

# Eating Healthy as You Age

Easter H. Tucker  
Associate Professor –  
Nutrition

Katie Cobb  
County Extension Agent -  
Family and Consumer  
Sciences

## Introduction

Your body changes as you age, but those changes don't have to lead to health problems or limit your independence, energy or enthusiasm for the activities you enjoy. By making healthy lifestyle choices, you can prevent certain health problems and keep chronic conditions from getting worse.

Combined with physical activity, eating nutritious foods in the right amounts can help keep you healthy. Exercise recommendations for increasing physical activity as you age can be obtained through the "Fit in 10" program or from your local county agent. Many illnesses—such as heart disease, obesity, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes and osteoporosis—can be prevented or controlled with dietary changes and exercise.



The Dietary Guidelines for Americans stress the importance of fruit and vegetable consumption as part of a healthy diet, along with whole grains and fat-free or low-fat milk products.



Diets relatively high in fruit and vegetables are associated with lower risks of many chronic diseases. Older Americans (those 60 and older) are one of the fastest growing segments of the population and are at a higher risk than younger individuals for some chronic diseases.

Nutrition is one of the major determinants of successful aging, defined as the ability to maintain three key behaviors: low risk of disease and disease-related disability, high mental and physical function and active engagement in life. Food is not only critical to your physiological well-being but also contributes to your social, cultural and psychological quality of life. Research has shown that behaviors such as eating a healthy diet and being physically active are more influential than genetic factors in helping you avoid the deterioration associated with aging.

Your nutritional needs are pretty much the same at 40, 50, 60 and beyond as they were when you were younger, but with minor variations.

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## Taste and Appetite

It is not uncommon to feel less hungry when you get older. Sometimes your medications can affect your appetite and you don't feel as hungry. If this occurs, try eating smaller, more frequent meals throughout the day. If you find it difficult to eat an entire meal in one sitting, eat what you can and put the rest in the refrigerator for a snack later. If you have a problem maintaining weight, consider meal replacement formulas.

Have you noticed that some foods don't taste as good as they once did to you? You are not alone! Our senses of taste and smell decrease as we age. Trying new seasonings, such as herbs and spices, new foods and new recipes may help you enjoy your food more.



Research has shown that retirement home residents given flavor-enhanced foods eat more foods. So go ahead and experiment with those herbs and spices.

## Experiencing Irregularity?

Since constipation may affect up to 20 percent of people over 65 years of age, you should choose to eat foods rich in dietary fiber. Fiber is found in fruits, vegetables, breads, cereals, beans and other grains, such as rice. Be sure to make those grains whole grains.

There are two kinds of fiber—soluble and insoluble. Both soluble and insoluble fiber will help to bulk up the stool and make it easier to pass. Soluble fiber has an added benefit in that it can help lower your bad cholesterol. Oatmeal and most fruits are great sources of soluble fiber.

Some other suggestions you might find helpful:

- Eat dried fruits such as figs and prunes or drink prune juice.
- Don't forget the fluids; drink at least eight to ten glasses each day, especially water.

- Limit greasy or fatty foods such as oils and margarine, fried foods, high fat sweets and meats.
- Limit use of antacids.
- Exercise on a regular basis.

## Blood Pressure

A reduced-sodium diet is recommended for people with high blood pressure. If you are watching your intake, try using seasonings other than salt to make your food taste better.



Reduce or eliminate highly processed foods such as chips, TV dinners, canned soups, lunch meats, canned vegetables, etc., because these foods often contain a lot of sodium. If you use canned vegetables, be sure to rinse them in water to wash off some of the sodium before preparing them.

## Cholesterol

Cholesterol is found in meat, poultry, shellfish, egg yolks and whole- and reduced-fat milk and dairy products. Foods from plants, such as fruits, vegetables, grains, nuts and seeds, do not contain cholesterol. A diet high in cholesterol can raise cholesterol levels in your body.

Saturated fat and trans fat also raise cholesterol levels. Saturated fat is found mostly in foods from animals and some plants. Foods from animals include meat, butter, cream, lard and dairy products made from whole and 2 percent milk. Foods from plants that contain saturated fat include coconut, coconut oil, palm oil, palm kernel oil and coconut oil. Trans fat is mainly found in highly processed foods, some margarines and shortening.

