

## Eating Well as You Age

**As you get older, eating well can help improve your mental sharpness, boost your energy levels, and increase your resistance to illness. These senior diet and nutrition tips can help.**



### **The benefits of healthy eating as you age**

Healthy eating is important at any age, but becomes even more so as we reach midlife and beyond. As well as keeping your body healthy, eating well can also be the key to a positive outlook and staying emotionally balanced. But healthy eating doesn't have to be about dieting and sacrifice. Rather, it should be all about enjoying fresh, tasty food, wholesome ingredients, and eating in the company of friends and family.

No matter your age or your previous eating habits, it's never too late to change your diet and improve the way you think and feel. Improving your diet now can help you to:

**Live longer and stronger.** Good nutrition can boost immunity, fight illness-causing toxins, keep weight in check, and reduce the risk of heart disease, stroke, [high blood pressure](#), type-2 diabetes, bone loss, and cancer. [Along with physical activity](#), a balanced diet can also contribute to enhanced independence as you age.

**Sharpen your mind.** People who eat fruit, leafy veggies, and fish and nuts packed with omega-3 fatty acids may be able to improve focus and decrease their [risk of Alzheimer's disease](#). Antioxidant-rich green tea may also enhance memory and mental alertness as you age.

**Feel better.** Wholesome meals can give you more energy and help you look better, resulting in a boost to your mood and self-esteem. It's all connected—when your body feels good, you feel happier inside and out.

## Healthy eating is about more than just food

Eating well as you age is about more than just the quality and variety of your food. It's also about the pleasure of eating, which increases when a meal is shared. Eating with others can be as important as adding vitamins to your diet. A social atmosphere stimulates your mind, makes meals more enjoyable, and can help you stick to your healthy eating plan.

Even if you live alone, you can make healthy meals more pleasurable by:

**Shopping with others.** Shopping with a friend can give you a chance to catch up without falling behind on your chores. It's also a great way to share new meal ideas and [save money](#) on discount deals like “buy one, get the second half price”.

**Cooking with others.** Invite a friend to [share cooking responsibilities](#)—one prepares the entrée, the other dessert, for example. Cooking with others can be a fun way to deepen your relationships, and splitting costs can make it cheaper for both of you.

**Making mealtimes a social experience.** The simple act of talking to a friend or loved one over the dinner table can play a big role in relieving stress and boosting mood. Gather the family together regularly and stay up to date on everyone's lives. Invite a friend, coworker, or neighbor over. Visiting an [adult day care center](#) or enrolling in a senior meal program can also provide both companionship and nutritious meals for older adults.

## How to create a healthy senior diet

The key to healthy eating is to focus on the whole, minimally processed food that your body needs as you age—food that is as close to its natural form as possible. Our bodies respond differently to different foods, depending on genetics and other health factors, so finding the healthy diet that works best for you may take some experimentation. These tips are a good place to start:

**Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables.** Break the apple and banana rut and go for color-rich pickings like berries or melons. Aim for 2-3 servings a day. When it comes to veggies, choose antioxidant-rich dark, leafy greens, such as kale, spinach, and broccoli as well as colorful vegetables such as carrots and squash. Make veggies more appetizing by drizzling them with olive oil, sprinkling with goat cheese, or frying with garlic or chili flakes. Try for 2-3 cups every day.

**Choose calcium for bone health.** Maintaining bone health as you age depends on adequate calcium intake to prevent osteoporosis and bone fractures. Good sources include milk, yogurt, cheese or non-dairy sources such as tofu, broccoli, almonds, and kale. [Learn more>>](#)

**Go “good fat” not “no fat”.** Rather than trying to cut out fat from your diet, focus on enjoying healthy fats—such as omega-3s—that can protect your body against disease and support your mood and brain function. [Learn more>>](#)

**Vary your sources of protein.** As you age, eating enough high-quality protein can improve your mood, boost your resistance to stress, anxiety, and depression, and even help you think more clearly. However, eating too much protein from processed meat products such as hot dogs, bacon, and salami may increase your risk of heart disease, cancer, and other health problems. Vary your sources of protein instead of relying on just red meat by including more fish, beans, peas, eggs, nuts, and seeds in your diet. [Learn more>>](#)

**Eat more fiber.** Dietary fiber can do so much more than keep you regular. It can lower your risk for heart disease, stroke, and diabetes, improve the health of your skin, and help you to lose weight. As you age, your digestion becomes less efficient, so it's important to include enough fiber in your diet. Women over 50 should aim to eat at least 21 grams of fiber per day, men over 50 at least 30 grams a day. Unfortunately, most of us aren't getting even half those amounts. [Learn more>>](#)

