

AgePage

Good Nutrition: It's a Way of Life

"I have trouble chewing."

"Food just doesn't taste the same anymore."

"I don't have a car to go shopping."

"It's hard to cook for one person."

"I'm just not that hungry anymore."

Sound familiar? These are some of the common reasons older people stop eating right. And that's a

problem because food provides energy and *nutrients* everyone needs to stay healthy. Nutrients

include proteins, carbohydrates,

fats, vitamins,

minerals, and water.

As you grow older, you may need less energy from what you eat. But, you still need just as many of the nutrients in food.

What Should I Eat?

Choose many different healthy foods. Pick those that are lower in cholesterol and fat, especially saturated fat (mostly in foods that come from animals) and *trans fatty acids* (found in some processed foods, margarines, and shortenings). Avoid “empty calories” as much as you can. These are foods and drinks with a lot of calories, but not many nutrients—for example, chips, cookies, sodas, and alcohol.

Calories are a way to measure the energy you get from food. If you eat more calories than your body needs, you could gain weight. Most packaged

foods have the calorie counts listed on the labels.

How Much Should I Eat?

The Dietary Guidelines from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) encourage people to eat a suggested amount from five major food groups every day. If you can't do that, at least try to eat something from each group each day. Lower fat choices are best. Make sure you include vegetables, fruits, and whole-grain foods. Eating the smallest amount suggested will give you about 1,600 calories a day, the largest number has about 2,800 calories.

How many calories each day for people over age 50?

A woman: 1,600 calories, if her physical activity level is low
 1,800 calories, if she is moderately active
 2,000-2,200 calories if she has an active lifestyle

A man: 2,000 calories, if his physical activity level is low
 2,200-2,400 calories, if he is moderately active
 2,400-2,800 calories, if he has an active lifestyle

The more physically active you are, the more you might be able to eat without gaining weight.

Most people should have at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity on most days of the week. Regular physical activity will help all areas of your life as you grow older.

The Dietary Guidelines suggest:

Grains—5-10 ounces; some choices are:

- ◆ One roll, slice of bread, or small muffin,
- ◆ ½ cup of cooked rice or pasta, or
- ◆ about 1 cup (1 oz.) of ready-to-eat cereal.

Vegetables—2 to 3 ½ cups with a variety of colors and types of vegetables

Fruits—1 ½ to 2 ½ cups

Milk, yogurt, and cheese—3 cups of milk:

- ◆ 1 cup of yogurt equals one cup of milk,
- ◆ 1 ½ to 2 ounces of cheese equals one cup of milk,
- ◆ 1 cup of cottage cheese equals ½ cup of milk.

Meat, poultry, fish, dry beans, eggs, and nuts—5 to 7 ounces of lean meat, poultry, or fish:

- ◆ ¼ cup of cooked beans or tofu, 1 egg, ½ ounce of nuts or seeds, or 1 tablespoon of peanut butter—each can count as one ounce of meat.

Some other tips:

- ◆ Each day eat only small amounts of fats, oils, and sweets.
- ◆ When eating foods from the grains group, try to include at least 3 ounces from whole grains.

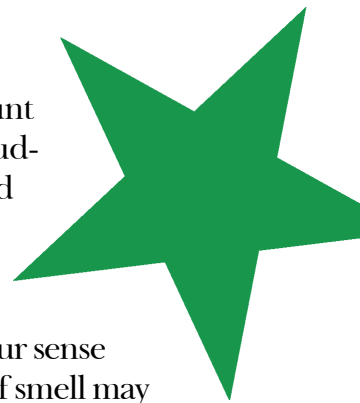
- ◆ Sometimes manufacturers put more than one serving in a package or bottle.

Another eating plan suggested by the Dietary Guidelines is called the DASH Eating Plan. DASH stands for Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension. See the resources at the end of this *Age Page* for more information on DASH.

Are You Less Interested in Food?

Does your favorite chicken dish taste different? Does Aunt Molly's pea soup suddenly seem to need salt? The flavor of the food is probably the same as always. With age your sense of taste and sense of smell may change. This affects how foods taste. They may seem to have lost flavor.

