



NUTRITION AND OLDER ADULTS

Why is nutrition important for older adults?

Healthy eating is just as important for seniors as it is for young adults, adolescents and children. While the emphasis is on "healthy" (being healthy and choosing healthy foods), it is also important to make eating an enjoyable and sociable activity that you can look forward to. Studies on the nutritional status of the Australian population indicate that a number of older people have poor diets, and do not eat enough fibre, or enough of some vitamins and minerals. When the diet does not provide the body with the nutrients it needs, health can suffer.

To have a healthy lifestyle, a good diet should be combined with regular, moderate exercise. This can include activities such as walking, swimming or dancing. Exercise helps you control your appetite and hence your weight, strengthens your heart, blood vessels, lungs and bones, and helps you sleep.

Ageing can be associated with changes in lifestyle that affect the types of foods eaten. Loneliness, boredom, depression and worrying about the future can lead some to neglect their diets. Unfortunately this can result in skipping meals, and generally poor eating habits. It is important to address these factors and seek ways to improve diet, even if this means asking for help from friends, family or other community services. You can find out about the services available in your community by asking your doctor, or by contacting your local community health centre, council, or hospital.

The following suggestions can also help you to maintain good health into older age.

Use less Salt

Table salt is also known as sodium chloride. All individuals require a certain amount of sodium chloride, though we actually get enough from the salt that occurs naturally in foods such as meat, eggs, milk and vegetables. Most of the salt in the Australian diet comes from the salt added to foods by food manufacturers and caterers. A high salt diet increases the risk of developing high blood pressure, which is common in Australia. In fact, approximately half of the Australian population over the age of 60 suffers from high blood pressure. Herbs and spices can be used to flavour foods instead of adding salt.

Like all Australians, older people should restrict their use of highly salted foods such as corned beef, bacon and luncheon meats and snack foods such as potato chips. It is important to make the effort to buy reduced-salt and low-salt manufactured foods.

Drink more water

It is essential to drink water in order to keep the body hydrated. However, as you age, you may not feel thirsty as often, even when your body is in need of fluid. Remember to take regular drinks, at least six times a day. You don't need to only drink plain water – tea, coffee, mineral water, soda water, fruit juice and milk can count towards your fluid intake during the day.

Limit your intake of high fat foods

Pies, pastries, fried and battered foods, and snack foods such as chips and chocolate are all high in fat and should only be eaten occasionally. If you wish to eat dessert, why not try fruit, yoghurt, custard or ice cream (there are plenty of reduced-fat and low-fat varieties available. Rice, with some dried fruit added plus a little bit of sugar with milk always makes an easy and delicious dessert!

Be careful with alcohol

Alcohol does not provide protective nutrients such as vitamins and minerals, but it does provide energy in the form of kilojoules or calories. This adds to your total energy intake for the day. Whilst consuming small amounts of alcohol with a meal may help you enjoy the meal, alcohol should not replace intake of actual foods that provide your body with essential nutrients.

Vitamins

A poor diet cannot be turned into a good diet just by adding vitamin supplements. If you are convalescing or unable to eat well, there are a number of ways to make sure that your diet stays healthy and nutritious. A milk egg flip, an omelette, a glass of fresh fruit juice or a bowl of vegetable soup are all easily digested, nutritious foods.

If you do use a vitamin supplement, choose a low dose multivitamin supplement, as large doses of vitamins can be dangerous.

Special Considerations for the Older Adult

Fragile Bones

Osteoporosis, a decrease in the mineral content of the bones, commonly affects older people, especially women after menopause. When osteoporosis is present, calcium is withdrawn from the bones; the bones therefore become fragile and the risk of fractures increases. Fractures of the hip, leg and wrist are common amongst the elderly.

Once calcium is lost from the bones, it is difficult to replace. There are, however, ways that you can protect yourself against the progression of the disease, and these include Exercise, diet and sufficient sunshine. Calcium, fluoride and vitamin D are the key nutrients involved.

