without a trip to a theme park, consider Discovery Cove Orlando, an all-inclusive park where admission includes breakfast, lunch and snacks, a lazy river, swimming pool, snorkeling (gear provided), flotation devices, animal-friendly sunscreen and parking.

My son and I were not sure what to expect, but we were thrilled to discover you could sign up for a dolphin encounter or go underwater with schools of fish, in addition to swimming in Serenity Bay or floating in the Wind-Away River.

And did I mention the

all-inclusive meals and drinks? That's right. At Laguna Grill, you can choose from a variety of selections during both breakfast and lunch hours that include chicken and waffles, scrambled eggs, breakfast meats, fruit, burgers, salads and desserts. Hibiscus Hideaway offers pizza, ice cream, chips and fruit, while the Blue Bamboo Bar has such snacks as warm soft pretzels, chocolate chip cookies, fruit and more. Regardless of where you dine, you can enjoy complimentary Coca-Cola products, bottled water, coffee and – for those age 21 and older – beer and wine.

"At Discovery Cove, you can choose your own pace – whether it's a chill-vibe day or one packed with adventure-filled moments," said Crystal O'Hea, vice president of marketing. "From sunning on our sandy beaches and floating along the award-winning Wind-Away River to snorkeling with tropical fish, interacting with playful dolphins and more, Discovery Cove offers a variety of once-in-a-lifetime opportunities. Set in a tropical oasis that's away from the crowds and lines of other Orlando-based theme parks, it's an ideal place for the young and young-at-heart to enjoy the day together making memories. Additionally, since it's all-inclusive, all of your meals, snacks, beer and wine are included."

I highly recommend taking this luxury experience to the next level by booking your own private cabana. These are outfitted with a locker, towel service, a hammock, lounge chairs, a ceiling fan, a mini fridge with sodas and water, and snacks. We loved having our own private corner to enjoy between meals and activities.

From sips to sci-fi: 6 ways to pack fun into August

By Lesly Gregory
For the AJC

All the kids are headed back to school, but August is still a jam-packed month of fun in Atlanta.

Here are six ways you can get out and try something new. Whether you're looking for an adult-only activity or somewhere to take the whole family, these experiences have you covered.

FOOD AND DRINK

Sips Under the Sea: Glow Nights

Inspired by the ocean's natural bioluminescence, this 18 and older event features signature cocktails, live music and glowing decor. Explore the aquarium after hours, and stop on the dance floor and boogie. Admission comes with three drink tickets, with additional drinks and food available for purchase. If you want to make a night of it, stay and sleep over in the aquarium. This special experience includes a bedtime snack, light breakfast and access to the aquarium the following day.

■ 7-10 p.m. Aug. 8. \$51.99 for members, \$56.99 for nonmembers. Event plus overnight experience is also available for \$140.99 for members and \$155.99 for nonmembers. Georgia Aquarium, 225 Baker St. NW, Atlanta. georgiaaquarium.org/events/event/sips-08-2025



Explore the aquarium after hours at the Georgia Aquarium's special edition of Sips Under the Sea.

KATRINA MERTO FOR THE AJC

Grand Tasting Alpharetta

More than 20 of Alpharetta's top restaurants come together in this all-inclusive, 21 and older event. Sample unlimited bites and sip a variety of wine, beer and cocktails. Live music and additional entertainment keep the night lively and fun. Meet celebrity chefs and rising kitchen stars, as well. For those looking for some special treatment, VIP access gets you into the event an hour early, upgrades your drinks and gets you upclose for live chef demos.

■ 6-10 p.m. Aug. 28. General admission tickets are \$98.07. VIP tickets are \$133.81. The Hotel at Avalon, 9000 Avalon Blvd., Alpharetta. alpharetta.tasteofatlanta.com

ARTS AND CRAFTS

Atlanta Summer Arts and Crafts Festival

Combining live entertainment with a vibrant mix of art, culture, food and community, the Atlanta Summer Arts and Crafts Festival showcases local artists, crafters and performers. From handcrafted goods to fine art, home decor and more, everything is made by local artists and makers. This family friendly event also includes a variety of food vendors.

■ 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Aug. 8-10. Free event. Perkinson Park, 770 Deckner Ave. SW, Atlanta. eventbrite.com/e/atlanta-summer-arts-and-crafts-festival-ga-tickets-1329798566309

Piedmont Park Arts Festival

Emphasizing visual arts and family fun, the Piedmont Park Arts Festival includes up to 250 painters, photographers, sculptors, leather and metalworkers, glass blowers, jewelers and crafters. Artist demos, live music and an Emerging Artists Pavilion round out the creative experience, while a children's play area ensures there's something for everyone. Festival-themed food and drinks are also available.

