EAT WELL TO AGE WELL: NUTRITION AND OLDER ADULTS

As you get older, it’s important to continue choosing healthy foods and enjoying eating as a social activity that you can look forward to.

However as we get older our lifestyles and appetite can change and this can affect the types and amounts of foods we eat. A decreasing appetite or reduced ability to buy and prepare healthy foods can mean that many older people don’t get enough essential vitamins, mineral and fibre, and this can contribute to general unwellness or exacerbate some chronic illness.

It is important to use every meal and snack as an opportunity for maximum nutrition and find ways to improve your diet to fit with your personal tastes, ability and lifestyle, even if this means asking for help from friends, family or other community services.

Ask your doctor, health centre or hospital, or local council for available support services in your community, or visit www.seniors.gov.au

The following suggestions can also help you to maintain healthy eating habits as you get older.

**Use less salt**

Everyone requires a certain amount of salt, but too much can increase the risk of high blood pressure and heart disease.

Salt occurs naturally in many foods such as meat, eggs, milk and vegetables, but much of the salt in the Australian diet comes from the salt added to foods by manufacturers or when adding salt yourself.

Older adults should restrict their intake of high salt foods such as cured meats (including ham, corned beef, bacon and luncheon meats), snack foods (such as potato chips and savoury pastries) and sauces (such as soy sauce). Choose reduced salt varieties of foods when shopping, and flavour foods with herbs and spices instead of adding salt.
Drink more water

Water supports provides many vital functions in body, including hydration, digestion and blood volume, however as you age you may not feel thirsty as often, even when your body needs fluid.

Aim to drink at least six times a day, and more in warmer weather or if you’re exercising. Tea, coffee, mineral water, soda water and reduced fat milk can all count towards your fluid intake during the day, but water is always best!

Limit your intake of high fat foods

Pies, pastries, fried and battered foods, and discretionary items such as chips and chocolate are all high in fat and should only be eaten very occasionally.

If you’re in the habit of having desserts, aim to make it partly nutritious and avoid high sugar or high fat foods. Try fresh fruits with reduced fat yoghurt for sweetness and flavour, and choose wholegrain and/or oat-based options for crumbles or cakes.

Be careful with alcohol

Alcohol does not provide any essential nutrients but it is full of kilojoules, which can add up.

Current Australian guidelines¹ state that:

- healthy men and women should consume **no more than two standard drinks on any given day** to reduce the risk of alcohol related disease
- and **no more than four standard drinks on any occasion**, to reduce the risk of alcohol related injury on that occasion.

Vitamins and minerals

Vitamin and minerals can play a role for diagnosed deficiencies, which are not uncommon in older people as they may eat less, or have digestions issues due to illness or medication.

But for otherwise healthy people, vitamins and minerals cannot compensate for a poor diet, and can also be expensive.

Enjoy a variety of foods from the core foods groups to get as many nutrients from foods as possible, or see an Accredited Practising Dietitian or your GP to discuss your specific nutritional needs.

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Special considerations for older adults

Bone health

Osteoporosis is characterised by a decrease in bone density which increases the risk of fractures. It commonly affects older people, especially women after menopause. Fractures of the hip, leg and wrist are common amongst the elderly.

Once calcium is lost from the bones it is difficult to replace, but there are ways to protect yourself against the progression of the disease, including getting enough calcium, fluoride and vitamin D, as well as exercise.

Milk and milk products such as yoghurt and cheese are high in calcium, and fish with soft, edible bones, such as canned salmon or sardines, are also good sources of calcium. The Australian Dietary Guidelines\(^2\) recommend that women over 51 should consume four serves of dairy per day, while men aged 50–70 should consume two and a half, and men over 70 should have three and a half serves of dairy per day.

Diets that don’t include dairy products are almost certain to contain much less calcium than the recommended amount, so we recommended you see an Accredited Practising Dietitian to identify foods, drinks or supplements to meet your nutritional requirements.

Vitamin D is also essential in helping to build and maintain healthy bones. The best source of vitamin D is the sun, but you only need to spend a short period of time in the sunshine each day, to help your body get the vitamin D that it needs.

This can vary from 10 to 30 minutes a day depending on your skin type, your location in Australia and the time of year. Visit http://www.sunsmart.com.au/vitamin_d/how_much_sun_is_enough to find out how much sun is right for you, or consult with your GP or health professional.

People who have been advised to avoid the sun (such as those with previous skin cancers) or those who are unable to get outside, can get some vitamin D from foods such as egg yolk, butter, table margarine, whole milk, yoghurt, cheese, malted milk, lamb's fry, liver, tuna, sardines and pilchards or a supplement. Talk to your GP or an Accredited Practising Dietitian to discuss your personal needs and options.

Finally, weight-bearing exercise such as walking or light weights also supports bone health. Talk to your GP or a health professional to identify local exercise opportunities that are right for you.

**Arthritis**

Eating a variety of healthy foods is the best dietary recommendation for those with arthritis, and to help maintain a healthy weight. Being overweight can aggravate pain in weight-bearing joints such as hips, knees and ankles.

Fish oils may have some benefit for rheumatoid arthritis, so eat fish at least twice a week, or see your GP or an Accredited Practising Dietitian to discuss how your diet could help manage or alleviate discomfort from arthritis.

**Constipation**

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

Fibre and water work well together so make sure you consume enough fluids throughout the day to help prevent and alleviate constipation.

**Healthy teeth and gums**

Maintaining healthy teeth and gums is essential to help you enjoy eating, and to eat well.

Missing teeth, sore gums and dentures that don’t fit properly can all make it difficult to chew food, which might mean that you change what and how much you eat.

Have your teeth checked regularly and ensure your dentures are adjusted correctly so that you can continue to enjoy a variety of foods and drinks without restriction. And remember to visit your dentist whenever you are having difficulty with your teeth, gums or dentures.

**Shopping for food**

Shopping can become more difficult for older people that live alone, or those with mobility issues or a lack of transport. So it is a good idea to have your cupboard well-stocked with foods that can keep for a long time without going stale. This makes it easier to easily prepare a nutritious meal.

This may include:
- canned fruit and canned and UHT fruit juice
- canned vegetables (reduced salt where possible)
- canned beans and bean mixes
- rice, spaghetti, macaroni, flour, rolled oats and breakfast cereals
- canned, powdered and reduced fat UHT milk and custard
- canned meat and fish
- canned soups
- sauces (such as reduced fat soy sauce) and pastes (such as reduced fat and salt peanut butter)
- vegetable oil such as olive oil or canola 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.