Remember, to help lower your cholesterol, eat plenty of fruits, vegetables and whole-grain foods every day. Choose lean meats and poultry, and low-fat or fat-free dairy products when selecting foods. Use healthy vegetable oils such as canola, sunflower or olive oil most of the

time, and limit commercially fried foods and highly processed foods.

## Glucose

Diabetes is a medical condition that affects the way the body uses glucose. Glucose is commonly known as blood sugar. Carbohydrates break down to glucose when they are digested. Eating small, balanced meals throughout the day that consist of fiber-rich carbohydrates, fats and proteins can help control your blood sugar. Talk with your doctor or dietitian for specific meal plans.

## Nutrient Needs

### Calcium and Vitamin D

Keeping your bones healthy and strong is very important as you grow older. You need to give your bones the right nutrients so they will stay strong. Adults 50 and older need 1,200 mg of calcium and 800-1,000 IU of vitamin D daily. Milk and cheese are the best sources for calcium. However, some green leafy vegetables also contain calcium. You may need a calcium supplement if you do not eat two to three servings of dairy products each day.

Vitamin D helps the body absorb and use the calcium from the foods you eat. You can get vitamin D from fortified foods such as milk or from fatty fish like salmon. Your body can also make vitamin D during exposure to sunlight. Fifteen to 20 minutes of mid-day sun on your face and hands without sunscreen each day is enough for the body to make a day's supply of vitamin D if your skin is light in color. Vitamin D will not get made if you have sunscreen on.

Older adults and people with dark skin need more sun exposure to make enough vitamin D. Many nutrition experts recommend older people take a vitamin D supplement to make sure they get enough. Talk to your doctor before taking any dietary supplements.

### Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 is very important for nerve function and preventing some forms of anemia.

Aging can also affect your ability to absorb vitamin B12. After age 50, eat foods fortified with B12 or take a balanced multivitamin and mineral supplement containing B12. Foods with good sources of vitamin B12 include meat, eggs and dairy products. Doctors may recommend a vitamin B12 shot for older adults who may not be able to absorb enough vitamin B12 from their food.

## Protein

Protein is one of the basic nutrients that our bodies need. It is made of building blocks called amino acids. Amino acids build protein that our bodies use in many different ways. The main function of protein is to maintain and repair our body tissues. Protein also helps our bodies by making hemoglobin (it takes oxygen to our cells), antibodies (which help us fight off infections and diseases), and enzymes and hormones (which regulate our body functions). Our bodies use protein to make muscle tissue.

Milk, eggs and meat products (including poultry) are great sources of protein. Try to get protein from low-fat animal sources and/or a wide variety of plant foods. Plant foods (such as grains, dry beans and peas and vegetables) provide some protein but not a complete protein. For complete protein consumption, combine plant foods such as grains and legumes (dry beans, peas, lentils and peanuts) like rice and beans, or whole-wheat bread with peanut butter or combine plant foods with small amounts of animal protein sources.

Be mindful not to overload your body with too much protein as it can be hard on the kidneys, especially as you get older.

## Water

Water is an essential nutrient for survival—more important than even food. Water helps to transport nutrients to cells, removes wastes from the cells and helps regulate body temperature. Another important function of water is to cool our bodies. When the body gets hot, it sweats. As sweat evaporates, the



body is cooled. If the sweat is not replaced by drinking more fluids, the body's water balance is upset and your body may overheat. You can get water not only by drinking water and other fluids but by eating fruits and vegetables which contain a lot of water.

How much water do you need? It depends on how active you are and the climate. A physically active adult living in a moderate climate should consume eight to ten glasses of water a day. Active adults and those living in a warm climate (or just summer in Arkansas) should consume more. Older adults may have a diminished thirst sensation and should make an effort to drink water throughout the day.

## Nutrition Assistance Programs

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers community-based food and nutrition assistance programs for older adults to increase food security and reduce hunger by providing both food and nutrition education. The programs offered by the USDA include the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the Senior Farmers

Market Nutrition Program, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, the Emergency Food Assistance Program and the Commodity Supplemental Program. Each of these programs has its own guidelines, so check with your local Department of Human Services for more information. Please keep in mind; these programs are there if you need them.

## References

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**EASTER H. TUCKER** is associate professor - nutrition with the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture in Little Rock and **KATIE COBB** is county Extension agent - family and consumer sciences for White County in Searcy.

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