■ 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Aug. 16, and 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Aug. 17. Free admission. Piedmont Park, 1215 Piedmont Ave, Atlanta. piedmontparkartsfestival.com

VINTAGE AND NICHE

Monsterama

Focused on cinema, art, comics, literature and media, Monsterama is a retro horror and sci-fi convention for all ages. A star-studded guest list of entertainers from multiple eras combine with panels, vendor booths, screenings and a Dealer's Hall. There's also a Monster Prom and a Market Macabre that features art, collectibles, toys, posters and more.

■ 2-9 p.m. Aug. 8, 9 a.m.-7 p.m. Aug. 9 and 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Aug. 10. Admission is \$55 for a three-day pass. Atlanta Marriott Northeast/Emory Area, 2000 Century Blvd. NE, Atlanta. monsteramacon.com

Dragon Con

Celebrating science fiction, fantasy, gaming, comics, literature, art, music and film, Dragon Con is a pop culture phenomenon. Contests, events, workshops, vendors, an art show and even a parade fill up this Labor Day weekend celebration. Featured guests throughout the weekend include well-known writers, artists, actors, illustrators and other creative minds. Pick up your badge at the Courtland Grand Hotel and then enjoy the festivities throughout downtown Atlanta.

■ Aug. 28-Sept. 1. The event kicks off at 5 p.m. and runs continuously for the next 96 hours. Times for specific activities are available online. Tickets are \$175 for a 2025 membership with access to the entire five days (workshops and other special experiences are extra and prices vary.) Courtland Grand Hotel, 165 Courtland St. NE, Atlanta. dragoncon.org

Georgia travel group helps seniors see the world

From day trips to overnight adventures, Cathy Stokes is leading tour groups from coast to coast.

By Karon Warren
For the AJC

If you want to travel, but do not want to plan it yourself or maybe don't have anyone to travel with, consider booking a spot on a motor coach tour with Seniors on the Go Travel.

Located in Lawrenceville, Seniors on the Go Travel features day trips, overnight trips, longer tours and some cruises for groups of 30 or more travelers. Now, that's not to say your group must have 30 people. Instead, for a booked trip to move forward, it must have at least 30 participants.

"We are an active group of senior adults who enjoy group travel opportunities," said Cathy



Based in Lawrenceville, Seniors on the Go Travel features day trips, overnight trips and some cruises for larger groups. CHENG-JIH CHEN/DREAMSTIME/TNS

Stokes, owner and tour planner for Seniors on the Go Travel. "By offering a variety of tours, we can find the right type of tour, from a day trip from Lawrenceville to a more extensive, multiday fly-in tour."

The company's most popular option is day trips, which frequently sell out. These trips include visits to the Atlanta History Center

or to see a show at the Strand Theater.

"They offer a great day out for those who may not like to be away overnight," Stokes said. "It's a great way to be with their travel friends and gives them a chance to socialize."

Overnight trips could be a short, three-day trip to Charleston or Savannah. Stokes also offers more extensive journeys, such as a 10-day trip to

Wisconsin, or a 14-day tour of Europe. Offered in partnership with Collette Travel Services, fly-in trips include both U.S. and European destinations, and offer inclusive pricing with airfare, hotels, a tour director, several meals, and all admission fees and tours.

Travelers can sign up for the Seniors on the Go Travel newsletter to stay up to date on upcoming tours. If they see something of interest, Stokes recommends signing up as soon as possible.

"This is especially true with those trips that involve airfare," she said. "People should sign up at least a year in advance. On the day trips and the overnight bus tours, it would be more in the four- to six-month range. It really depends on the trip and when deposits are due."

To learn more about Seniors on the Go Travel and to see what tours are currently available, visit the website and follow their Facebook page.

AGING IN ATLANTA

Moving along: How to care for your knees

'Losing 10 pounds can reduce knee stress by 40 pounds per step,' says Dr. Jonathan Payne.

By Rachel Brown Kirkland
For the AJC

Jeff Watkins knew he had to act when his knee hurt so badly it impacted his golf game.

An X-ray confirmed what he could no longer ignore: an old sports injury had led to degenerative arthritis and bone-on-bone contact. He needed a total knee replacement.

His procedure with Dr. George Guild of Total Joint Specialists and Northside Hospital not only gave him a championship season, it also let him climb a 14,000-foot Colorado peak with his daughter and son-in-law less than a year later. At the summit, he posed with a sign thanking his orthopedic surgeon.

"I am on top of the world, and I feel so blessed," he said.

Watkins is just one example of what's possible when people get the knee care they need. But causes of knee pain vary widely. We asked local providers for advice.

Keeping your knees young

At Piedmont Hospital, Dr. Jonathan Payne said adults over 55 typically face knee problems for three main reasons: osteoarthritis, cartilage tears or tendinitis.

"Cartilage naturally thins with age, increasing osteoarthritis risk," Payne said.

To reduce risk, he suggests maintaining a healthy weight, exercising regularly, and staying flexible.

