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Healthy Eating After 50

Choosing healthy foods is a smart thing to do—no matter your age! Healthy habits like eating well and being physically active can help you reduce your risk of chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, and osteoporosis.

Here are some tips to get you started:

- Eat many different colors and types of vegetables and fruits.
- Make sure at least half your grains are whole grains.
- Limit saturated fat (found mostly in butter, beef fat, and coconut, palm, and palm kernel oils) and *trans* fats (found in processed foods like store-bought baked goods, pizza, and margarine).
- Eat “good” (poly- and monounsaturated) fats, like those found in seeds, nuts, avocados, and fatty fish like salmon. Any fats added in cooking should come from plant-based oils like olive or canola oils.

- Eat 8 ounces of seafood per week. Certain fish, like salmon, shad, and trout, contain less mercury than large fish, like tuna. Mercury can be harmful.

Make Smart Food Choices

Eating a variety of foods from each food group will help you get the nutrients you need. The *2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans* from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Department of Health and Human Services describes healthy eating patterns. These guidelines are flexible to help you choose a diet of nutritious foods and drinks that you like, that are available in your area, and that fit your budget.

The *Dietary Guidelines* suggests that people 50 or older choose foods every day from the following:

Vegetables—2 to 3 cups

What is the same as a cup of cut-up vegetables? Two cups of uncooked leafy vegetables.

Fruits—1½ to 2 cups

What is the same as a half cup of cut-up fruit? A fresh 2-inch peach or a half cup of grapes.

Grains—5 to 8 ounces

What is the same as an ounce of grains? A small bagel; a slice of whole grain bread; a cup of flaked, ready-to-eat cereal; or a half cup of cooked rice or pasta.

Protein foods—5 to 6½ ounces

What is the same as an ounce of meat, fish, or poultry? One egg, ¼ cup of cooked beans or tofu, a half ounce of nuts or seeds, or 1 tablespoon of peanut butter.

Dairy—3 cups of fat-free or low-fat milk

What is the same as 1 cup of milk? One cup of plain yogurt, 1½ ounces of hard cheese, or 2 cups of cottage cheese.

Oils—5 to 7 teaspoons

What is the same as oil added during cooking? Foods like olives, nuts, and avocados have a lot of oil in them.

Other—130 to 350 calories

This includes calories from all types of foods and beverages, including baked goods, sweets, and alcohol. If you eat too many foods high in saturated fats or added sugars, you will not have enough calories left for the more nutritious foods you should be eating.

Your doctor may want you to follow a special diet because you have a health problem like heart disease or diabetes. Or, you might have been told to avoid eating some foods because they can change how well your medicines work. Talk with your doctor or a registered dietitian—a nutrition specialist—about foods you can eat instead.

Here's a tip: Stay away from “empty calories.” These are foods and drinks with a lot of calories but not many nutrients—for example, chips, cookies, soda, and alcohol.

If you have high blood pressure or are at risk, your doctor may recommend the DASH Eating Plan. DASH stands for Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension. Following this plan can help you lower your blood pressure. See the *For More Information About Healthy Eating* section to find out more about DASH.

How Much Should I Eat?

How much you should eat depends on how active you are. If you eat more calories than your body uses, you gain weight.

What are calories? Calories are a way to count how much energy is in food. The energy you get from food helps you do the things you need to do each day. Try to choose foods that have a lot of the nutrients you need, but not many calories.

Just counting calories is not enough for making smart choices. Think about this: a medium banana, 1 cup of flaked cereal, 1½ cups of cooked spinach, 1 tablespoon of peanut butter, or 1 cup of 1% milk all have roughly the same number of calories. But, the foods are different in many ways. Some have more nutrients than others do. For example, milk gives you more calcium than a banana, and peanut butter gives you more protein than cereal. Some foods can make you feel more full than others.

How Many Calories Do People Over Age 50 Need Each Day?

A woman:

- Who is not physically active needs about 1,600 calories
- Who is somewhat active needs about 1,800 calories
- Who has an active lifestyle needs about 2,000-2,200 calories

A man:

- Who is not physically active needs about 2,000-2,200 calories
- Who is somewhat active needs about 2,200-2,400 calories
- Who has an active lifestyle needs about 2,400-2,800 calories

Here's a tip: Aim for at least 150 minutes (2½ hours) of physical activity each week. Try to be active throughout the day to reach this goal, and avoid sitting for a long time.

Common Problems Older Adults Have with Eating

Does your favorite chicken dish taste different? As you age, your sense of taste and smell may change, and foods may seem to lose flavor. Try extra spices, herbs, or lemon juice to add flavor. Also, medicines may change how food tastes. They can also make you feel less hungry.

Talk to your doctor if this is a problem.

Maybe some of the foods you used to eat no longer agree with you. For example, some people become lactose intolerant. They have stomach pain, gas, or diarrhea after eating or drinking something with milk in it. Your doctor can test to see if you are lactose intolerant.

Are you finding it harder to chew your food? If you have dentures, maybe they do not fit, or your gums are sore. If so, a dentist can help you. Until then, you might want to eat softer foods that are easier to chew.

These are just a few possible problems older adults may have with eating. For more information, visit www.nia.nih.gov/health/overcoming-roadblocks-healthy-eating.

Do Older Adults Need to Drink Water?

With age, you might lose some of your sense of thirst. Don't wait until you feel thirsty to drink water or other fluids. Unless your doctor has told you to limit fluids, drink plenty of liquids like water, milk, or broth.

Try to add liquids throughout the day. You could try low-fat soup for a snack or drink a glass of water when you take a pill. Don't forget to take sips of water, milk, or juice between bites during a meal.

