

Senior Nutrition

The joy of eating well and aging well

Food for thought: Think healthy eating is all about dieting and sacrifice? Think again. Eating well is a lifestyle that embraces colorful food, creativity in the kitchen, and eating with friends.

For seniors, the benefits of healthy eating include increased mental acuteness, resistance to illness and disease, higher energy levels, a more robust immune system, faster recuperation times, and better management of chronic health problems. As we age, eating well can also be the key to a positive outlook and staying emotionally balanced.

You are the boss when it comes to food choices! Read on for tips on how to supercharge with food.

Senior nutrition: Feeding the body, mind and soul

Remember the old adage, *you are what you eat*? Make it your motto. When you choose a variety of colorful fruits and veggies, whole grains, and lean proteins you'll feel simply marvelous inside and out.

- **Live longer and stronger** – Good nutrition keeps muscles, bones, organs, and other body parts strong for the long haul. Eating vitamin-rich food boosts immunity and fights illness-causing toxins. A proper diet reduces the risk of heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, type-2 diabetes, bone loss, cancer, and anemia. Also, eating sensibly means consuming fewer calories and more nutrient dense foods, keeping weight in check.
- **Sharpen the mind** – Scientists know that key nutrients are essential for the brain to do its job. Research shows that people who eat a selection of brightly colored fruit, leafy veggies, certain fish and nuts packed with omega-3 fatty acids can improve focus and decrease the risk for Alzheimer's disease.
- **Feel better** – Eating well is a feast for your five senses! Wholesome meals give you more energy and help you look better, resulting in a self-esteem boost. It's all connected—when your body feels good you feel happier inside and out.

How many calories do seniors need?

There is a right number of calories for your body. Use the following as a guideline.

A woman over 50 who is:

- Not physically active needs about 1600 calories a day
- Somewhat physically active needs about 1800 calories a day

- Very active needs about 2000 calories a day

A man over 50 who is:

- Not physically active needs about 2000 calories a day
- Somewhat physically active needs about 2200-2400 calories a day
- Very active needs about 2400-2800 calories a day

Source: [National Institute of Aging](#)

Remember that balanced nutrition is more than calorie counting. Read on for more tips on creating a nutritious lifestyle.

Senior nutrition: What your body needs

Older adults can feel better immediately and stay healthy for the future by choosing healthy foods. A balanced diet and physical activity contribute to a higher quality of life and enhanced independence as you age.

Senior food pyramid guidelines

Fruit – Focus on whole fruits rather than juices for more fiber and vitamins and aim for around 1 ½ to 2 servings each day. Break the apple and banana rut and go for color-rich pickings like berries or melons.

Veggies – Color is your credo in this category. Choose anti-oxidant rich dark leafy greens, such as kale, spinach, and broccoli as well as oranges and yellows, such as carrots, squash, and yams. Try for 2 to 2 ½ cups of veggies every day.

Calcium – Aging bone health depends on adequate calcium intake to prevent osteoporosis and bone fractures. Seniors need 1,200 mg of calcium a day through servings of milk, yogurt, or cheese. Non-dairy sources include tofu, broccoli, almonds, and kale.

Grains – Be smart with your carbohydrates and choose whole grains over processed white flour for more nutrients and a higher fiber count. If you're not sure, look for pasta, breads, and cereals that list "whole" in the ingredient list. Seniors need 6-7 ounces of grains each day and one ounce is about 1 slice of bread.

Protein – Seniors need about .5 grams per pound of bodyweight. Simply divide your bodyweight in half to know how many grams you need. A 130-pound woman will need around 65 grams of protein a day. A serving of tuna, for example, has about 40 grams of protein. Vary your sources with more fish beans, peas, nuts, eggs, milk, cheese, and seeds.

Important vitamin and minerals

Water – Seniors are prone to dehydration because our bodies lose some of its ability to regulate fluid levels and our sense of thirst is dulled. Post a note in your kitchen reminding you to sip water every hour and with meals to avoid urinary tract infections, constipation, and possibly confusion.

Vitamin B – After 50, your stomach produces less gastric acid making it difficult to absorb vitamin B-12—needed to help keep blood and nerves vital. Get the recommended daily intake (2.4 mcg) of B12 from fortified foods or a vitamin.

Vitamin D – We get most of vitamin D—essential to absorbing calcium—through sun exposure and a few foods (fatty fish, egg yolk, and fortified milk). With age, our skin is less efficient at synthesizing vitamin D, so consult your doctor about supplementing with fortified foods or a multivitamin.

Senior nutrition: Tips for wholesome eating

Once you've made friends with nutrient-dense food, your body will feel slow and sluggish if you eat less wholesome fare. Here's how to get in the habit of eating well.

