

# NUTRITION FOR SENIORS

CARING FOR YOUR PARENTS: EDUCATION FOR THE FAMILY CAREGIVER®



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**We've all heard the adage: "an apple a day keeps the doctor away". Certainly getting enough fruits and vegetables in your diet is good thing and should be a lifelong practice – but as we age our bodies and internal systems slow and change.** Illnesses can pop up that can require a modification in what we can and can't eat. Also we may not have the same get-up-and-go we had even in mid-life, so we need to reduce our caloric intake.

Helping our elderly parents manage their diets and eating habits can offer them numerous benefits including increased cognitive function, resistance to illness, higher energy levels, an improved immune system, faster recuperation times, and better management of chronic health issues.

You don't have to be a nutritionist to help your parents with their diet, you just need some simple guidance about making healthy choices. In this workshop, we'll talk about why proper nutrition is important and what can happen if your senior loved one doesn't have good eating habits. Then, we'll give you some simple ways to help your parents shop for good food and eat right. Finally, we'll share some pointers for specific dietary and health concerns and places where you can get additional help and information.

## **WHY PROPER NUTRITION IS IMPORTANT FOR SENIORS**

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As our parents age, a number of changes occur that can make eating less enjoyable, reduce appetites, and even make the act of cooking a meal feel more like a task than a pleasure. These changes may include:

- **Lifestyle changes.** If one of your parents has passed away, your newly single mom or dad may not know how to cook or may not feel like cooking for one. Or a limited budget might make it hard to afford a balanced, healthy diet.
- **Lower levels of activity.** Seniors often cut back on activities for physical and medical reasons. If they continue to eat the same amount of calories, weight gain can result. Increased weight can also come with the normal slow-down in our metabolism because the body is burning fewer calories.
- **Diminished sense of taste and smell.** As their senses diminish, your parents may be inclined to season and salt their food more heavily than before – even though they need less salt. It may also mean that they can't distinguish food that's gone bad and could potentially eat something that makes them sick. A loss of taste and smell can also make eating less enjoyable so they might not eat at all, which can result in weight loss.
- **Changes in appetite.** These changes can result from loneliness, a medical condition or prescription medications.
- **Changes in digestive system.** As your parents' age, it can become more difficult for them to process certain vitamins and minerals, such as vitamin B12, B6 and folic acid, which are necessary to maintain mental alertness, a keen memory and good circulation.

All of these challenges might seem overwhelming but there are ways you can help your parents overcome these situations. Start by following these important guidelines for seniors:

- Reduce sodium (salt) to help prevent water retention and high blood pressure,
- Monitor fat intake in order to maintain healthy cholesterol levels,
- Consume more calcium and vitamin D for bone health,
- Eat more fiber-rich foods to prevent constipation,
- Cut back on sugar and on dry foods,
- Make sure to get the recommended amount of important vitamins and minerals,

- Increase water intake, and
- Participate in regular physical activity – about 30 minutes three times a week.

Healthy eating can keep your parent’s body and mind sharp and extend quality of life. While both men and women need to practice good eating habits, each gender has some specific needs that need to be met:

Older Men	Older Women
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Older men need <b>calcium</b> and <b>vitamin D</b> to help maintain strong and healthy bones. <b>Fiber</b> helps keep bowel functions normal and is good for the heart. Increasing <b>potassium</b> intake along with decreasing <b>sodium</b> (salt) may lower a man’s risk of high blood pressure.</li> <li>• For weight control and overall health, it is recommended men should limit fat calories to 20 to 35% of their diet. Most of the fats should come from heart-healthy <b>unsaturated fats</b> such as extra-virgin olive oil, canola oil, walnuts, almonds and avocados.</li> <li>• Healthy older men without heart disease should limit their <b>saturated fat</b>, which comes from meat, full-fat dairy and fried foods, to 10% of their total fat calories. Men with <b>high cholesterol</b> need to reduce that amount to 7%.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women benefit from a <b>balanced and varied diet</b>. It should include plenty of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean protein, dairy, healthy fat and fluids.</li> <li>• In particular, older women typically need <b>calcium</b> and <b>vitamin D</b> to keep bones and teeth strong, <b>zinc</b> for wound healing and good vision and <b>vitamin B12</b> for energy and cognitive function.</li> <li>• Older women often do not feel thirsty, even when they need fluids, putting them at risk for <b>dehydration</b>. They need to drink water and fluids like 100% juices often throughout the day.</li> </ul>

Of course, every senior should consult with their doctor to discuss dietary requirements, and to determine which supplements and vitamins may be best suited to the senior’s specific health needs.

