

Good Nutrition Can Help Older Adults Maintain Their Health

NEWARK, Del. — If health is wealth, it pays to maintain good eating habits — especially for older adults. "While food alone can't make you healthy, eating right can help maintain and improve your health," according to Dr. Sue Snider, University of Delaware extension food and nutrition specialist.

"The average American consumes too many calories from fats and simple sugars," Snider says, and she recommends that around 30 percent of daily calories come from fats, more than 50 percent from carbohydrates, and the remainder from proteins. Complex carbohydrates, such as those found in beans, peas, nuts, seeds and whole grain products, provide essential nutrients in contrast to simple carbohydrates, such as sugar, which provide little more than calories.

What nutritional areas should older people pay special attention to? One important nutrient is calcium, which is most commonly found in milk and milk products.

Calcium helps keep bones and teeth strong, but many older adults neglect this mineral. "Most adults think that only children need milk to make their bones strong," Snider says. "But if you don't consume enough calcium, your body will take it from your bones, which will then become thin and break more easily."

Eventually this bone-thinning may lead to osteoporosis — or "porous bones" — a major health problem for older adults that can result in serious fractures and tooth decay.

It's never too late to retard bone loss, the nutrition specialist says. At any age, increasing calcium intake helps prevent further thinning. Also, moderate weight-bearing exercise, such as walking, helps keep bones strong.

Adults should consume 800 mg of calcium a day — about the equivalent of two glasses of milk. But milk isn't the only source. The following items each contain the approximate calcium content of

one 8-ounce glass of milk:

- 1 ounce Swiss cheese,
- 1½ ounces Cheddar cheese,
- 1½ cups cooked spinach,
- 1 cup collard greens,
- 3 ounces sardines with bones.

While inexpensive calcium supplements containing dolomite or bone meal are available, Snider doesn't recommend these because they may also contain dangerous levels of lead or mercury. The preferred source of calcium is from food, which also provides other essential nutrients.

Consumption of fluids and fiber is another important dietary consideration for older adults. "Many people are unaware that water is an essential nutrient," Snider says. "It helps carry waste from the body in the form of urine and helps keep stools soft. The body requires more water than thirst suggests. A good guide is to drink six to eight glasses a day; coffee and tea don't count."

Most people, including older adults, should also increase their fiber intake, the specialist says. Eating more fiber in addition to drinking more liquid helps reduce constipation and the need for laxatives — a common problem among older adults. Fruits, vegetables and whole grain breads and cereals are good sources of fiber.

Vitamins and minerals are a frequent concern for older people as well. But people who eat a wide variety of foods in adequate amounts rarely need supplements. If supplements are required, be wary of claims which suggest that certain vitamins delay aging or have other magical powers. Snider also advises, "Don't be fooled into thinking that so-called organic or natural vitamins are superior to synthetic ones. The least expensive generic brands provide the same benefits as higher-priced natural ones."

Megadoses of vitamins — up to ten times the Recommended Daily Allowance — are also potentially hazardous. Loss of appetite, bone tenderness, liver enlargement or

other dangerous side effects can result, especially with fat soluble vitamins A, D, E, and K.

A critical concern for older adults is the interaction between drugs and nutrients, Snider says. Sometimes medications affect the nutritional status of an individual, or the diet may affect the function of a drug. Vitamins and minerals are most likely to be affected by medications. Mineral oil, for example, often used as a laxative, impairs absorption of vitamins A, D, E, and K, while insufficient vitamin D can impair calcium and phosphorus absorption. Alleviating one problem can cause another!

