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Older Americans: Nutrition Tips

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What we eat plays a large role in how the body functions. As we age, we need to adjust our diets to accommodate for changes in our bodies. Many Americans over the age of 65 are diagnosed with medical conditions that can benefit from improved eating habits. Here we discuss some of the most common health problems faced by older Americans and how diet can help manage them.

Managing Health Conditions

Weight Management

Since older adults are more likely to have health conditions, it is very important to maintain their weight so the body is strong enough to fight any issue or disease. Many older adults have a decreased intake, so it's important to be mindful of weight status and make sure they aren't losing weight unintentionally. Unplanned weight loss and sarcopenia (muscle loss) could lead to malnutrition or a depleted immune system in an older adult.

Oral Health

Oral health issues such as missing teeth, loose teeth, dentures or dysphagia (trouble swallowing) can make eating undesirable, as chewing and swallowing can be difficult and painful. In order to avoid malnutrition and unintended weight loss, food can be soft or minced to make

eating easier. Older adults should focus on keeping their mouth healthy through proper cleanings at home and at the dentist, eating more calcium-rich foods such as dairy and green leafy vegetables and choosing water over sugar-sweetened beverages.

Neurocognitive Disorders

Similarly to oral health, someone who suffers from a neurocognitive disorder such as dementia can have a loss of appetite and difficulty eating, swallowing, and chewing. These people should be monitored to make sure they are eating enough and may need help feeding themselves. To encourage intake, mealtimes should be calm, person-centered and food can be broken down into small, distinct bite-sized portions.

Cardiovascular Disorders (CVD)

CVD is any illness that affects the heart and blood vessels. A healthy diet can minimize the risk of CVD conditions such as hypertension and atherosclerosis (blocked arteries), as well as heart attacks, strokes, heart failure and kidney disease. Choose monosaturated fats (like olive oil and avocado) and polyunsaturated fats (like canola oil and nuts) over trans-fat and saturated fat. Omega-3 fatty acids are encouraged, which are found in fatty fish such as salmon, mackerel and tuna. Limit sodium intake to 1,500-2,300 mg per day. When evaluating a food label on packaged foods, use the 5%-20% rule of thumb: 5% or less is low, and 20% or more is high. Keep sodium and saturated fat low, and vitamins, minerals and fiber high

Diabetes

Diabetes is a disease that comes with many complications such as kidney disease, eye problems, muscle weakness, reduced cognition, possible amputations and obesity. Sustaining a healthy diet, managing your carbohydrate intake and engaging in regular physical activity are imperative for controlling blood glucose levels and avoiding any further complications. Opt for brown rice, whole fruits and vegetables, whole wheat bread and whole grains instead of white rice, juice, white bread and other refined carbohydrates.

Bone Health

Older Americans are particularly susceptible to osteopenia (weak bones) and osteoporosis (very weak bones). Bone health is important in older Americans as fractures are more common and bones get weaker as we age. Consuming vitamin D and calcium are vital to bone health, as they help keep them strong. Sources of calcium include dairy products, fortified soy or juice, tofu and canned fish with bones, while you can get vitamin D from fortified milk, eggs, fish and sunlight. Vitamin K, magnesium and protein are also important nutrients for proper bone function.

Stress and Mental Health

Often the aging process and its associated stress can diminish quality of life. There are various reasons for increased stress among older adults. Life events such as retirement, illness, and loss of loved ones (and the accompanying grief) can lead to long-term activation of the body's stress response. This can impair the immune system's ability to fight disease and increase the risk of physical and mental health problems. Stress and anxiety in older adults are associated with increased physical problems and difficulty in carrying out activities of daily living (ADLs); increased health problems; and decreased sense of well-being and satisfaction with life. Coping with stress and anxiety is essential for older adults and it comes in many forms. It is helpful to stay physically active (modified as needed), to engage in social activities, and hobbies that bring enjoyment.

Looking for more information on how to care for older adults in your life? Our nutrition booklet and fact sheets can help!

[Download Nutrition Tips for Older Adults](#)



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Diet can help manage some of the most common health problems faced by older Americans. Here's how.



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