Foods that are high in calcium are milk (whole or skim) and milk products such as yoghurt and cheese. Fish with soft, edible bones such as canned salmon or sardines are also good sources of calcium.

Diets which do not include milk and cheese are almost certain to contain much less than the recommended amount of calcium (1000 mg daily for women over 54 years, and 800 mg for men). For those who need to reduce their fat intake, fat modified milks such as skimmer or "Take Care", low-fat yoghurt and skim milk cheeses are suitable alternative sources of calcium. For those who do not eat sufficient dairy, calcium supplement may be necessary, but make sure to check with your doctor or dietitian before supplementation commences.

Sunshine helps our bodies to make vitamin D, the vitamin that helps calcium enter the bones. You only need to spend a short period of time in the sun each day, to help your body make the vitamin D that it needs.

If you have skin cancers or you have been advised against spending time in the sun, or if you are confined indoors, make sure that you include foods that contain vitamin D in your diet. These foods include egg yolk, butter, table margarine, whole milk, yoghurt, cheese, malted milk, lamb's fry, liver, tuna, sardines and pilchards. You should also ask your doctor, dietitian or pharmacist about taking a safe vitamin D supplement (the recommended intake is 5µg). Remember, you can have 'too much of a good thing', so don't take more than the prescribed dose.

Arthritis

Eating a variety of healthy foods is the best dietary recommendation for those with arthritis, and this is also important to help maintain a healthy weight. Being overweight can aggravate pain in weight-bearing joints. Recent research has suggested that fish oils may have some benefit in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis. Try and eat fish at least once a week but don't use fish oil supplements to treat arthritis unless they are prescribed by your doctor.

High Blood Pressure

Many Australian adults suffer from high blood pressure. The risk of developing high blood pressure increases with age, and people who suffer from this condition are more likely to sustain a stroke or develop heart disease.

The high level of salt in the Australian diet is believed to increase people's risk of developing high blood pressure, though being overweight and not engaging in exercise also contribute to this risk. Many people who have high blood pressure may have already been advised to avoid salt at the table and in cooking, and to avoid highly salted foods. In general, Australians are being advised to eat less salt in the hope that this will reduce the number of people that develop high blood pressure in our society.

Remember to taste your food before you add salt to it, and try using other flavourings instead of salt, such as lemon juice, herbs and spices, tomato, onion or garlic. Salt is not fattening, and does not add kilojoules or calories to the diet. However, salt can be retained in the body with extra fluid, and this may cause body weight to increase for some people.

Constipation

To prevent constipation it is important to include foods in your diet that have a high fibre content. Wholegrain cereals, wholemeal bread, fruit, dried fruit, dried peas, beans and lentils are excellent sources of fibre.

Healthy Teeth and Gums

Having healthy teeth and gums is very important, because teeth and gums are necessary to help you enjoy your food. Loss of teeth, sore gums and dentures that do not fit properly, make it difficult to chew food, and this might mean that less food is eaten. It is important to have your teeth checked regularly and that those who have dentures make sure that they are adjusted correctly. Remember to visit your dentist whenever you are having difficulty with your teeth, gums or dentures.

Shopping for Food

If you are living on your own and are not always able to make it to the supermarket, it is a good idea to have your cupboard well-stocked with foods that can keep for a while without going stale. Such foods may include:

- Canned fruit and canned and UHT fruit juice
- Canned vegetables
- Baked beans and bean mixes
- Rice, spaghetti, macaroni, flour, rolled oats and breakfast cereals
- Canned, powdered and UHT milk and custard
- Canned meat and fish
- Canned soups
- Sauces (such as soy sauce) and pastes (such as peanut paste)
- Vegetable oil

Having a healthy diet and making sure that you keep active will help you to maintain your health as you age. Remember to eat well, keep moving, and call on friends and family whenever you need help along the way.