



There's no question about it: Our bodies change as we age. In turn, seniors have very different nutritional needs than teenagers, children, and even middle-aged adults. Age-related changes can affect how your body processes food, which influences your dietary needs and affects your appetite. Below you will find information that can guide you to making healthy choices in order to live a longer, healthier life.

Eating Healthy is Critical to Aging Well



Consuelo H. Wilkins, MD, MSCI

Maintaining a healthy diet throughout life is a critical component of healthy aging. Several physiologic changes occur with aging that impact nutrition including a decrease in lean body mass, changes in taste and smell, and changes in digestive function. In addition to the age-related changes, many older adults have chronic

medical conditions that require prescription medications, which can further impact appetite, metabolism, taste, and smell.

The dietary needs of older adults are often complicated by a decrease in physical activity, which results in the need for fewer calories. This requires that older adults consume foods with high nutritional value and without excess calories. Ideally, older adults should consume diets high in whole grains, fiber, vegetables, and low fat protein. Based on the Modified MyPyramid, older adults should consume the following (daily):

1. *Fruits* - 1 ½ to 2 ½ cups. Opt for deep-colored fruit such as berries and melon. Limit fruit juices because they have less nutritional value compared to whole fruits.
2. *Vegetables*- 2 to 3 ½ cups. Eat bright-colored vegetables such as broccoli, carrots and eggplant.
3. *Grains* - 5 to 10 ounces. At least half of the grains should be whole grains. Whole grains such as brown rice, enriched and fortified cereals, and 100% whole wheat bread are good options.

4. *Protein* - 5 to 7 ounces. Consider dry beans and nuts, fish, poultry, lean meat and eggs.
5. *Low and non-fat dairy products*- 3 cups. Yogurt and low-lactose milk are good options. If you prefer not to consume dairy products, non-dairy products such as soy or almond milk that is fortified with calcium and vitamin D are good alternatives.
6. *Limit intake of solid fats, oils, and foods high in sugars.* Saturated fats (found mostly in foods from animal sources) and trans fats (found in some margarine, shortening, and some processed foods) increase the risk of heart disease and should be consumed only in trace amounts.

Many older adults are concerned about the need for vitamins and minerals. This is an important concern because deficiencies in some vitamins and minerals can contribute to some age-related diseases. Additionally, the average American diet does not include adequate intake of a number of vitamins and minerals.

Unfortunately, there are no long-term clinical research studies that support recommending a multivitamin for older adults. Therefore, it is unclear whether a daily multivitamin would be beneficial for an average older adult in reasonably good health. Despite the lack of definitive data, many health professionals recommend a multivitamin for older adults because it is believed that the likely benefit outweighs the risk.

Additional supplements may be beneficial for some older adults, depending on other health conditions. Inadequate

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intake of calcium, vitamin D, and fiber often requires supplementation. Age-related physiologic changes also increase the likelihood of vitamin D and vitamin B12 deficiency so older adults may need to have blood levels checked to determine sufficiency.

In addition to the types of foods older adults should consume, it is important to consider other lifestyle and physical changes that may impact eating for older adults. Below are some additional considerations for nutrition in older adults.

Difficulty chewing. Tooth loss and changes in the oral cavity can lead to difficulty chewing for many older adults. Regular dental care is important to prevent tooth loss and maintain adequate chewing.

Preparing less food. Cooking for one or two people instead of larger group can be an adjustment for some older adults. Consider taking cooking classes or using recipes that allow leftovers to be modified to create additional meals. To minimize food waste, choose frozen vegetables and fruits that can be resealed for multiple uses.

Eating on a budget. Many older adults choose single serving processed foods such as ‘TV dinners’ because they

may be cheaper and have a longer storage life. These foods are often high in sodium (which is bad for many chronic health conditions) and low in nutritional value. With some planning, healthy and low-cost meals can be easily prepared. Buying foods in bulk can substantially reduce the costs. Foods such as whole-wheat pasta, oatmeal, nuts, and dry beans can be used in many meals and can be stored for long periods.

Because the nutritional needs of older adults varies significantly due to physical activity level, optimal body weight, and health conditions, including deficiencies in vitamin B12 and vitamin D, it is important to discuss individual dietary needs with a health professional.

Regardless of age and health conditions, a nutritious diet remains important to aging well. Small changes in diet can make a huge difference in overall health and well being.



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Healthy Eating After 50

“I have trouble chewing.” “Food just doesn’t taste the same anymore.” “I can’t get out to go shopping.” “It’s too much trouble to cook for one person.” “I’m just not that hungry.”

Sound familiar? These are a few common reasons some older people don’t eat healthy meals. But, making healthy food choices is a smart thing to do—no matter how old you are!

Here are some tips to get you started:

- Eat many different colors and types of vegetables and fruits.
- Make sure at least half of your grains are whole grains.
- Eat only small amounts of solid fats, oils, and foods high in sugars. Limit saturated fat (found mostly in foods that come from animals) or *trans* fats (found in foods like some margarines, shortening, cookies, and crackers).

Two Plans for Healthy Eating

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) suggest two eating plans. Eating a variety of foods from each food group in either plan will help you get the nutrients you need.