**Notes:**

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## LACK OF PROPER NUTRITION AND HYDRATION

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So how do you know if your senior loved one's diet fits the bill? Simple monitoring of your parent's situation can help. Here are **ten warning signs** that might signal a potential problem:

1. **Loss of appetite.** If your senior has always been a hearty eater but no longer eats as he or she used to, it's time to find out why. An underlying illness could be the root cause. Or it could be problems with ill-fitting dentures or other pain while chewing.
2. **Stopped going out to eat.** Ask yourself: "Did mom and dad used to love eating out and now they rarely if ever go out to their favorite restaurant?" If so, ask them about the change to determine if there is a problem.
3. **Depression.** Watch for signs of depression, this can be signaled by a change in appetite.
4. **Sudden weight fluctuation.** A weight change – losing or gaining 10 pounds in six months – could mean that something is amiss.
5. **Expired or spoiled food.** Check the refrigerator, as your parents could be saving food until it's no longer safe to eat. If they end up eating something they shouldn't it could lead to illness that could severely weaken them.
6. **Skin tone.** If your parents are eating properly, their skin should look healthy and well-hydrated.
7. **Lethargy.** If your loved one has regularly been active but suddenly becomes lethargic, it could mean an improper diet.
8. **Cognitive problems.** Seniors who live alone might forget to eat. Dementia and cognitive problems can lead to nutritional deficiencies.
9. **More than three medications.** Medication can influence both appetite and weight. Check with your parent's doctor to find out if the medications could be a culprit.
10. **A recent illness or a hospital stay.** Be sure to keep tabs on your loved one's recovery to make sure they're eating properly.

What should you do if you suspect your senior loved one isn't eating right?

- **Sit down and have a talk with your parent.** Tell them what you've noticed and that you are concerned. Listen carefully to find out what they have to say. Also, be sure to let them know that their symptoms might be easily cleared up with some simple dietary changes.
- If you suspect medication or an illness might be to blame, **suggest a visit to their primary care physician** and offer to go along. Be sure to take along a list of current medications, any recent illnesses they might have experienced, and signals of poor nutrition that you noticed. With this information in hand, the doctor can best diagnose the problem. The doctor may suggest some simple blood tests that can help reveal any potential medical problems.
- **Consider nutritional supplements**, including drinks and pudding. You might also ask your parent's doctor if a **nutritionist or dietician** would be helpful, especially if there are medical conditions, such as diabetes, that need to be taken into consideration during meal preparation.
- **Suggest a visit to the dentist**, if you think dental or jaw problems are to blame.

## HELPING YOUR SENIOR EAT RIGHT

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You can help your senior eat right by making trips to the grocery store more organized and productive. Here are **ten tips** to help you get started.

1. **Make a list.** Sit down with your parents and make a list of what they want to eat for the week. Pre-planning can cut down on time and money.
2. **Don't shop hungry.** Shoppers are always tempted to buy more when they're hungry, so eat before hitting the aisles.
3. **Clip coupons.** Review store ads, clip coupons and organize them at home.
4. **Invite a friend.** The resulting companionship makes the task of grocery shopping easier and more fun.
5. **Discount programs.** Sign up for a grocer's bonus or discount card. Seniors can reap additional savings and take advantage of grocery store specials.
6. **Try store brands.** Store brands that may be cheaper and just as good are often placed higher or lower on the grocery shelves. So remind your parents to look up and down for better bargains.
7. **Think variety.** Encourage your parents to try new foods or ethnic alternatives.
8. **Shop the perimeter.** Have your parents focus on the perimeter of the store. That's where most of the fresh, healthier foods are located.
9. **Watch for sales.** Stock up on sale items by choosing only as much as your senior can use in a timely manner.
10. **Budget wisely.** Remind your parents to use their food budget wisely. For the price of a large bag of chips and a box of cookies, they can buy a good supply of apples, bananas, carrots, potatoes, peppers and other healthier foods.