- **Reduce sodium** (salt) to help prevent water retention and high blood pressure. Look for the “low sodium” label and season meals with a few grains of coarse sea salt instead of cooking with salt.
- **Enjoy good fats.** Reap the rewards of olive oil, avocados, salmon, walnuts, flaxseed, and other monounsaturated fats. Research shows that the fat from these delicious sources protects your body against heart disease by controlling “bad” LDL cholesterol levels and raising “good” HDL cholesterol levels.
- **Fiber up.** Avoid constipation, lower the risk of chronic diseases, and feel fuller longer by increasing fiber intake. Your go-to fiber-foods are raw fruits and veggies, whole-grains, and beans.
- **Cook smart.** The best way to prepare veggies is by steaming or sautéing in olive oil—it preserves nutrients. Forget boiling—it leeches nutrients.
- **Five colors.** Take a tip from Japanese food culture and try to include five colors on your plate. Fruits and veggies rich in color correspond to rich nutrients (think: blackberries, melons, yams, spinach, tomato, and zucchini).

Senior Nutrition: Changing Dietary Needs

Every season of life brings changes and adjustments to the body. Understanding what is happening will help you take control of your nutrition requirements.

Physical changes

- **Metabolism.** Every year over the age of forty, our metabolism slows. This means that even if you continue to eat the same amount as when you were younger, you're likely to gain weight because you're burning fewer calories. In addition,

you may be less physically active. Consult your doctor to decide if you should cut back on calories.

- **Weakened senses.** Your taste and smell senses diminish with age, so you may be inclined to salt your food more heavily than before—even though seniors need less salt than younger people. Use herbs and healthy oils—like olive oil—to season food.
- **Medicines and Illnesses.** Prescription medications and illnesses often negatively influence appetite. Ask your doctor about overcoming side effects of medications or specific physical conditions.
- **Digestion.** Due to a slowing digestive system, you generate less saliva and stomach acid as you get older, making it more difficult for your body to process certain vitamins and minerals, such as B12, B6 and folic acid, which are necessary to maintain mental alertness, a keen memory and good circulation. Up your fiber intake and talk to your doctor about possible supplements.

Lifestyle changes

- **Loneliness and Depression.** Loneliness and depression affect your diet. For some, feeling down leads to not eating and in others it may trigger overeating. Be aware if emotional problems are affecting your diet, and take action by consulting your doctor or therapist.
- **Death or Divorce.** Newly single seniors may not know how to cook or may not feel like cooking for one. People on limited budgets might have trouble affording a balanced, healthy diet. See the resources below for suggestions on cooking for one and easy, healthy menu selections.

Understanding malnutrition

Malnutrition is a critical senior health issue caused by eating too little food, too few nutrients, and by digestive problems related to aging. Malnutrition causes fatigue, depression, weak immune system, anemia, weakness, digestive, lung, and heart problems, and skin concerns.

Prevent malnutrition

- Eat nutrient packed food
- Have flavorful food available
- Snack between meals
- Eat with company as much as possible
- Get help with food prep
- Consult your doctor

Senior nutrition: Tips for creating a well-balanced diet

Thinking of trading a tired eating regime for a nutrient-dense menu? Good for you! It's easy and delicious.

Avoid skipping meals – This causes your metabolism to slow down, which leads to feeling sluggish and poorer choices later in the day.

Breakfast – Select high fiber breads and cereals, colorful fruit, and protein to fill you with energy for the day. Try yogurt with muesli and berries, a veggie-packed omelet, peanut-butter on whole grain toast with a citrus salad, or old-fashioned oatmeal made with dried cherries, walnuts, and honey.

Lunch – Keep your body fueled for the afternoon with a variety of whole-grain breads, lean protein, and fiber. Try a veggie quesadilla on a whole-wheat tortilla, veggie stew with whole-wheat noodles, or a quinoa salad with roasted peppers and mozzarella cheese.

Dinner – End the day on a wholesome note. Try warm salads of roasted veggies and a side of crusty brown bread and cheese, grilled salmon with spicy salsa, or whole-wheat pasta with asparagus and shrimp. Opt for sweet potatoes instead of white potatoes and grilled meat instead of fried.

Snacks - It's okay, even recommended, to snack. But make sure you make it count by choosing high-fiber snacks to healthfully tide you over to your next meal. Choose almonds and raisins instead of chips, and fruit instead of sweets. Other smart snacks include yogurt, cottage cheese, apples and peanut butter, and veggies and hummus.

Senior nutrition: Overcoming obstacles to healthy eating

Let's face it. There's a reason why so many seniors have trouble eating nutritiously every day. It's not always easy! The following tips will help you "speak the language" of good nutrition and help you feel in control.

