Eldercare Q&A   March, 2016
Eating Well, Feeling Better

Q: Should older people worry about 'eating better'?

A: You're never too old to start "eating better." No matter what your age, the food choices you make daily have an impact on how you look and feel.

Eating a balanced mix of foods has many health benefits. You can reduce your risk of heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, bone loss, some kinds of cancer, and anemia. Even if you already have a chronic condition, eating well and being physically active can help you reduce high blood pressure, or manage diabetes. A proper mix of vitamins, minerals, protein, carbohydrates, fats, and water, can keep your muscles, bones, organs, and other parts of your body healthy as you get older.

Your doctor might suggest that you need extra of a few vitamins, as well as the mineral calcium. It is usually better to get the nutrients you need from food, rather than a pill. Most older people don't need a complete multivitamin supplement. But if you don't think you're making the best food choices, look for a supplement sold as a complete vitamin and mineral supplement. It should be well balanced and contain 100% of most recommended vitamins and minerals. Read the label to make sure the dose is not too large. Avoid supplements with mega-doses. Too much of some vitamins and minerals can be harmful, and you might be paying for supplements you don't need.

Here are some of the vitamin and mineral supplements recommended for people over 50 by the National Institute for Aging:

* Vitamin D: You can get vitamin D from fatty fish, fish liver oils, fortified milk and milk products, and fortified cereals. If you're age 50–70, you need at least 600 international units (IU) of Vitamin D, but not more than 4,000 IU. If you're over age 70, you need at least 800 IU, but not more than 4,000 IU.

* Vitamin B6: You can find B6 in fortified cereals, whole grains, organ meats like liver, and fortified soy-based meat substitutes. Men need 1.7 milligrams (mg) daily. Women need 1.5 mg daily.

* Vitamin B 12: You can get vitamin B12 from fortified cereals, meat, fish, poultry, and milk. You need 2.4 micrograms (mcg) daily. Some people over age 50 have trouble absorbing the vitamin B12 found naturally in foods, so make sure you get enough of the supplement form of this vitamin, such as from fortified foods.

* Folate: You can get folate from dark-green leafy vegetables like spinach, beans and peas, fruit like oranges and orange juice, and folic acid from fortified flour and fortified cereals. You need 400 mcg daily. Folic acid is the form used to fortify grain products or added to dietary supplements.

Eating well also involves calories, which measure the energy you get from food. Your need for calories depends on your age, your gender, your height and weight, and how active you are. Eating more calories than your body needs for your activity level results in extra pounds, which can increase the risk for diseases like type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and joint problems. If you become less physically active as you age, you will probably need fewer calories to stay at the same weight. Choosing mostly nutrient-dense foods--which have a lot of nutrients but fewer calories--can give you the nutrients you need, but keep down calorie intake.

If you aren't getting enough calories or nutrients, you can add healthy snacks during the day, like raw vegetables with a low-fat dip or hummus, low-fat cheese and whole-grain crackers, or a piece of fruit. Unsalted nuts or nut butters are nutrient-dense snacks that give you added protein. Try putting shredded low-fat cheese on your soup or popcorn, or sprinkling nuts or wheat germ on yogurt or cereal.

Eating well isn't just a "diet" or a "program." It's a healthy lifestyle that if you can adopt now, it can stay with you in the years to come. To eat healthier, start off with some simple steps like removing the salt shaker from your table, and switching to whole-grain bread, seafood, or more vegetables and fruits.

If you have a specific medical condition, talk to your doctor, and ask if it makes sense for you to talk with a registered dietitian about foods you should include or avoid.

To learn more about how to shop for food that's good for you, see: https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/whats-your-plate/shopping-food-thats-good-you

If you eat too much of the wrong types of foods, you can put on too much weight. Obesity is a growing problem in the United States. But frailty is also a problem, and not just in thin people. As you get older, you can lose muscle strength, and add more fat tissue. Being overweight puts you more at risk for frailty and disability, but losing weight is not necessarily the answer. Sometimes when older people lose weight, they lose more muscle, which puts them at higher risk for falling, and having a broken bone after a fall. Exercise helps you keep muscle and bone. Also, for some people, a few extra pounds late in life can act as a safety net should they get a serious illness that limits how much they can eat for a while.

[See more information about vitamins and minerals, including ones recommended for people over age 50.](#)

Eating Well Promotes Energy

Eating well helps keep up your energy level, too. By consuming enough

[Learn how weight may affect frailty as we age.](#)

Food Choices Affect Digestion

[Click for more information](#)

Your food choices also affect your digestion. For instance, not getting enough fiber or fluids may cause constipation. Eating more whole-grain foods with fiber, fruits and vegetables or drinking more water may help with constipation.

Make One Change at a Time

Eating well isn't just a "diet" or "program" that's here today and gone tomorrow. It is part of a healthy lifestyle that you can adopt now and stay with in the years to come.

To eat healthier, you can begin by taking small steps, making one change at a time. For instance, you might

- take the salt shaker off your table. Decreasing your salt intake slowly will allow you to adjust.
- switch to whole-grain bread, seafood, or more vegetables and fruits when you shop.

These changes may be easier than you think. They're possible even if you need help with shopping or cooking, or if you have a limited budget.

To learn more about choosing healthy meals as you get older, [see 10 Healthy Eating Tips for People 65+](#)

Checking With Your Doctor

If you have a specific medical condition, be sure to check with your doctor or registered dietitian about foods you should include or avoid.

You Can Start Today

Whatever your age, you can start making positive lifestyle changes today. Eating well can help you stay healthy and independent -- and look and feel good -- in the years to come