

Senior Nutrition & Creative Meal Sharing:

EATING WELL AS WE GROW OLDER



Numerous benefits of a healthy diet and proper nutrition

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, our relationship to food changes along with our bodies. When we're younger, we might grab fast food on the run and not think twice about it. In later life, however, eating well can be the key to staying mentally sharp, emotionally balanced and energetic, with a strong immune system and a positive outlook.

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Eating obstacles for seniors

Obstacles to proper diet, including emotional, lifestyle and physical factors, crop up as we age.

- **Lifestyle changes.** 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.
- **Activity level.** Seniors often cut back on activity for physical and medical reasons. Weight gain can result from the decrease in calories burned.
- **Metabolism.** Every year over the age of forty, our metabolism slows down. This means that even if you continue to eat the same amount and kinds of food 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 now.

- **Taste and appetite.** Your senses of taste and smell diminish, so you may be inclined to season your food more heavily than before—even though seniors need less salt than younger people. You may struggle with loss of appetite due to lifestyle, loneliness or a medical condition.
- **Health issues.** Physical ailments and prescription medications often negatively influence appetite. Talk to your doctor about overcoming side effects of medication or specific physical conditions.
- **Digestion.** Due to changes in your 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.
- **Emotional factors.** Emotional factors such as loneliness and depression can affect your diet. For some, feeling down leads to not eating and in others it may trigger overeating. If emotional problems are affecting your diet, it is important to talk to your doctor or a therapist.

Specific nutritional recommendations for seniors

Yes. Some of the factors described above, like changes in the digestive system, as well as health concerns like the increased risk of fragile bones, means that nutritional needs change as you age. Periodic review of your diet is always helpful, particularly if you have specific medical conditions. Your doctor can help you assess your nutritional needs and make suggestions for meeting them.

In general, some important guidelines for seniors include:

- reduce sodium (salt) to help prevent water retention and high blood pressure,
- monitor fat intake in order to maintain healthy cholesterol levels,
- consume more calcium and vitamin D for bone health,
- eat more fiber-rich foods to prevent constipation,
- cut back on sugar and on dry foods,
- make sure you get the recommended amount of important vitamins and minerals,
- increase your water intake, and
- participate in regular physical activity.

Additionally, because of lifestyle changes and a lower metabolism, it is important to consider *how* you eat as well as what you eat. To manage your weight and maintain optimum health, focus on eating efficiently. This means choosing foods that maximize nutritional value, not calories.

Whole, natural, fresh foods such as fruits and vegetables, whole grains, nuts, legumes, healthy sources of protein (poultry, fish, eggs, tofu) and dairy products that contain calcium constitute efficient eating. Highly processed and refined foods usually contain more calories and fewer nutrients, which is why people often still feel hungry after consuming them.

Creating a healthy, well-balanced diet

The first step to eating well is to learn what your body needs right now. Knowing what to eat, and how much or little, is key to achieving and maintaining nutritional health. Begin by familiarizing yourself with the general dietary guidelines and recommendations in [Healthy Eating: New Food Pyramids and Tips for a Healthy Diet](#). It may also be wise to consult your health care professional, who can evaluate your specific nutritional needs based on your medical history and current health profile, assess whether you need to follow a special diet, and recommend any necessary supplements.

Commit to making dietary choices that are:

- nutrient-dense: low in fat and sodium, high in fiber and calcium, with a moderate calorie content;
- flavorful, so you'll look forward to mealtimes;

- easy to chew, swallow and digest;
- simple to prepare;
- appealing to the eye as well as the palate.

Sound like a tall order? Eating well as you age is easier than you think. Here's how:

- **Focus on good carbs.** Opt for whole grain nutrition (brown rice, whole wheat bread, rolled oats, barley, millet), not refined "white" products, such as white bread, white rice, or products made with white flour.
- **Raw equals roughage!** Aim to eat at least one daily serving of your fruits and vegetables raw. This not only preserves their nutritional value, it's an easy way to eliminate constipation. Raw fruits and veggies are loaded with fiber, vitamins, minerals, and enzymes to aid digestion. Plus, there's no preparation involved. If you have difficulty biting or chewing, cut your apple or carrot into bite-sized pieces. Or try a green salad with grated zucchini.
- Steaming is the best way to cook vegetables; it preserves nutrients. Light sautéing is next. Boiling leeches nutrients—but you can use the leftover cooking water as soup stock!
- **Go lean on protein.** Fish, poultry, eggs, beans, peas, nuts and tofu all count as protein, so it's easy to vary your healthy protein choices. Try skinless turkey or chicken, or fish, baked, broiled, grilled, steamed or poached, and you'll savor the flavor while adding healthy, low-fat, low cholesterol nutrition to your diet. Go easy on red meats, which contain saturated fat, and on salty meats such as bacon or ham.
- **Bone up on calcium.** All dairy products are not created equal. Milk, cheese and yogurt retain their calcium content; cream cheese, cream and butter do not. As part of a healthy senior diet, choose fat-free or low fat dairy products. If you're lactose-intolerant, consider lactose-free and lower-lactose products, such as hard cheeses and yogurt. Or, a calcium supplement might be a better way for you to meet your calcium requirement.
- **Choose first-rate fats.** Get your "good" fats from oils such as olive oil and sunflower oil, avocados and avocado oil, nuts and seeds.
- **Keep it moist.** In addition to drinking enough water each day, aim to consume foods with a high water content. Staying properly hydrated flushes toxins from your body, relieves constipation, helps keep your joints flexible and your mind clear. High water content foods include melons, grapes, cucumbers, onions, apples, cabbage, and, of course, soup!