I can't shop or cook for myself

There are a number of possibilities, depending on your living situation, finances and needs:

- **Home delivery** – Many grocery stores have internet or phone delivery services.
- **Swap services** – Ask a friend, neighborhood teen or college student if they would be willing to shop for you.
- **Share your home** – If you live alone in a large home, consider having a housemate / companion who would be willing to do the grocery shopping and cooking.
- **Hire a homemaker** – Try to find someone who can do the shopping and meal preparation for you. Say "no" to eating alone

Eating with company can be as important as vitamins. Think about it: a social atmosphere stimulates your mind and helps you enjoy meals. When you enjoy mealtimes, you're

more likely to eat better. If you live alone, eating with company will take some strategizing, but the effort will pay off.

- **Make a date** to share lunch or dinners with grand children, nieces, nephews, friends and neighbors on a rotating basis.
- **Join in** by taking a class, volunteering, or going on an outing, all of which can lead to new friendships and dining buddies.
- **Adult day care centers** provide both companionship and nutritious meals for seniors who are isolated and lonely, or unable to prepare their own meals.
- **Senior meal programs** are a great way to meet others. Contact your local Senior Center, YMCA, congregation or high school and ask about senior meal programs.

Loss of appetite

First, check with your doctor to see if your loss of appetite could be due to medication you're taking, and whether the dosage can be adjusted or changed. Then let the experimenting begin. Try natural flavor enhancers such as olive oil, vinegar, garlic, onions, ginger, and spices.

Difficulty chewing

Make chewing easier by drinking smoothies made with fresh fruit, yogurt, and protein powder. Eat steamed veggies and soft food such as couscous, rice, and yogurt. Consult your dentist to make sure your dentures are properly fitted.

Dry mouth

Drink 8 -10 glasses of water each day. Period. Take a drink of water after each bite of food, add sauces and salsas to foods to moisten, avoid commercial mouthwash, and ask your doctor about artificial saliva products.

I don't like healthy food

If you were raised eating lots of meat and white bread, a new way of eating might sound off-putting. Don't beat yourself up. Eating healthfully is a new adventure. Start with small steps:

- First and foremost, commit to keeping an open mind.
- Try including a healthy fruit or veggie at every meal.
- Focus on how you feel after eating well – this will help foster new habits and tastes.

Stuck in a rut

Rekindle inspiration by perusing produce at a farmers market, reading a cooking magazine, buying a new-to-you spice, or chatting with friends about what they eat. By making variety a priority, you'll soon look forward to getting creative with healthy meals.

Meals on Wheels

Meals on Wheels provides nutritious meals to people who are homebound and/or disabled, or would otherwise be unable to maintain their dietary needs. The daily delivery generally consists of two meals: a nutritionally balanced hot meal to eat at lunch time and a dinner, consisting of a cold sandwich and milk along with varying side dishes. Generally, Meals on Wheels is available to those persons who are not able to provide for themselves, for whatever reason.

Senior nutrition: Tips for staying on track

Healthy eaters have their personal rules for keeping with the program. Here are some to keep in mind.

- **Ask for help** for your health's sake. Know when you need a hand to make shopping, cooking, and meal planning assistance.
- **Variety, variety, variety!** Try eating and cooking something new as soon as boredom strikes.
- **Make every meal "do-able."** Healthy eating needn't be a big production. Keep it simple and you'll stick with it. Stocking the pantry and fridge with wholesome choices will make "do-able" even easier.
- **Set the mealtime mood.** Set the table, light candles, play music, or eat outside or by a window when possible. Tidying yourself and your space will help you enjoy the moment.
- **Break habits.** If you eat watching TV, try eating while reading. If you eat at the counter, curl up to a movie and a slice of veggie pizza.

Related links for senior nutrition

Links

[Nutrition Guidelines for Senior Citizens](#) – Outlines changes in nutrition guidelines for seniors and suggests how to compensate for them. (Seniors Site)

[Eating Well as We Age](#) – Describes potential problems for seniors (such as no appetite or can't shop) and suggests solutions. (FDA)

[Senior Nutrition Services – Nutrition Survey](#) – A detailed survey to help seniors assess whether they are at nutritional risk. (Senior Nutrition)

[Meals on Wheels: Find a Local Program](#) – A searchable database that allows you to find a Meals on Wheels program in your area. (Meals on Wheels Association of America)

[Nutrition In Later Life](#) – Adapts the Healthy Eating Pyramid for seniors and includes special considerations for minimizing conditions such as arthritis, osteoporosis and high blood pressure. (Nutrition Australia)

[DASH Eating Plan](#) (PDF) – Provides specific eating recommendations for lowering blood pressure. (National Institutes of Health)

[A Seniors Guide to Good Nutrition](#) – Addresses specific eating-related problems along with tips on adapting to a special diet and preparing healthy meals. Written for vegetarians but many of the tips apply to all. (Vegetarian Resource Group)

[Food Safety for the Elderly](#) – Guidelines for safe food handling and preparation, including the minimum cooking temperature for all meats and eggs. (Clemson Extension)

[A Healthy Diet Is Linked to Better Cognitive Performance in Seniors](#) – Study results describe how proper nutrition enhances mental function in older adults. (Health and Age)

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