There are other reasons food may not taste the same. Some medicines can change your sense of taste or make you feel less hungry. Maybe you have slowed down a bit, so your body needs fewer calories. Maybe chewing is difficult because your dentures need to be adjusted or your teeth or gums need to be checked. You might want to pick softer foods to eat.



Do I Need to Drink Water?

Not just water. You need to drink plenty of liquids like water, juice, milk, and soup. You have to replace the fluids you lose every day. But check with your doctor if he or she has told you to limit how much you drink.

Don't wait until you feel thirsty to start drinking. With age you may lose some of your sense of thirst. In addition, medicine can sometimes cause you to lose fluids. If you are drinking enough, your urine will be pale yellow. If it is a bright or dark yellow, you need to drink more liquids.

Do you have a urinary control problem? If your answer is yes, don't stop drinking a lot of liquid. But, talk to your doctor for help with your urinary control problem.

What About Fiber?

Dietary fiber is found in foods that come from plants—fruits, vegetables, beans, nuts, seeds, brown rice, and whole grains. It is the part of plant foods that your body cannot digest. Eating more fiber might help you avoid intestinal problems like constipation, diverticulosis, and diverticulitis. It might also lower cholesterol and blood sugar and help you have regular bowel movements.

If you are not used to eating a lot of fiber, add more fiber to your diet

slowly to avoid stomach problems. The best source of this fiber is food, rather than dietary supplements. When adding fiber, remember:

- ◆ 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 lots of fluids to help the fiber move through your intestines.

Should I Cut Back on Salt?

Salt (sodium chloride) is the most common way people get sodium. Sodium is naturally present in most foods, and salt is added to many canned and prepared foods. The body uses sodium to keep the blood, muscles, and nerves healthy. Too much is not good, however, and can make your blood pressure go up.

Most people eat a lot more sodium than they need. If you are over age 50, aim for 1500 mg of sodium—about $\frac{2}{3}$ of a teaspoon of table salt. That includes all the sodium you get in your food and drink, not just what you add when cooking or eating. If your doctor tells you to use less salt, cut back on salty snacks and processed foods.

Try adding spices, herbs, and lemon juice to add flavor to your food. Also make sure your diet is rich in foods containing potassium. That will help counter the effects of salt on your blood pressure. Some foods that have a lot of potassium are leafy green vegetables, fruit from vines like tomatoes, bananas, and root vegetables like potatoes.

What About Fat?

Fat in your diet gives you energy and certain vitamins. But too much fat can be bad for your heart and blood vessels and can lead to heart disease. Fat is also high in calories.

To lower the fat in your diet:

- ◆ Choose lean cuts of meat, fish, or poultry (with the skin removed).
- ◆ Trim off any extra fat before cooking.
- ◆ Use low-fat dairy products and salad dressings.
- ◆ Use non-stick pots and pans, and cook without added fat.
- ◆ If you do use fat, use either an unsaturated vegetable oil or a nonfat cooking spray.
- ◆ Broil, roast, bake, stir-fry, steam, microwave, or boil foods. Avoid frying them.
- ◆ Season your foods with lemon juice, herbs, or spices, instead of butter.

What about Food Safety?

Because your sense of taste and smell may not work as well as you get older, you may not always be able to tell if foods have gone bad. You might want to date foods in your refrigerator to keep yourself from eating foods that are no longer fresh. If in doubt, throw it out.

Older people should be very careful with certain kinds of foods that need to be well cooked to prevent disease. For example, be sure to fully cook eggs, pork, fish, shellfish, poultry, and hot dogs. You might want to talk to your doctor or a registered dietitian, a specialist trained in nutrition, about foods you should avoid. These might include raw sprouts, some deli meats, and foods that are not *pasteurized* (heated enough to destroy disease-causing organisms), including some milk products.

Confused About What to Eat?

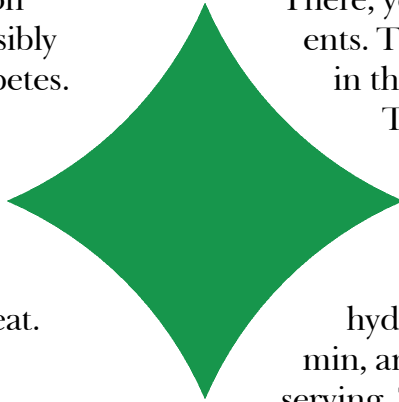
The USDA Dietary Guidelines suggest how much the “average” older person needs to eat. But, how does “average” match your needs? For example,

maybe you have high cholesterol and need to keep a close eye on how much fat you eat. Or, possibly you have a food allergy or diabetes. Then you should check with your doctor or a dietitian. They can help you plan meals that will include the healthy foods you need without the foods you should not eat.