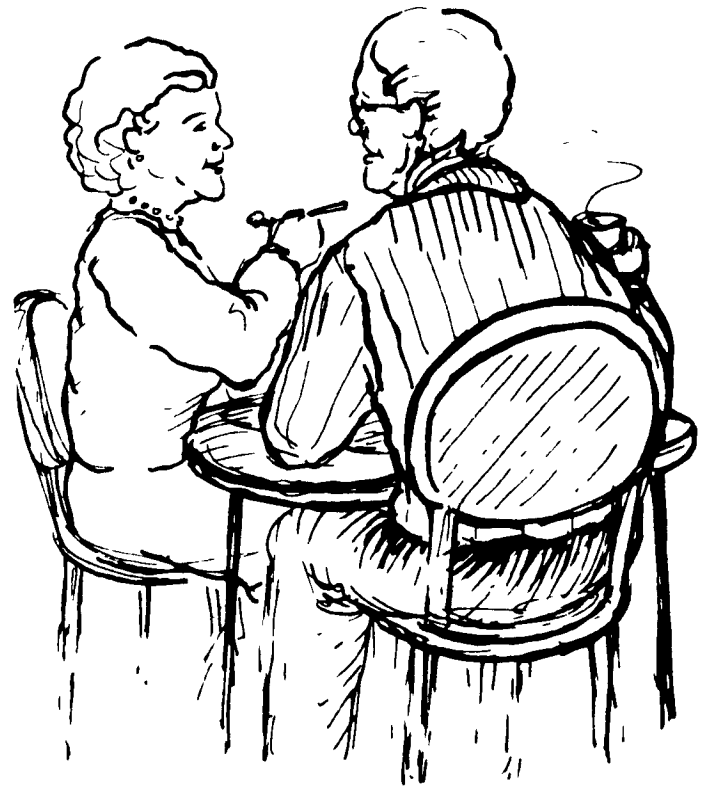
The best advice is to ask a pharmacist or doctor for information about the possible nutritional effects of any medication. Be sure to tell the doctor or pharmacist about all medications being taken, both prescribed and over-the-counter. Ask about how the drug works, possible side effects, foods or drinks which may adversely affect the medication, and precautions which should be taken while on the medication. And always follow instructions on medication labels.

Some general food eating guidelines can help maintain a healthy body:

- Cut calories. Older people need the same nutrients they did when they were younger. But since they're probably less active, they need fewer calories. Low-nutrient, high-calorie foods such as fats, oils and sugars should be avoided. Extra weight can be shed by reducing calories and increasing activity.

- Consume less fat and cholesterol. Choose lean cuts of meat, trim excess fat from meats, and use eggs and organ meats moderately.

- Some older people have trouble chewing, but they can still eat well by choosing softer foods such as peanut butter, fish or cottage cheese. Stews, soups or cooked foods are both nutritious and easy to chew. Or use a blender or food processor to make foods more manageable.



BACK HOME

By Michelle S. Rodgers

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Homesickness Isn't Terminal!

Band camp, soccer camp, church camp, 4-H camp, and scout camp. Every family I come in contact with seems to be getting ready for camp. Even I'm gearing up for our annual youth group camping event. Some parents rejoice when the kids finally get packed and leave for a week or so. Other parents are more anxious and upset about the separation than the kids are!

Regardless of what kind or where the camp, homesickness is common to every camp. The symptoms are similar in each case. This epidemic strikes every year, most often at bedtime and can last from a few minutes to all week. It doesn't even seem to be limited to a certain age group... it is just expressed differently depending on age.

Probably 95 percent of us have experienced homesickness at one time or another. I remember counting down days when I went to church camp. I was really glad to be there, but still there was a nagging tug to go home and Mom's letters were always welcomed at the mid-week point. I remember, too, a recent three-week study tour in Israel. I described my feelings that first week as "cultural shock". In reality, it was probably a mature sounding way of saying, "I'm homesick!"

If someone in your family is leaving for camp or just a few days away at grandma's, read on for some measures you can take to prevent it.

In general, the parents who take an active interest in camp and prepare their kids for a fun, full week of activities are least likely to get desperate letters or phone calls from "this prison called camp."

Discovering on the first day that you don't like the food, activities, or your roommate is enough to make anyone depressed. Perhaps talking with the camp director or a former camper about these points will help to reassure your child.