One plan is called the USDA Food Guide (also known as MyPyramid). It suggests that people 50 or older choose healthy foods every day from the following:

Fruits—1-1/2 to 2-1/2 cups

What is the same as 1/2 cup of cut-up fruit? One medium whole fruit or ¼ cup of dried fruit

Vegetables—2 to 3-1/2 cups

What is the same as a cup of cut-up vegetables? Two cups of uncooked leafy vegetable

Grains—5 to 10 ounces

What is the same as an ounce of grains? One roll, a small muffin, a slice of bread, 1 cup of flaked, ready-to-eat cereal, or ½ cup of cooked rice, pasta, or cereal

Meat/beans—5 to 7 ounces

What is the same as an ounce of meat, fish, or poultry? One egg, ¼ cup of cooked beans or tofu, ½ ounce of nuts or seeds, or 1 tablespoon of peanut butter

Milk—3 cups of fat-free or low-fat milk

What is the same as 1 cup of milk? One cup of yogurt or 1-1/2 to 2 ounces of cheese. One cup of cottage cheese is the same as ½ cup of milk.

Your doctor may have suggested that you follow a certain diet because you have a health problem like heart disease or diabetes. Or, you might have been told to avoid eating certain foods because they can change how well your medicines work. Talk to your doctor or a registered dietitian about foods you can eat instead.

Here’s a tip: Stay away from “empty calories.” These are foods and drinks with a lot of calories but not many nutrients—for example, chips, cookies, sodas, and alcohol.

The second eating plan is called the DASH Eating Plan. DASH stands for Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension. Following this plan will help you lower your blood pressure. (See the resources at the end of this article for more information on DASH.)

How Much Should I Eat?

How much you should eat depends on how active you are. If you eat more calories than your body uses, you gain weight.

What are calories? *Calories* are a way to count how much energy is in food. You use the energy you get from food to do the things you need to do each day.

Just counting calories is not enough for making healthy choices. For example, a medium banana, 1 cup of flaked cereal, 2-1/2 cups of cooked spinach, 1 tablespoon of peanut butter, or 1 cup of 1% milk—all have roughly the same number of calories. But, the foods are different in many ways. Some have more of the nutrients you might need than others do. Milk gives you more calcium than a banana, and peanut butter gives you more protein than cereal. And a banana is likely to make you feel fuller than a tablespoon of peanut butter.

Here’s a tip: In the USDA Food Guide, eating the smallest amount suggested for each food group gives you about 1,600 calories. The largest amount has 2,800 calories.

How many calories do people over age 50 need each day?

A woman:

who is not physically active needs about 1,600 calories

who is somewhat active needs about 1,800 calories

who has an active lifestyle needs about 2,000-2,200 calories

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A man:

who is not physically active needs about 2,000 calories

who is somewhat active needs about 2,200-2,400 calories

who has an active lifestyle needs about 2,400-2,800 calories

Here's a tip: Get at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity on most, if not all days of the week.

What about Fiber?

Fiber is found in foods from plants—fruits, vegetables, beans, nuts, seeds, and whole grains. Eating more fiber might prevent stomach or intestine problems, like constipation. It might also help lower cholesterol, as well as blood sugar.

It is better to get fiber from food than dietary supplements. Start adding more fiber slowly. That will help avoid unwanted gas. Here are some tips for adding fiber:

- Eat cooked dry beans, peas, and lentils often.
- Leave skins on your fruit and vegetables if possible.
- Choose whole fruit over fruit juice.
- Eat whole-grain breads and cereals.

Drink plenty of liquids to help fiber move through your intestines.

Should I Cut Back on Salt?

The usual way people get sodium is by eating salt. The body needs sodium, but too much can make blood pressure go up in some people. Most fresh food contains some sodium. Salt is added to many canned and prepared foods.

People tend to eat more salt than they need. If you are over age 50, about 2/3 of a teaspoon of table salt--1500 milligrams (mg) of sodium--is all you need each day. That includes all the sodium in your food and drink, not just the salt you add when cooking or eating. If your doctor tells you to use less salt, ask about a salt substitute. Some contain sodium. Also, don't add salt during cooking or at the table, and avoid salty snacks and processed foods. Look for the word sodium, not salt, on the Nutrition Facts panel. Choose foods labeled "low-sodium." Often, the amount of sodium in the same kind of food can vary greatly between brands.

Here's a tip: Spices, herbs, and lemon juice can add flavor to your food, so you won't miss the salt.

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Can I Afford to Eat Right?

If your budget is limited, it might take some thought and planning to be able to pay for the foods you should eat. Here are some suggestions. First, buy only the foods you need. A shopping list will help with that. Before shopping, plan your meals, and check your supply of staples like flour and cereal. Make sure you have some canned or frozen foods in case you do not feel like cooking or cannot go out. Powdered, canned, or ultra-pasteurized milk in a shelf carton can be stored easily.

Think about how much of a food you will use. A large size may be cheaper per unit, but it is only a bargain if you use all of it. Try to share large packages of food with a friend. Frozen vegetables in bags save money because you can use small amounts and keep the rest frozen. If a package of meat or fresh produce is too large, ask a store employee to repackage it in a smaller size.

Here are other ways to keep your food costs down:

- Plain (generic) labels or store brands often cost less than name brands.
- Plan your meals around food that is on sale.
- Prepare more of the foods you enjoy, and quickly refrigerate the leftovers to eat in a day or two.
- Divide leftovers into small servings, label and date, and freeze to use within a few months.

Food stamps from the Federal Government help people with low incomes buy groceries. You may be able to enjoy free or low-cost meals for older people at a community center, church, or school. This is a chance to eat good food and to be with other people. Home-delivered meals are available for people who are homebound. To learn more about these programs contact the Eldercare Locator listed under *For More Information* to find your local Area Agency on Aging.

For more information here are some helpful resources.

To learn about the DASH diet:

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

Box 30105
Bethesda, MD 20824-0105
1-301-592-8573
1-240-629-3255 (TTY)
www.nhlbi.nih.gov

To learn more about nutrition, meal programs, or help with shopping:

Eldercare Locator

1-800-677-1116 (toll-free)
www.eldercare.gov