"Losing 10 pounds can reduce knee stress by 40 pounds per step," he said. "Going on an outdoor walk after meals is a simple way to exercise regularly."

Guild said weight-related knee issues often become a cycle.

"The more weight you're carrying, the more weight it is on your knee and the more it's going to degenerate," Guild said. "If you get a lot of knee pain, it becomes very difficult to exercise." Supportive shoes help reduce joint impact, anti-inflammatory foods can lower inflammation, and reducing sugar and alcohol can contribute to better health.

Don't delay care

Persistent knee pain that lasts for weeks, limits daily activities, or disrupts sleep is a reason to see a doctor. Delaying care can make things worse.

"I think the biggest mistake patients make – in general, not just in knee care – sometimes there's still a fear of going to the doctor," Guild said.

Left untreated, osteoarthritis or meniscus tears can further damage cartilage. Joint instability can lead to even worse injuries, such as a broken



Persistent knee pain that lasts for weeks, limits daily activities or disrupts sleep is a reason to see a doctor.
NATPOL ROBBANG/DREAMSTIME/TNS

hip. Chronic pain often forces people to change how they walk, creating stress in other areas.

Depending on the problem, early treatment can help delay or even prevent surgery, doctors said.

Platelet-rich plasma injections, which use the patient's own blood to reduce inflammation and preserve cartilage, have become more common, especially for early arthritis. Steroid shots, hyaluronic acid injections, and possibly stem cell injections are other options. Guild said the goal of injections is to reduce pain enough for patients to do resistance training to rebuild quadriceps strength, which helps relieve knee stress.

Dealing with pain

There are many treatment options, from physical therapy to strengthen supporting muscles, to ice or heat, over-the-counter medications, braces, injections, and alternative therapies such as acupuncture or massage.

If surgery is the right option, sticking with rehabilitation is essential to regaining strength

and mobility, Payne said. Guild said today's surgical procedures are much improved, often resulting in quicker recoveries. Modern implants can last 25 to 30 years.

Becky Sams, an Athens resident in her 80s, has had knee, shoulder, and hip replacements with Dr. Payne at Piedmont Athens Regional. She said the process was smoother than she expected and praised Payne's care.

"I did not know what to expect," she said. "I had had friends who had knee replacements and they said it took a long time to recover."

For her, recovery was quick and eliminated painful arthritis. The surgery let her return to an active life, including social clubs, outings with friends, and volunteer work.

Guild said he appreciates seeing patients regain their active lives.

"He really looks like a much younger version of himself," Guild said of Watkins. "When people come in and they can't walk and you intervene and then they can walk, it's really a difference maker."

Mobility to mental health: Impacts of falls

The fear of falling can put older adults at risk for reduced independence.

By Elizabeth Green
For the AJC

Fear of falling: It's the official term for, well, being afraid of taking a tumble.

With 1 in 4 adults over age 65 falling each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control, that apprehension is prevalent among seniors for good reason. But local experts say there are ways to offset the risks.

Causes and consequences

The body often undergoes muscle weakness and muscle mass loss with aging, said Feng Yang, associate professor in the College of Education & Human Development's Department of Kinesiology and Health at Georgia State University. Balance and vision impairments and sensation loss come with those deteriorations, and all of these factors can contribute to falls.

Consequences, Yang said, run the gamut from physical injuries like hip fractures and brain injuries to psychological effects like sustained fear.

"It's a psychological concept, but it has a huge impact on the lifestyle of individuals," he said of developing a fear of falling.

Falls also present economic strain. According to the CDC, medical costs for falls across the nation topped out at around \$50 billion in 2015. Hospitalization and at-home medical caregivers contribute to those costs, Yang said.

Dr. Mary Mosley, an Atlanta-based Kaiser Per-

manente physician who now practices in-home palliative care, said she sees the emotional effects of falls among seniors, which can bring anxiety, depression or loss of confidence – causing many to miss out on social activities.

Risk factors

There are two types of risk factors contributing to fall prevalence: intrinsic and extrinsic, which encompass physiological components and environment, Yang explained.

Intrinsic offsets include a healthy diet, appropriate physical activity, adequate sleep and care for any vision or hearing issues.

Extrinsic offsets include adequate lighting, anti-slip floors, clear pathways for walking and bathroom grab bars in the home, along with footwear with soles that are not exceedingly thick, allowing for feeling of the terrain underneath the feet.

Mosley suggested that older adults also examine which medications they're taking to make sure effects like drops in blood pressure aren't contributing to fall risk.

The effects of fall prevention

The positive effects of fall prevention can significantly impact seniors' daily lives. Staving off falls, Yang said, can allow older adults to maintain independence and accomplish goals of aging in place.

Continuing to move sustainably way, Mosley posited, is truly the antidote to debilitating falls. She pointed out that physical activity can include low-impact activities like tai chi, walking, yoga or workouts in a seated position.

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