



Healthy Eating and Healthy Aging for Adults

Healthy eating is important at any age. It gives your body the nutrients and energy it needs for good health.

The following information will help you choose foods to help you feel your best, achieve or maintain a healthy weight, and prevent or manage chronic disease, such as heart disease and diabetes.

What does healthy eating mean?

Healthy eating is:

- Eating in a way that meets your energy and nutrient needs, and supports your physical and mental wellbeing.
- Being able to shop for, buy and prepare a variety of healthy and affordable foods.
- Being able to enjoy the food that you eat.
- Getting pleasure from sharing meals with family and friends.

If you need help with any part of healthy eating, talk to your health care provider or a registered dietitian. To speak with a dietitian, call HealthLink BC at **8-1-1**.

What nutrients are important as we age?

As you get older, your body's ability to use or absorb some nutrients may change. In particular, it is important to get enough of the following nutrients.

Protein

Protein is needed to build muscles and keep them strong. It is also used to keep hair, nails and skin healthy. Protein is found in meat, fish, poultry, eggs, milk products, legumes, tofu, soy beverage, nuts, and seeds.

Fibre

Fibre helps your bowels stay active and prevents constipation. Constipation is more common as we age. Fibre can also help keep blood sugar (glucose) and blood cholesterol levels normal.

Fibre is found in plant foods, especially vegetables and fruits, whole grain products, nuts and seeds, and legumes. If you increase the amount of fibre you eat, it is important to drink enough fluid to keep your bowel movements soft.

Fat

Fat helps your body absorb vitamins, and is used in the brain and nervous system. Eating more fat than you need can lead to weight gain. Having excess weight can increase your risk of diabetes, heart disease and cancer.

There are 3 types of dietary fat: unsaturated, saturated and trans. Choose foods higher in unsaturated fats instead of those high in saturated and trans fats. In particular, limit eating foods with industrially-produced trans fat. This type of trans fat increases your risk of heart disease. Industrially-produced trans fat is found mostly in fried foods and bakery products.

For more information about the types of fat and their effects on our health, see [HealthLinkBC File #68f Dietary Fats and Your Health](#).

Calcium

Calcium is essential for healthy bones and to prevent osteoporosis. It may also help keep the muscles of the heart healthy. Calcium needs increase in people over the age of 50.

Foods high in calcium include milk and milk products, calcium-fortified plant beverages such as soy beverages, canned fish with bones, and calcium-enriched 100% fruit juices.

Vitamin D

Vitamin D helps your body absorb calcium and balance calcium levels for healthy bones. Getting enough vitamin D may also help prevent falls.

As we age, the risk of vitamin D deficiency increases, in part, because our body absorbs less vitamin D from our diet. For this reason, adults over the age of 50 need to take a daily vitamin D supplement of 400IU in addition to eating food sources of vitamin D.

Good sources include food fortified with vitamin D such as cow's milk, soy beverage, and margarine. Vitamin D is also found in egg yolk and oily or fatty fish such as salmon and herring.

Vitamin B6

Vitamin B6 helps the body to make protein, which is used to build red blood cells, make hormones, and fight infection. It also helps maintain a healthy nervous system and regulate blood sugar (glucose) levels.

Your vitamin B6 needs increase with age because your body's ability to absorb and use the vitamin changes. Choosing a variety of foods and eating enough food each day can meet the increased need for vitamin B6.

The best food sources of vitamin B6 include fish, meat, poultry, organ meats, enriched cereals, meatless soy products, nuts, lentils, starchy vegetables like potatoes, and fruit other than citrus.

Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 helps your nervous system work properly and helps make red blood cells. Natural sources of vitamin B12 include meat, fish, poultry, eggs and milk products. As you get older, it is harder for your body to absorb the vitamin B12 found naturally in foods.

If you do not get enough vitamin B12 you can develop anemia, which means your blood has a lower than normal number of red blood cells. The most common symptom of anemia is feeling tired and weak, but you might also have shortness of breath, dizziness, and coldness in your hands and feet. Over time, too little vitamin B12 can also cause nerve and brain damage.

Adults over the age of 50 need to eat foods fortified with vitamin B12 or take a daily multivitamin/mineral supplement containing vitamin B12. Foods fortified with vitamin B12 include breakfast cereals, vegetarian deli meats and fortified soy beverages.

Sodium

Sodium is needed in very small amounts by the body. Too much sodium can increase blood pressure, putting you at higher risk of heart disease, stroke and kidney disease. Most adults consume too much sodium.

Sodium is found in all types of salt. Limit salty foods, processed and ready-to-eat foods, and fast foods. Use the %DV (Daily Values) on the Nutrition Facts Table on packaged foods to compare the amount of sodium in different products. Choose products with 5% DV or less for sodium. Prepare your own meals using low or no sodium-added ingredients, such as fresh or dried herbs and spices.

How do I meet my nutrient needs?

Eating a well-balanced and varied diet is the best way to meet your nutritional needs. *Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide* is an example of a healthy eating pattern. If you are over 50 years of age, aim for the following number of servings from each food group:

- 7 servings of vegetables and fruit;
- 6 to 7 servings of grain products;
- 3 servings of milk and alternatives; and
- 2 to 3 servings of meat and alternatives.

Do I need to take a supplement?

A daily multivitamin/mineral supplement can help your body get the nutrients it needs, especially for vitamins D and B12. Supplements provide vitamins and minerals but they do not provide other important nutrients such as carbohydrate, fat, protein, or fibre.

If you are thinking about taking a supplement other than a multivitamin/mineral, speak with your health care provider about what your body needs and what supplement is right for you.

How do I meet my fluid needs?

Fluid is needed for your body to function well. When you don't get enough fluid your body becomes dehydrated. Dehydration can make you feel tired and confused.

Water is your best choice to satisfy your thirst. Milk and fortified soy beverages also provide nutrients such as protein, calcium and vitamin D. Tea, coffee, soup, low sodium vegetable juice, and 100% fruit juice also provide fluid.

For More Information

- Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide
<https://food-guide.canada.ca/en/>
- Dietitians of Canada - Seniors
www.dietitians.ca/Your-Health/Nutrition-A-Z/Seniors.aspx?categoryID=42
- Healthy Eating for Seniors Handbook
<http://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/family-social-supports/seniors/health-safety/active-aging/healthy-eating/healthy-eating-for-seniors-handbook>