Snacking

Snacks are okay, as long as they are smart food choices. If you want an afternoon pick-me-up or after-dinner snack, have a piece of fruit, or spread peanut butter or low-fat cream cheese on whole wheat toast. Don't forget to include snacks in your daily food count. For example, 1 tablespoon of peanut butter spread on a slice of whole wheat toast counts toward the protein foods group and the grains group. Some ideas for healthy snacking include:

- Have an ounce of cheese with some whole grain crackers, a container of low-fat or fat-free yogurt, or a 1-ounce portion of unsalted nuts.
- Put fruit instead of candy in the bowl on your coffee table.
- Keep a container of washed, raw vegetables in the fridge along with hummus or other healthy dips.
- To limit your portion sizes, don't eat from the bag. Count out a serving and put the bag away.
- When you are out and need a snack, don't be tempted by a candy bar. Instead, take along homemade trail mix in a plastic bag when you go out. If you need to buy a snack while you are on the go, pick up an apple or banana—most convenience stores carry them.

What About Fiber?

Fiber is found in foods from plants—fruits, vegetables, beans, nuts, seeds, and whole grains. Eating more fiber can help prevent stomach or intestinal problems, like constipation. It might also help lower cholesterol and blood sugar.

It is better to get fiber from food than dietary supplements. Start adding fiber slowly. That will help avoid gas. Here are some tips for adding fiber:

- Eat cooked dry beans, peas, and lentils.
- Leave the skin on your fruit and vegetables if possible but wash them first.
- Choose whole fruit over fruit juice.
- Eat whole grain breads and cereals.

Should I Cut Back on Salt?

The usual way people get sodium is by eating salt. The body needs sodium, but too much can make blood pressure go up in some people. Many foods contain some sodium, especially those high in protein. However, most fresh fruits and vegetables do not have much sodium. Salt is added to many canned, boxed, and prepared foods.

People tend to eat more salt than they need. If you are 51 or older, about 1 teaspoon of table salt—2,300 milligrams (mg) sodium—is all you need each day. That includes all the sodium in your food and drink, not just the salt you add. If you have high blood pressure or prehypertension, try to limit sodium to

1,500 mg, or about $\frac{2}{3}$ teaspoon, per day.

Try to avoid adding salt during cooking or at the table. Eat fewer salty snacks and processed foods, such as lunch meats, potato chips, or frozen dinners.

Look for the word sodium, not salt, on the Nutrition Facts panel. Choose foods labeled “low sodium,” “no salt added,” “unsalted,” or “salt free.” The amount of sodium in the same kind of food can vary greatly among brands, so check the label.

Here’s a tip: Spices, herbs, and lemon juice add flavor to your food, so you won’t miss the salt.

What About Fat?

Fat in your diet comes from two places—the fat already in food and the fat added when you cook. Fat gives you energy and helps your body function, but it is high in calories. Some types of fat, like mono- and polyunsaturated fats, provide your body with important nutrients and can be good for you in the right amounts. Other types of fat, like *trans* fat and saturated fat, can be bad for your health. To lower the fat in your diet:

- Choose cuts of meat, fish, or poultry (with the skin removed) with less fat. Trim off any extra fat before cooking.
- Use low-fat or fat-free dairy products and salad dressings.
- Choose unsaturated fats, such as olive, canola, or vegetable oil, for cooking. Check the label.

- Don’t fry foods. Instead, broil, roast, bake, stir-fry, steam, microwave, or boil them.

Keep Food Safe

As you grow older, you must take extra care to keep your food safe to eat. It is harder for you to fight off infections, and some foods could make you very sick.

Handle raw meat, poultry, seafood, and eggs with care. Keep them apart from foods that won’t be cooked or are already cooked. Use hot, soapy water to wash your hands, tools, and work surfaces as you cook.

Don’t depend on sniffing or tasting food to tell what is bad. Try putting dates on the foods in your fridge. Check the “use by” date on foods. If in doubt, toss it out.

Make sure food gets into the refrigerator no more than 2 hours after it is bought or cooked. Use or freeze leftovers within 3 to 4 days.

Can I Afford to Eat Right?

If your budget is limited, it might take some planning to be able to pay for the foods you should eat. Here are some suggestions:

- Buy only the foods you need—a shopping list will help.
- Buy only as much food as you will use. If you buy in bulk, buy only as much as you can use before it goes bad.

- Choose foods with plain (generic) labels or store brands—they often cost less than name brands.
- Plan your meals around food that is on sale.
- Divide leftovers into small servings, label and date, and freeze to use within a few months.

Federal Government programs are available to help people with low incomes buy groceries. To learn more about these programs or find your Area Agency on Aging, contact the Eldercare Locator (see below).

For More Information About Healthy Eating

To learn more about the DASH diet:

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

1-301-592-8573

nhlbiinfo@nhlbi.nih.gov

www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health-topics/dash-eating-plan

To find out about nutrition, meal programs, or getting help with shopping:

Eldercare Locator

1-800-677-1116 (toll-free)

<https://eldercare.acl.gov>

Federal Government Nutrition Websites:

www.choosemyplate.gov—Get resources for healthy eating.

www.foodsafety.gov—Learn how to cook and eat safely.

www.nutrition.gov—Learn more about healthy eating, food shopping, and assistance programs.

National Library of Medicine MedlinePlus

www.medlineplus.gov

USDA Food and Nutrition Information Center

National Agricultural Library

1-301-504-5755

fnic@ars.usda.gov

www.nal.usda.gov/fnic

For more information on health and aging, including nutrition and exercise, contact:

National Institute on Aging Information Center

1-800-222-2225 (toll-free)

1-800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

niaic@nia.nih.gov

www.nia.nih.gov

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