One 4-H family has a tradition that helps to combat homesickness with laughter. Every traveling member of that family can expect to find something silly tucked in his or her suitcase after arriving at the destination. Usually it has some sort of significant meaning to the traveler, but not too sentimental. A stuffed animal, one spare sock, a can of baked beans, or a plastic spoon are possible silly tradition starters. Pictures of family and pets often succeed only in making the traveler think about home, so avoid these types of things.

Talk about camp in positive ways. It is best to expect the camper to have a terrific time while reassuring your child that life will go on as usual at home. Parents sometimes try to ease the pressure by saying, "If you get homesick, just call... We'll come and get you." This effectively tells the child that he won't be able to get over the homesickness by himself, and doesn't have to try. That's too easy! Phone calls and mushy letters from home have the same effect — a reminder of what he's missing.

Dealing with homesickness when it happens is miserable for the affected person and frustrating for those who try to soothe him. My parents always vowed that the only way to ever get over homesickness was to stick it out to the end — never, never give in and go home. Although I hate to say "never," maybe they were right after all.

I do agree that honesty is the best policy when dealing with homesick kids. Telling them exactly when they will be going home, sticking to it, and then filling the hours with lots of activities will help to make the gnawing thoughts of home fade away comfortably and provide a week of fun memories.

And on that reassuring note — I'll pack my own bags for our camping event. I doubt I'll have much of a chance to get homesick when surrounded by 30 teens!

Taste and Smell Sensations Diminish With Age

NEWARK, Del. — You've prepared Grandpa's favorite meal. But when you sit down to eat, he takes a bite and says, "It just doesn't taste like it should." After working so hard to please him, his comment may seem like a slap in the face. But before you react in anger, consider that Grandpa may have a reduced ability to taste because of his age.

Debbie Amsden, University of Delaware extension home economist, says an elderly person's declining ability to taste may lead to conflict in family relationships if it is misunderstood. Because his taste buds have changed, Grandpa is unable to detect the flavors that he used to.

Dr. Patricia Tanner Nelson, extension family specialist, says, "After the age of 50, the ability to perceive the four taste sensations — sweet, sour, salty and bitter — declines. Most people over 65 have lost half of this ability. By the late

70's, the average person has one-sixth the taste sensitivity of a 20-year-old. Studies indicate that people lose the ability to taste sweet and salty flavors first. They can taste bitter and sour flavors well into old age."

Along with causing conflict in the family, this loss can lead to malnourishment, says Amsden. Many people stop eating because nothing tastes good to them. Others eat too much while trying to achieve a taste sensation. These people may put excessive amounts of sugar, salt or seasonings on their food and ruin the flavor for a younger person.

Bland or low-salt diets can make food less appealing, as can poor health, ill-fitting dentures, lack of energy, and reluctance to prepare meals for just one person.

To encourage eating, Amsden says food should be prepared and served attractively. Distinctive and varied textures, colors and temperatures add to the en-

joyment. Portions for the elderly can be more highly spiced. People who chew thoroughly, and take alternate bites of different foods, derive more enjoyment from their meals.

"If a person needs help to eat, don't mix different foods together," says the home economist. "Mixing makes it impossible to distinguish separate flavors. Also, be sure meals are served at a moderate temperature. Dishes that are too cold or too hot limit the taste. People notice temperature first; if it is extreme, that may be all they notice."

In addition to loss of taste, Nelson notes that older people have difficulty identifying common smells. Studies indicate that the sense of smell is often the first sensory system to decline with age, beginning as early as the late 30s or early 40s.

Because two-thirds of the ability to taste depends on the ability to smell, this loss may also depress appetites in the elderly. In addition, a person may no longer be able to smell body or household odors that are offensive to others. Odors warning of smoke, gas or spoiled foods may be undetected. Smoke alarms and pilot lights can decrease the potential hazard that loss of smell creates, especially for persons living alone.

Families should understand that it is normal for people to lose some of the ability to taste and smell as they grow older. So if Grandpa says his food doesn't taste right, chances are it's because of his age, not your cooking.