**Be smart about carbs.** Choose whole grains over processed white flour for more nutrients

and fiber and cut down on sugar and refined carbs. While our senses of taste and smell diminish with age, we retain the ability to distinguish sweet tastes the longest, leading many older people to consume more sugar and refined carbs than is healthy. Unlike complex carbs that are rich in fiber, refined or simple carbs (such as white rice, white flour, refined sugar) can lead to a dramatic spike in blood sugar, followed by a rapid crash which leaves you feeling hungry and prone to overeating. [Learn more>>](#)

## Important vitamins and minerals as you get older

**Water.** As you age, you may be more prone to dehydration because your sense of thirst is not as sharp. Remember to sip water regularly to avoid urinary tract infections, constipation, and even confusion.

**Vitamin B.** After the age of 50, your stomach produces less gastric acid making it harder to absorb vitamin B-12—needed to help keep blood and nerves healthy. Get the recommended daily intake (2.4 mcg) of B12 from fortified foods or a vitamin supplement.

**Vitamin D.** With age, your skin is less efficient at synthesizing vitamin D, so consult your doctor about supplementing your diet with fortified foods or a multivitamin, especially if you're obese or have limited sun exposure.

## Cope with changing dietary needs as you age

Every season of life brings changes and adjustments to your body. Understanding what is happening will help you take control of your nutritional and dietary requirements.

### Physical changes that can affect your diet

**Metabolism.** Every year over the age of 40, our metabolism slows, and often we become less physically active. This makes it even more important to adopt healthy eating and exercise habits to [avoid weight gain](#).

**Weakened senses.** Older adults tend to lose sensitivity to salty and bitter tastes first, so you may be inclined to salt your food more heavily than before—even though older adults need less salt than younger people. Use herbs, spices, and healthy oils—like olive oil—to season food instead of salt.

**Medications and illness.** Some health problems or medications can negatively influence appetite or affect taste, again leading older adults to consume too much sugar or salt. Talk to your doctor.

**Digestion.** Due to a slowing digestive system, you generate less saliva and stomach acid as you get older, making it more difficult for your body to process certain [vitamins and minerals](#), such as B12, B6, and folic acid, which are necessary to maintain mental alertness and good circulation. Up your fiber intake and talk to your doctor about possible supplements.

## **Lifestyle changes that can affect your diet**

**Loneliness and depression.** For some, feeling down leads to not eating and in others it may trigger overeating. Sharing meals with other people can be an effective antidote to loneliness. [Reach out to friends or neighbors](#)—everyone loves a home-cooked meal and most people who live alone are in the same boat as you. Be the one to reach out and break the ice.

**Death or divorce.** If you're newly single, you may not be used to cooking or have little enthusiasm for preparing meals for just yourself. However, [cooking your own meals](#) can help you take charge of your health. The key to cooking for one is to master a few basic skills and get creative in making meals that work specifically for you.

**Living on a limited budget.** With the right tips and a little planning, it is possible to [enjoy healthy food on the cheap](#). Often, by simply cutting out junk and processed foods, you can free up enough in your budget to enjoy healthier, better quality food.

## **Understanding malnutrition**

Malnutrition is a critical health issue among older adults caused by eating too little food, too few nutrients, and by digestive problems related to aging. Malnutrition causes fatigue, depression, weak immune system, anemia, weakness, digestive, lung, and heart problems.

### **To prevent malnutrition as you age:**

- Eat nutrient-packed food.
- Have flavorful food available.
- Snack between meals.

- Eat with company as much as possible.
- Get help with food preparation.

## Overcome obstacles to eating well as an older adult

Let's face it, there's a reason why so many of us have trouble eating nutritiously every day. Sometimes it's just quicker or easier to eat unhealthy food. If you're having trouble getting started on a healthy eating plan, these tips can help:

### Boost a low appetite

Check with your doctor to see if your loss of appetite could be due to medication, and whether the medication or dosage can be changed. Try natural flavor enhancers such as olive oil, butter, vinegar, garlic, onions, ginger, and spices to boost your appetite.

### Cope with difficulty chewing

- Make chewing easier by drinking smoothies made with fresh fruit, yogurt, and protein powder.
- Eat steamed veggies and soft food such as couscous, rice, and yogurt.
- Consult your dentist to make sure your dentures are properly fitted.

### Deal with a dry mouth

- Drink 8-10 glasses of water each day.
- Take a drink of water after each bite of food.
- Add sauces and salsas to moisten your food.
- Avoid commercial mouthwash.
- Ask your doctor about artificial saliva products.