How Can I Make Shopping Easier?

Plan your meals in advance. Check your supply of staples like flour, sugar, rice, and cereal. Make a list of what you need. Keep some canned or frozen foods on hand. These are handy when you do not feel like cooking or cannot go out. Powdered nonfat dry milk, canned evaporated milk, and ultra-pasteurized milk in a carton can be stored easily.

Think about how much of a product you will use. A large size may be cheaper per unit, but it is not a bargain if you end up throwing much of it away. Share large packages with a friend. Frozen vegetables sold in bags save money because you can use small amounts while keeping 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.



Learn to read food package labels. There, you will find a list of ingredients. The first one listed is present in the food in the largest amount.

The ones that follow are present in smaller and smaller amounts. Look at “Nutrition Facts” for the calories, protein, carbohydrate, fat, sodium, fiber, vitamin, and mineral amounts per serving. The label also suggests a serving size for comparing foods. There may be an expiration or “use by” date on the label or container. At first, reading labels will add some time to your shopping trip. Soon you will learn which products are best for you.

Won't All This Food Cost a Lot?

Here are some ways to keep your food costs down:

- ◆ Plain (generic) labels, if available, or store brands are usually cheaper than name brands.
- ◆ Plan your menu around items on sale.
- ◆ Prepare more of the foods you enjoy, and quickly refrigerate the leftovers to eat in a day or two.
- ◆ Divide leftovers into individual servings. Write the contents and

date on each package, and freeze to use within a few months.

- ◆ Share meal preparation and costs with a friend.
- ◆ Plan a “pot-luck” dinner where everyone brings a prepared dish.

Food stamps from the Federal Government help people with low incomes buy groceries. If you think you are eligible, check with a local food stamps office or Area Agency on Aging. Also ask your local Area Agency on Aging or tribal organization about the nearest senior center or nutrition site. You may be able to enjoy free or low-cost meals for older people at a community center, church, or school. These meals offer good food and a chance to be with other people. Home delivered meals are available for people who are homebound.

For More Information

To learn about DASH, go to:

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, contact:

USDA Food and Nutrition
Information Center (FNIC)
10301 Baltimore Avenue, Room 304
Beltsville, MD 20705-2351
1-301-504-5719
www.nal.usda.gov/fnic

Administration on Aging
330 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201
1-202-619-7501
Eldercare Locator:
1-800-677-1116 (toll-free)
www.eldercare.gov

The Federal Government has several websites with information on nutrition:

www.nutrition.gov
www.healthierus.gov
www.mypyramid.gov

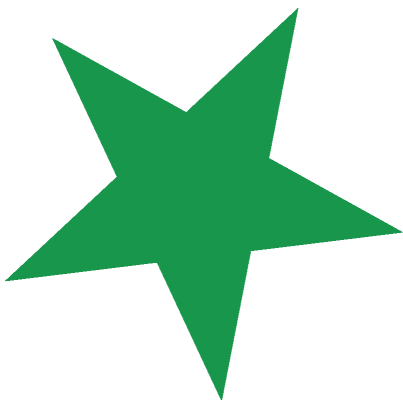
For information on health, exercise, and aging, contact:

National Institute on Aging
Information Center
P.O. Box 8057
Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057
1-800-222-2225 (toll-free)
1-800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)
E-mail: niaic@jbs1.com

To order publications (in English or Spanish) online, visit www.niapublications.org.

The National Institute on Aging website is www.nia.nih.gov.

Visit NIHSeniorHealth.gov (www.nihseniorhealth.gov), a senior-friendly website from the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine. This simple-to-use website features popular health topics for older adults. It has large type and a “talking” function that reads text out loud.



National Institute on Aging

U.S. Department of Health and
Human Services
Public Health Service
National Institutes of Health

April 2005

