

# Healthful Eating for Older Adults

## AGING AND NUTRITIONAL HEALTH

Changes in health and lifestyle can affect nutrition needs as we age.

- **Physical changes** can affect interest in food or ability to eat well. These include vision, dental, or taste problems.
- **Lifestyle changes** such as losing a spouse can affect eating habits.
- To help prevent or treat **chronic diseases**, we may need to change the kinds of foods that we eat.

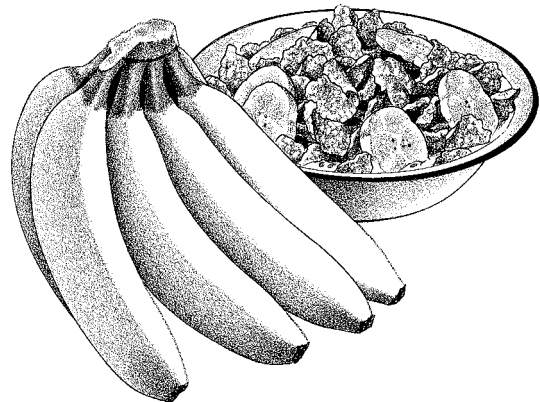
Here is some good news: We can plan meals and snacks to overcome these challenges, improve health, and maintain our quality of life.

## GOALS FOR GOOD HEALTH

### Get the right amount of calories for a healthy weight.

As we age, our metabolism slows down. We burn fewer calories when we breathe, digest food, and handle other body functions. We also may be less physically active. As a result, we may need fewer calories to maintain a healthy weight.

It's best to consume the right amount of calories for good health. *Too many calories* can lead to obesity. This raises the risk for high blood pressure, diabetes, heart attack, and stroke. *Too few calories* can lead to weight loss and feeling weak.



**Eat a balanced diet that's rich in nutrients.**

Although we need fewer calories, we still need plenty of vitamins and minerals. To meet nutrient needs on fewer calories, older adults should consume a variety of *nutrient-dense* foods.

*Nutrient-dense* foods and beverages are rich in vitamins and minerals. They are also low or moderate in calories. Examples are fruits, vegetables, juices, lean meats, low-fat dairy products, whole grain breads, and fortified cereals.

**Get enough fiber in foods.**

Dietary fiber can help control blood cholesterol and blood sugar. It can also help keep the bowels regular. Aim for 20 to 35 grams of fiber each day. Foods with fiber include fruits, vegetables, cooked dry beans, lentils, brown rice, and whole grain cereals and breads.

**Drink enough fluids.**

Every day, our bodies lose fluids. Replace these fluids to prevent dehydration, keep the body working smoothly, and prevent constipation.

Most people need at least 6 to 8 cups of fluids each day. Fluids can include water, juice, milk, soups, and decaffeinated coffee or tea.

**Prevent or control chronic diseases.**

Many chronic diseases are related to poor eating habits acquired earlier in life. However, good nutrition in the later years can help lessen the effects of these diseases, and improve the quality of life. Contact a health care provider for specific advice.

***Heart disease: Follow a heart-healthy diet.***

- Limit foods that are high in saturated fat. These include eggs, high-fat meats, butter, lard, and palm oil.
- Eat foods that are low in *trans* fat. Use food labels as a guide.
- Use olive, safflower, canola, or soybean oils.
- Try lean meats and low-fat milk.
- Eat fish at least 1 or 2 times per week.
- Remove skin from chicken and other poultry.
- Avoid fried foods.
- Eat fruits, vegetables, and cooked dry beans and lentils.

**High blood pressure:** Control sodium intake and weight.

- Choose foods with less salt or sodium. Use food labels as a guide.
- Include fruits, vegetables, and low-fat dairy products.
- Maintain a healthy weight.

**Diabetes:** Control blood sugar and weight.

- Follow a meal plan from a health care provider.
- Use insulin or other medicines.
- Stay physically active, if possible.
- Maintain a healthy weight.

**Osteoporosis:** Keep bones healthy with calcium and vitamin D.

- Consume low-fat milk, cheese, and yogurt as calcium sources.
- Drink milk fortified with vitamin D.
- Ask a health care provider if supplements are needed.
- Stay physically active, if possible.

**Address problems that make meals hard to eat.**

**Poor appetite**

- Eat small, frequent meals.
- Drink beverages with calories and nutrients, such as milk, soup, or hot chocolate. Ask a health care provider if supplemental drinks are needed.
- Add variety and color to meals.
- Perk up flavors with herbs or spices.
- Marinate meats in fruit juice or salad dressing to add flavor.
- Create a positive setting for meals. Some ideas are tablecloths, pleasant lights, and appealing music.

**Problems with chewing foods**

- Drink water or fluids with meals.
- Eat foods that are soft and easy to chew.
  - ✓ Tender cuts of meat
  - ✓ Soft foods that are good sources of protein (eggs, low-fat milk, cheese, or yogurt)
  - ✓ Soft fresh fruits and vegetables
  - ✓ Fruits canned in water or juice
  - ✓ Cooked vegetables
  - ✓ Cooked cereals, rice, or pasta
  - ✓ Mashed or pureed food

**Food allergies**

- Carefully read the ingredients on food labels to avoid foods or additives that trigger allergies.

**Lactose intolerance** (*inability to digest the sugar found in milk*)

- Try lactose-free milk products or lactase pills that digest lactose.
- Some dairy foods such as cheese or yogurt may be easier to digest.

**Stay physically active.**

Physical activity can be part of a healthy lifestyle at any age. It can help:

- Burn calories to help manage weight.
- Maintain strong bones and muscles.
- Prevent heart disease and diabetes.
- Improve the way that the heart and lungs work.
- Increase strength and flexibility.
- Add to a feeling of well-being.
- Maintain overall quality of life.

Most older adults can take part in physical activity. Examples are walking, gardening, swimming, or dancing. Climbing stairs, chair exercises, and wheelchair exercises also count.

**Know your medications.**

Some medicines react with foods in the diet. Read the labels carefully.

**ASK YOUR HEALTH CARE PROVIDER**

- Find out how many calories you need, and whether you need to follow a special diet.
- Tell the doctor and pharmacist about all medicines that you take. This includes over-the-counter and prescription drugs. Ask whether any of these medicines might react with the foods in your diet.
- Get advice before starting a new exercise.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

U.S. Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Library

Website: [www.nutrition.gov](http://www.nutrition.gov) (In the **Nutrition Information About...** box, click on **Elderly**).