



Public Engagement Tips for Healthy Ageing Research

These tips are for scientists, researchers and students who want to engage the public around the topic of healthy ageing research and ageing biology. The aim of these tips is to encourage researchers to have the confidence to talk about healthy ageing to different types of people in a variety of science engagement settings. For example, at a science festival or family fun day, or after a talk or discussion event with older adults.

- Everyone experiences ageing; be aware that everyone has their own experience of ageing and healthspan. Healthy ageing research is dedicated to improving everyone's lives and sharing scientific knowledge with the wider public is important. However, we recognise that ageing and, with it, death can be a sensitive subject, which everyone is touched by. Be prepared to have personal conversations on potentially sensitive topics about individual experiences, including the person's own ageing and the ageing of their family members.

- The biology of ageing and research on healthspan isn't widely known about among the public. Be careful not to assume any prior knowledge. Many people also find ageing research exciting so it can be a really rewarding experience to engage the public on it.

- If someone starts talking about their own experience, practice active listening. Try to listen instead of thinking about what you are going to say next and pay attention to what they are saying.

- Don't give medical advice. It is never appropriate to comment on an individual's health status or to influence health decisions in a public engagement context. Any questions asking for clinical advice should be acknowledged and pointed in the direction of appropriate help. If anyone brings up their own medical issues, you can suggest that they visit their GP.

- However, it is a good idea to explain how a personal experience relates to the known research evidence. For example, if someone says "I developed diabetes and then depression soon after, I always thought they might be linked, do you think it's because of how my cells are ageing?" you could say "we can't yet tell how illnesses interact in a single person, but we do know they can affect one another directly and in unexpected ways. There's a lot of active research to understand this and predict what illnesses people will develop".

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- Convey the urgent need to deal with the grand challenges of an ageing population and how this research is revolutionary. Don't be afraid to address areas of confusion, fear and anxiety for the public. For example, clarifying that the aim of this type of research is not to pathologise ageing or stigmatise older people.
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- Don't be afraid to say "I don't know" or "there isn't clear evidence yet" where that is the case. People prefer transparency and honesty rather than things being oversimplified.
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- Clear and accessible language is important; avoid using jargon and acronyms but don't talk down to people or patronise. Importantly, know your audience and tailor your language appropriately. For example, when speaking to a group of 70-year-olds, don't generalise with terminology such as "old people".
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- Don't overload with facts which can be easily forgotten but if you tell a simple and clear story with distinctive details, this can be more memorable. Give information in 'bite-sized' formats.
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- Have a realistic and optimistic conversation about potential drug treatments that could target underlying changes in biological processes that cause ageing. But it's important to remain honest about the likely timeframes involved in bringing treatments from lab to clinic to avoid giving false hope. Reassure people that projects like UK SPINE and ageing researchers worldwide are working to close that gap by collaborative working across different research areas and with industry partners, patients and other stakeholders to exchange knowledge.

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- Do some research around the current live debates in the news and media. Incorporate them into the context of your research to demonstrate the relevance and impact on individuals and society.
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- If appropriate, discuss the challenges still faced in funding this research area and the need to bring the public along the journey to ensure everyone is aware, understands and has confidence in how treatments can be used.
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- Be prepared to have more general conversations about the biology of ageing as well as holistic treatments including lifestyle choices, social prescribing and other non-medical interventions.
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- Enjoy it! Be genuine. The public will get to see that scientists are just human, and they will feel empowered with their new knowledge. This will all contribute to improved understanding of healthy ageing research.

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