### But what if you don't like healthy food?

None of us were born with a craving for French fries and donuts or an aversion to broccoli. This conditioning happens over time as we're exposed to more and more unhealthy food choices. However, it is possible to reprogram your brain's food cravings over time so that you crave healthier foods instead.

**Commit to keeping an open mind.** Just because a food is healthy, it doesn't mean it can't



be tasty as well.

**Don't change everything all at once.** Add a side salad to your normal dinner, for example, or substitute unhealthy fries with baked sweet potato fries, or have a smaller portion of dessert and fill up with melon and pineapple slices.

**Focus on how you feel after eating well**—this will help foster new habits and tastes. The more healthy food you eat, the better you'll feel afterwards.

## Or are stuck in a rut?

No matter how healthy your diet, eating the same foods over and over is bound to get boring. Rekindle inspiration by:

- Browsing produce at a farmers market.
- Reading a cooking magazine.
- Buying foods or spices you haven't tried before.
- Chatting with friends about what they eat.

## Or you can't shop or cook for yourself?

**Take advantage of home delivery.** Most grocery stores have online delivery services. Other companies deliver pre-made meals or kits with all the ingredients you need to prepare a meal at home.

**Swap services.** Ask a friend, neighborhood teen, or college student if they would be willing to shop for you in return for homework help, for example.

**Share your home.** Consider having a housemate/companion who would be willing to do the grocery shopping and cooking.

## Meals on Wheels

Meals on Wheels provides nutritious meals to [people who are homebound](#) and/or disabled, or would otherwise be unable to maintain their dietary needs. See the "Get more help" section below for information on finding a program in your area.

## Eating well on a budget

For many older adults on a fixed, limited budget, knowing how to eat healthily is only part of the problem. Paying for the healthiest food isn't always easy but there are [ways to stretch your budget](#) and save money on nutritious food.

**Eat out less.** It may seem that fast food is less expensive than [cooking at home](#). But a meal for two at a fast-food restaurant in the U.S., with drinks and a side of fries each, can cost \$10 to \$15. Preparing a simple, healthy beef stew or roast chicken with vegetables can cost far less and leave you with leftovers as well.

**Stick to your grocery list.** The more prepared you are when food shopping, the less impulse purchases you'll make.

**Buy in bulk.** Doing things in bulk saves time and money. It's always a good idea to buy non-perishable items, such as dried beans and canned fish, in bulk. You can freeze perishable items, such as meat and bread, in smaller portions to use as needed or split them with a friend—saving you both money.

**Search out farmers' markets.** Many places host weekly farmers' markets where local farmers sell fresh food directly, often cheaper than the grocery store. Towards the end of the market, some vendors sell remaining perishable items at a discount.

**Purchase generic/store brands.** When you shop at conventional grocery stores, the store or generic brand will often be cheaper than the name brand for the same quality product.

**Join the grocery store savings club** and look out for discount coupons for more savings.

**Purchase less expensive cuts of meat and make better use of it.** You'll save money on the cut of meat and stretch the meat for more meals when you make tasty casseroles, sauces, soups, stews, and stir-fries. Add vegetables, beans, and whole grains to create filling and delicious meals.

**Cook once and eat multiple times.** Cook a large meal at the beginning of the week so that you have extra to use later in the week when you don't feel like cooking.





## Get more help

[DASH Eating Plan](#) (PDF) - Eating recommendations for lowering blood pressure. (National Institutes of Health)

[A Senior's Guide to Good Nutrition](#) - Written for vegetarians but many of the tips apply to all. (Vegetarian Resource Group)

[Food Safety for the Elderly](#) - Guidelines for safe food handling and preparation. (Clemson Extension)

[Dietary fiber: Essential for a Healthy Diet](#) - The health benefits of fiber and how to fit more into your diet. (Mayo Clinic)

[Sodium Content of Your Food](#) - How sodium affects your body and how to cut down on dietary sodium. (University of Maine)

[Fast Facts on Sugar and Salt](#) - Includes how to interpret food labels. (Harvard School of Public Health)

## Meals on wheels programs

[Meals on Wheels: Find a U.S. Program](#) - Find a Meals on Wheels program in your area of the U.S. (Meals on Wheels Association of America)

[Meals at Home Services](#) (UK) - In the UK, find a directory of providers in your area. (Gov.uk)

[Meals on Wheels Australia](#) - Find your local Meals on Wheels service in Australia. (Meals on Wheels Australia)

[Find a Meals on Wheels Location in Canada](#) - Find senior meal programs in your area of Canada. (VON Canada)

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