In general there are **twelve staples** your senior shouldn't live without. They may seem like common foods for any healthy diet, but these foods hold special nutritional value for seniors and can be used in a variety of recipes:

<b>Oatmeal</b>	A great source of fiber, oatmeal has been shown to help lower bad cholesterol and may reduce the risk of heart disease and stroke.
<b>Eggs</b>	With only 75 calories per serving, eggs contain 13 essential vitamins and minerals, including vitamin D, important to absorbing calcium needed for bone strength.
<b>Yogurt</b>	Rich in calcium, yogurt can contribute to the calcium requirement needed to prevent osteoporosis. Good bacteria is added to some yogurt, which may help people with digestive problems that often accompany aging.
<b>Blueberries</b>	These blue beauties are among the top fruits and vegetables for antioxidants. Research on aging and Alzheimer's disease reveals that blueberries may also improve memory and coordination.
<b>Apples</b>	The benefits of apples are numerous. In particular, the pectin in apples lowers the body's need for insulin and may help in the management of diabetes.
<b>Fish</b>	Bluefish, mackerel, salmon, sardines, trout and tuna are all a low-fat, high-protein source of nutrients. The American Heart Association recommends fatty fish twice a week to improve heart health.

<b>Chicken</b>	Poultry is an excellent source of protein that contains less fat than most meats. Chicken also has niacin and selenium, which possess cancer-fighting properties.
<b>Broccoli</b>	A good source of multiple nutrients including vitamins K, C, E, B, calcium and iron, broccoli has been found to protect against cancer, heart disease, stroke and macular degeneration.
<b>Soy</b>	Nutritionists recommend consuming up to one serving a day of soy as a replacement for foods high in saturated fats. Some studies have shown that soy improves bone health. Be sure to consult your doctor before adding soy to a senior's diet.
<b>Sweet potatoes and squash</b>	Sweet potatoes provide beta carotene and vitamins C and E, all of which promote healthy skin, hair and eyesight. Squash is a good source of beta carotene and vitamin C.
<b>Rice</b>	As a complex carbohydrate, rice digests slowly, allowing the body to utilize the energy released over a longer period of time, which is nutritionally efficient.
<b>Dark chocolate</b>	And for dessert, dark chocolate. Consumed in moderation, this high-calorie, high-fat food may contribute to health benefits such as boosting HDL cholesterol (known as good cholesterol) and lowering blood pressure.

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## HELPING YOUR SENIOR EAT RIGHT: ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

Beyond helping with grocery shopping, you can help your senior eat right by making cooking and eating more enjoyable.

Dr. Nadine Sahyoun, a nutrition expert at the University of Maryland, suggests making eating a happy event. She says sometimes we focus too much on what we can't eat and don't give enough attention to what food represents to us. Dr. Sahyoun says food is at the core of our lives – it's about aroma, color, feel, texture and socializing. All of this is what makes a meal enjoyable and is what should get our attention.

If there are issues with reduced taste and smell, or if your parent lives alone, there are a number of ways that you can help make cooking and eating more enjoyable and appealing for them:

- **Encourage variety.** To keep their daily menus interesting, and healthy, seniors will want to mix up their food choices – particularly within each food group – every day.
- **Suggest gradual improvements.** Start out by focusing on just one thing to change. For example, if food tastes too bland, suggest they try some natural flavor enhancers, which are also good for them. Some good choices are olive oil, vinegar, garlic, onions and spices, including cinnamon, cloves, and ginger. These spices are also good for people who need to cut back on salt.

**Tip**

Each senior's diet plan is individual. If your parent has reached age 75 and has not developed heart disease or cancer, you don't need to recommend any different food intervention. They've already found a meal plan that works.

