

# Solutions for healthy ageing: how technology can make a difference

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## **Professor Alex Mihailidis, Scientific Director and CEO of AGE-WELL Network of Centres of Excellence, looks to improve wellbeing and healthy ageing in older people through innovative technology**

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The world is getting old. Today, living past the age of 80 is no longer a rarity in many parts of the world. This is a great achievement, but how do we help older adults maintain their independence and quality of life with healthy ageing?

Technology can play a significant role in making this happen. It can also support caregivers and ease pressures on healthcare systems. We live in an increasingly technologically advanced, digital world and there is an unprecedented opportunity to harness the power of technology. Systems that connect people, platforms that promote physical and cognitive health, and remote therapies – are just a few of the innovations that can benefit older adults and caregivers.

But the timeline for implementing technology-based solutions has moved up dramatically. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed serious gaps in care and services for older adults, while highlighting the potential for technology to support seniors across all settings – hospital, community, home, and long-term care, where the pandemic has had such heartbreaking consequences.

### **We know that many older adults are receptive to technology**

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A poll conducted by Environics Research in July 2020 showed that COVID-19 had significantly increased the use of many technologies among older Canadians. Six in 10 of those aged 65+ agreed that technological advancements can help maintain relationships with family and friends, reduce social isolation, pursue hobbies, manage all aspects of health, and stay active and in their own homes as they age. Almost 7 in 10 were willing to pay for technology that allows them to stay at home as they age, while about half would pay for technology that helps manage health and wellness.

Recent years have shown a surge of interest within the research community in the role of technology for older adults. Do a quick search of ageing and technology in PubMed and one sees an exponential increase in the number of papers published in this area. In 1996, there were only a handful. Last year, it was more like 6,000 papers.

### **AgeTech is a fast-growing sector**

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Globally, AgeTech is on track to be a multi-trillion-dollar market. But we must remember that there is a digital divide between technology haves and have-nots. Technologies must be accessible, affordable and available to all. They must be user-friendly and practical. Connectivity is essential. Indeed, equitable access to technology is a human right.

Addressing the needs of ageing populations calls for networks that bring everyone together to drive innovation in AgeTech. For example, Ageing 2.0 is an international community striving to accelerate innovation in the healthy ageing space. The EU-based Active and Assistive Living (AAL) Programme, which just completed its 10-year mandate, is widely recognized as a global pioneer in the technology and ageing sector. Canadian networks include the Centre for Ageing + Brain Health Innovation (CABHI) and AGE-WELL, Canada's technology and ageing network.

## **Real-world products that enhance lives and promote healthy ageing**

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As Scientific Director and CEO of AGE-WELL, I've seen up close how networks can break down barriers and spur innovation. Funded through the federal Networks of Centres of Excellence program, AGE-WELL brings together researchers, older adults, caregivers, partner organizations (industry, government, community) and future leaders to accelerate the delivery of technology-based solutions that increase safety and security, support independent living and enhance social participation.

More than 170 technologies, services, policies and practices are being developed by AGE-WELL teams or already benefiting people and bringing socioeconomic returns. These include virtual exercise systems, non-intrusive health monitoring technology, and medication and daily life management services for people living with dementia. Smart home sensors are being created to identify potentially risky situations in the kitchen and signal people to take corrective actions. There's a "smart" glove designed to reduce hand tremors in people living with Essential Tremor; the Steadi-Two was created by one of over 60 AGE-WELL startup affiliates.

Another active area of research is public policy, and how it can support the growth of new technologies. AGE-WELL's APPTA National Innovation Hub supports governments in generating opportunities to assess the policy and practice challenges of a healthy ageing population.

Of note, two important new Canadian initiatives aim to promote technology adoption and innovative research. One is a federally-funded program called envisAGE that will catalyze Canada's AgeTech ecosystem by helping companies deliver solutions. The other, Healthy Ageing Canada, is a unique research collaboration launched by AGE-WELL and the Canadian Frailty Network that is critical to driving research excellence that will feed the innovation pipeline.

## **The world needs AGE-WELL's expertise**

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It is not an exaggeration to say that the world needs AGE-WELL's expertise in research and innovation that connects different disciplines and sectors, while meaningfully involving older adults and caregivers to ensure that products will actually be used.

Technology can never replace the human touch, but it is an essential tool in the toolbox to support healthy ageing. More than ever, we must work together globally to address the universal challenges of ageing. Let's build on the networks we have, tear down siloes and rally to transform the lives of older adults and caregivers everywhere, now and in the future.

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