Never too old to dive

Providing you have a regular annual dive medical and have no identified medical issues that would prevent you from diving, it is quite possible to enjoy scuba diving well into your 70s and there are documented cases of many 80 year olds continuing to dive regularly. (See this link for an example). A DAN-supported study that compared younger and older scuba divers found that physiologically there is no reason why older adults cannot continue to scuba dive (Mummery and Moon, 2003).

Of course, some of us who are getting a little older have to work harder at keeping fit for our diving, and may need a little more help getting on and off the boat than we used to. It is also true that the risk for decompression illnesses increases with age and maybe we need to set our dive computers to a slightly more conservative level. However, most of the challenges experienced by older divers are out of the water challenges; once under the sea, we are all equal.

My husband and I are both experienced dive instructors. He started diving at the age of 59 and is now a 72 year old PADI MSDT and SSI Advanced Open Water Instructor. I am a 58 year old PADI OWSI. Between us we have nearly two thousand safe dives in many different locations. The important thing for any diver, and even more so for an instructor, is that you can self-rescue if necessary, and also rescue another diver, if ever called to do so. If we ever felt that we could not look after our dive students under any circumstances then we would retire from instructing.

We both have our challenges: my husband has less than perfect eyesight, which is corrected by prescription lenses in the mask. I have osteo-arthritis in my feet and hands, which I don't feel while diving, but which can make it painful to fin onto the boat. If I have to fin up onto an inflatable with a high side we have a well worked-out system that prevents the damage that used to happen to the back of my wetsuit when being helped in by over-enthusiastic dive staff grabbing it near the zip. This system involves my husband/buddy keeping his regulator or snorkel in, holding onto the rope/handles on the side of the boat and ducking down below the water a little. I then place my knee on his shoulder while holding onto the boat rope to the side of him, kick hard with the other leg, and he pushes up. This gives me just the little boost I need, and is much less exhausting than any other method that we have tried.

Tips for older divers

Have an annual dive medical with a physician trained in dive medicine. Discuss particularly the effects of any medication you are taking and possible contra-indications for diving. Then you can dive in the knowledge that you are medically fit to do so. Maintain your strength and flexibility as much as possible, and then you can be sure of enjoying your diving. If you can do this manoeuvre *(photo 1)*, then you are sure to be able to reach your tank while it is on your back in order to turn your air on, if necessary. Of course, if you always do your buddy check properly, you won't need to!

Choose your dive centre carefully. If you are a new diver or just thinking of learning to dive, talk to a few dive centres and listen to the recommendations of others before making your choice. The instructors should be enthusiastic about teaching you and interested in helping you to overcome any physical difficulties. They should also be meticulous about proper dive insurance and checking that you have the required medical clearance. Do not dive with any instructor who makes you feel bad about yourself.

Do not be afraid to ask for help if you need it. It can be very tricky walking on a slippery deck in a rough sea if you are fully kitted up and waiting to do your giant stride entry. Use all hand grips available and ask for support with your tank. The same applies when exiting the sea using a ladder. Keep all gear on, except your fins, and ask for someone to hold your tank valve to steady you as you ascend, and then sit down as soon as you are able. Conversely, if you do not need help, be honest, and do not let well-meaning people interfere when you are OK. One of my worst injuries was caused by a dive master giving me "help" that I

had twice refused.
Develop techniques, either solo techniques or techniques that require a buddy's assistance, that will help you to overcome any limitations that you have. The exit strategy we use to help me on the boat is just one of them.
Use integrated weights, or weight belts with pockets. This keeps the weight where they should be. As a typical, slightly "pear-shaped" woman diver, I like a weight belt with pockets. I can slide it down to my hips, and with 0.5 kg on each ankle, I am perfectly trimmed in the water! My husband, in common with most men, has heavier legs, and likes integrated weights, which sit higher and counterbalance the weight of the lower half of his body.

(photo 2)
Log each dive, not only with the conditions and the fish life seen, but also with your wetsuit, tank and weight configuration. For example: *12l steel tank, 7mm full wetsuit, 7 kg,* or *10l al. tank, 3mm shortie wetsuit, 4kg.* Note if this was perfect weighting or too light or heavy. This will prove very useful in the future, when you dive in different locations. And remember that 4kg is nearer 9lbs than 8lbs. So often we forget this and end up underweighted if working in Imperial measures!
Stay as fit as possible. Maintaining your general fitness and muscle mass will reduce the amount of weight that you need for neutral buoyancy. The most common problem older divers encounter is managing the weight of the tank and gear with less than perfect strength in their backs, and sometimes made harder by previous back injuries. However, you can still successfully complete an Open Water dive course and become a competent diver. Anyone with a back problem that does not prohibit them from diving is able to put their gear on and take it off in the water. You can have the weight of the tank supported by your buddy when by the pool, for giant stride execution, for example.

The psychological benefits of diving when you are older
As older instructors, we attract clients who are also in our age group. Many are newly-retired and using their extra time to try something that they have always wanted to do. They are focused and enthusiastic. Leisure activities are a key factor in ensuring a good quality of life as we grow age (Leitner and Leitner, 2012).

(photo 3)
There are many psychological benefits of taking up diving when you are older, or continuing to dive longer than you ever thought possible. The first is with your self-image. It is hard to think of yourself as old in a negative way when you are spending your time on a dive boat, and under the sea or in a lake looking at our beautiful underwater world. Another is a new interest: logging your dives and scouring your books to identify the species seen can generate a new awareness of the importance of the aquatic ecosystem. Diving is also a good way of making friends with like-minded people and maintaining an active social life. I met my husband under the sea. Of course there are no guarantees about this!

So, prepare for your old age now, by going diving.
Photos

photo 1	**photo 2**	**photo 3**