- **Assemble healthy snacks at home.** Store the snacks in small baggies using foods such as nuts and seeds, low-fat cheese, fresh vegetables and fruits. This is healthier and less expensive than buying prepackaged and processed snacks.
- **Do some "batch cooking".** When the food budget and time allows, cook larger amounts (for example, spaghetti sauce), then divide it into small-size portions and freeze promptly to use for meals later in the month.
- **Take advantage of planned leftovers.** This can cut preparation time and save food dollars. For example, prepare a roast, serve half of it, and freeze the remaining half to use later with vegetables, for a quick soup, or in other dishes.
- **Mix up meals.** Who says your parents can't have lunch for breakfast or breakfast for dinner? Try vegetable soup and a tuna sandwich on pumpernickel bread at breakfast, or an omelet, bran muffin and fresh fruit for dinner. Variety is the spice of life.

## SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

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For some seniors, there are specific circumstances that may have an impact on healthy eating. For instance, if your senior loved one can't get to the grocery store or shop alone there are a number of possibilities for help depending on their living situation, finances and needs.

**Many grocery stores have delivery services.** Check the Internet or call a local grocery store to see if they accept phone or internet orders.

Another option is that either you or your parent could **ask a friend, neighborhood teen or college student** if they would be willing to do the shopping in exchange for sharing a meal. This solves two needs at once: buying groceries and providing dining companionship for your senior loved one.

There are also **professional cooks** who will prepare nutritionally balanced meals, often for a week at a time which can then be frozen. They can usually accommodate special diets. Check your local telephone book, senior center or the Internet to find a personal chef in your area.

Consider setting up **home care services** through a professional firm. Many of these service providers can do the shopping and meal preparation for a fee.

**Meals on Wheels** is a great option which provides nutritious meals to people who are homebound, disabled, or would otherwise be unable to maintain their dietary needs. The daily delivery generally consists of two meals:

- a nutritionally balanced hot meal to eat at lunch time, and
- dinner consisting of a cold sandwich and milk, along with varying side dishes.



In an effort both to cover costs and to maintain the elders' sense of dignity, the programs charge a small fee based on the individual's ability to pay.

For many, **companionship** makes more enjoyable. If this is a concern for your senior loved one, there are a number of options to consider:

- Contact the **local senior center, YMCA, congregation or high school**, and ask about senior meal programs.
- Encourage your senior **to take a class, volunteer or go on an outing** all of which can lead to new friendships and dining buddies. Your parents should also invite friends or acquaintances to share potluck lunches and dinners on a rotating basis. Not only will it add variety to all of their diets, it's a great way to meet new people and broaden interests.
- If your parents are a distance away from you, suggest **adult day care centers** which provide both companionship and nutritious meals for seniors who are lonely or unable to prepare their own meals.

**Diabetes** is another factor that requires special attention. According to the American Diabetes Association, more than 18% or approximately 8.6 million Americans age 60 and older have diabetes. The prevalence of the disease increases with age, and the risk of developing type 2 diabetes also increases with age.

Seniors face unique diabetes challenges. For those with type 2 diabetes, age causes a decline in insulin production and an increase in glucose intolerance. Older Americans are also more likely to have complicating conditions such as retinopathy, hypertension, and kidney problems.

A **registered dietitian**, preferably one who is also a **certified diabetes educator** (CDE) or is experienced in diabetes care, is an essential resource for learning more about individualized menu planning and good choices to help your senior loved one best manage his or her diabetes.

The best diet for a person with diabetes is really the same kind of healthy eating that is best for everyone. This means:

- **Focus on whole foods** that are high in fiber and nutrient-dense, including virtually all plant foods, most dairy products, lean meat, poultry, and fish.
- **Avoid highly processed foods** which are often full of refined flour and sugar.

#### Did you know...?

Unlike a diet that involves what you *can't* eat, nutritional management of diabetes usually involves dietary changes that balance moderation, carbohydrate control, and healthy eating choices.

There are many sources of helpful information on healthy senior nutrition. Explore the websites below, and check with local and state government agencies as they can help direct you and your senior loved one to reputable services available in the local area.

<b>National Institutes of Health –</b> National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK)	<a href="http://www.niddk.nih.gov">www.niddk.nih.gov</a>
<b>U.S. National Library of Medicine</b>	<a href="http://www.nlm.nih.gov">www.nlm.nih.gov</a> - click “Read about diseases”
<b>dLife – For Your Diabetes Life</b>	<a href="http://www.dlife.com">www.dlife.com</a>

