

Nutrition and older adults

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Key points:

- Appetites and lifestyles can change as we get older.
- As you get older, maintain healthy eating habits to support your health.
- More than 65% of adults aged 50 years and over have osteoporosis or osteopenia.
- Calcium requirements increase as we get older, especially for women.
- Dairy products such as milk, yoghurt and cheese are high in calcium.
- Vitamin D and exercise also contribute to bone health.

Eat well to age well

As we get older, the types and amounts of foods we like to eat can change. It is important to keep choosing healthy foods to support our health.

However, as we get older our lifestyles and appetite can change and this can affect the types and amounts of foods we eat. A decreased appetite and/or reduced ability to buy and prepare healthy foods can negatively affect the intake of essential vitamins, minerals and fibre older adults require to thrive. Inadequate nutrient intake can contribute to general unwellness or exacerbate some chronic conditions.

It is important to use every meal and snack as an opportunity for optimal nutrition. Try to find ways to improve your diet to fit with your personal tastes, abilities, and lifestyle – even if this means asking for support from friends, family, or other community services. Ask your doctor, health centre, hospital, or local council for available support services in your community, or visit www.seniors.gov.au.

Remember:

- As you get older, keep choosing healthy foods to support your health.
- Appetites and lifestyles can change as we get older.
- Use every meal and snack as an opportunity for optimal nutrition.

Maintaining healthy eating habits

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

Use less salt

Everyone requires a small amount of salt in their diet, 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 at the table.

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 savory 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 many vital functions in body, including hydration, digestion and blood volume. 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 are exercising. mineral water, soda water and reduced fat milk all count towards your fluid intake during the day, but water is always best!

Limit your intake of foods containing saturated fats and trans fats

Pies, pastries, fried and battered foods, and 'discretionary items' such as chips and chocolate are generally high in saturated fat, and may also contain dangerous trans fats. They should only be eaten very occasionally.

If you are in the habit of having desserts, aim to make it as nutritious as possible and avoid high sugar and saturated fat foods, or those containing trans fats. Try fresh fruits with yoghurt or custard 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. Australian guidelines state that: healthy men and women should consume no more than ten standard drinks a week and no more than four standard drinks on any one occasion, to reduce the risk of harm from alcohol.¹

Vitamins and minerals

Vitamins and mineral supplements may be recommended by a doctor or dietitian for diagnosed deficiencies. Nutrient deficiencies are not uncommon in older adults due to reduced appetite or digestion issues from illness or medication.

For the healthy population, vitamin and mineral supplements 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.

Remember:

- Limit your intake of foods high in added salt, fat and sugar.
- Drink more water.
- Be mindful of your limits with alcohol.
- Enjoy a wide variety of foods from the five food groups.

Special considerations for older adults

Bone health

Osteoporosis is characterised by a decrease in bone density, which may increase the risk of fractures. More than 65% of adults aged 50 years and over have osteoporosis or osteopenia.² 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.

Dietary calcium

Milk and milk products such as yoghurt and cheese are high in calcium. Fish with soft, edible bones, such as canned salmon or sardines, are also good sources of calcium. The Australian Dietary Guidelines 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

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, 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 requirements and options.

Exercise

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

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- Calcium requirements increase as we get older, especially for women.
- Dairy products such as milk, yoghurt and cheese are high in calcium.
- Vitamin D and exercise also contribute to bone health.
- Speak with your doctor or an accredited practicing dietitian if you are concerned.

Arthritis

Eating a variety of healthy foods and trying to maintain a healthy weight are the dietary recommendations for those with arthritis. 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, but all plant-based foods can provide fibre in the diet.

If you are increasing your fibre intake, 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 enjoy the experience of eating.

Missing teeth, sore gums and dentures that do not fit properly can make it difficult to chew food, which may mean that you change what and how much you eat and put yourself at risk of nutrient deficiencies or poor health outcomes.

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. Remember to visit your dentist whenever you are having difficulty with your teeth, gums or dentures.

Shopping for food

Shopping can become more challenging for older people that live alone, or those with mobility issues or a lack of transport. 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.

Staple foods may include:

- canned fruit and UHT fruit juice
- canned vegetables (reduced salt where possible)
- baked 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 (check the salt content)
- sauces (such as reduced salt soy sauce)
- pastes (such as peanut butter)
- vegetable oil such as olive oil or canola oil

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

Remember:

- Eat a variety of foods from the five food groups and maintain a healthy weight to help manage arthritis.
- Include plenty of fibre from plant foods in your diet and drink lots of fluid to keep everything moving.
- Remember to visit the dentist regularly to maintain your teeth or dentures.
- Stock up on shelf-stable staples.
- Eat well, keep exercising and ask for support where needed.

1. Source: <https://www.health.gov.au/health-topics/alcohol/about-alcohol/how-much-alcohol-is-safe-to-drink> [Accessed 14 July 2021]
2. Source: <https://healthybonesaustralia.org.au/your-bone-health/about-bones/> [Accessed 14 July 2021]