Loss of appetite

All of the foregoing might seem a moot point when you don't feel like eating. Check with your doctor to see if your loss of appetite could be due to medication you're taking, and if so, whether the dosage can be adjusted, or the medication change

If you're not hungry because most food tastes too bland, try these natural flavor enhancers, which are also good for you:

- olive oil;
- vinegars;
- garlic;
- onions;
- spices, including cinnamon, cloves, ginger, turmeric (which also aid digestion),

Change your ideas about what to eat for each meal:

- Try vegetable soup and a tuna sandwich on pumpernickel bread at breakfast, or an omelet, bran muffin and fresh fruit for dinner.
- Experiment with recipes created especially for one or two people.
- Combine leftover meats and vegetables into one-dish casseroles that can be easily re-heated for lunch or dinner, or frozen for later use.

I don't like eating alone. Are there places for seniors to share meals?

Yes. Consider implementing some of the following ideas for finding new dining companions:

- **Get out the Yellow Pages!** Contact your local Senior Center, YMCA, congregation or high school, and ask about senior meal programs.
- **Join in.** Taking a class, volunteering, and going on an outing can all lead to new friendships and dining buddies.
- **Invite friends or acquaintances to share potluck lunches and dinners** on a rotating basis. Not only will it add variety to your diet, it's a great way to meet new people and broaden your interests.
- **Adult day care centers** provide both companionship and nutritious meals for seniors who are isolated and lonely, or unable to prepare their own meals. See Helpguide's [Adult Day Care Centers: A Guide to Options and Selecting the Best Center for Your Needs](#) for more information.

What if I am unable to 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 delivery services. Find out if a grocery store in your area will accept phone or internet orders.
- **Swap services.** Ask a friend, neighborhood teen or college student if they would be willing to shop for you, in exchange for sharing a meal with friends at your house later in the week. This solves two needs at once: buying groceries, and providing dining companionship.
- **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 in exchange for rent.
- **Personal chef service.** These are professional cooks who will prepare nutritionally balanced meals, often for a week at a time (which you then freeze). They can usually accommodate special diets. Check your local telephone book, Senior Center or the Internet to find a personal chef in your area.
- **Hire a homemaker** who can do the shopping and meal preparation for you. For more information, see Helpguide's [Services to Help Seniors Remain At Home](#).
- **Meals on wheels.**

What is Meals on Wheels and how does it work?

Meals on Wheels is a world-wide concept with organizations everywhere, who provide 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. In an effort both to cover costs and to maintain the elders' sense of dignity, the program charge a small fee based on the individual's ability to pay.

Generally, Meals on Wheels is available to those persons who are not able to provide for themselves, for whatever reason. However, specific requirements for availability of service vary from region to region. [Meals on Wheels: Find a Local Program](#) is a searchable database that allows you to find a Meals on Wheels program in your area. For more information on the Meals on Wheels programs see [Frequently Asked Questions](#).

Mental tips for changing old habits and improving diet

It is important to recognize your bad habits and tackle obstacles to good nutrition. If you are finding it hard to change your ways, here are a few things to remember:

- **Start slow** – Rome wasn't built in one day, and neither is a healthy diet. If you find your diet is full of highly processed foods, sweets, sodium and caffeine, don't try to change everything overnight. Pick one thing to work on at a time and give yourself a pat on the back when you achieve your goal. Then, move on to your next goal.

- **Think positive** – Rather than thinking about breaking bad habits, think about establishing good ones. Don't just concentrate on eliminating processed foods from your diet, first add 3 servings of fresh fruits and vegetables to your daily menu or cook one meal from fresh whole foods everyday. You may have to work hard to banish old habits, but your first steps should be in a positive direction.
- **Reward yourself** – Celebrate the small victories by rewarding yourself with non-food related treats. If you have a favorite hobby or activity, consider using some of those things as incentives along your road to healthy eating. If you link some of your favorite things to good nutrition, eating well might just become a routine part of your life.
- **Create a picture of success** – Visualization can help you keep moving in the right direction. Spend some time everyday thinking about why a healthy diet is important to you. If you hope to have more energy, or lower your cholesterol, or have stronger bones, or stick around longer for your children or grandchildren, remind yourself of those things on a daily basis so that you remember why you are working so hard.

All of your hard work will pay off. Maintaining a healthy diet can yield numerous benefits, including increased energy, good mental health and mental abilities, resistance to disease, faster recovery from illness, accident, or surgery, better medication effectiveness, and improved management of chronic health problems. The overall result of an emphasis on good nutrition will be an improvement in your quality of life, mobility, and independence.

To Learn More: Related Helpguide Articles

[Cancer Prevention Diet](#): Guide to Foods that Help Prevent Cancer

[Cancer Prevention Diet and Nutrition](#): Guide to Foods that Help Prevent Cancer

[Preventing and Healing Heart Disease and Stroke](#): Nutrition and Diets

[Diabetes Diet and Nutrition](#): Guide to Controlling, Preventing, and Healing Diabetes

[Healthy Recipes](#): Guide to Fast, Delicious Meals

[Preventing and Healing Osteoporosis](#): Nutrition and Diets

Related links for senior nutrition

Additional online resources for senior nutrition

[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)

[Growing Older, Eating Better](#) – Offers information and suggests solutions for eating well on a budget and when cooking for one. (New York State Office for the Aging)

[Nutrition for Seniors](#) (commercial site) – Special nutritional needs for seniors, including supplements, medical conditions and cooking tips for one or two. (reprinted from University of Georgia, Cooperative Extension Service)

[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)

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)

Other resources that we used in writing this article

[Nutrition for Older Adults' Health: Water/Hydration](#) (PDF) – Focuses on the importance of water in senior health and ways to include high water content foods in your diet. (University of Georgia/Athens)

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