

Partners in Care

6 Vital Nutrition Tips for Aging Adults

As people age, their diets may need to change, especially if their diets are not well-balanced. According to Ruth Frechman, registered dietitian and spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association, in addition to eating a healthful variety of foods, there are specific things a caregiver can incorporate into their their loved one's diet to boost his or her health.

Prepare meals rich in these nutrients:

- **Omega 3 fatty acids:** The acids have been proven to reduce inflammation, which can cause heart disease, cancer and arthritis. They can be found in flaxseeds and flaxseed oil, walnuts, canola oil, and different types of fish.
- **Calcium:** The need for calcium increases as people age. This is primarily to preserve bone health. One added benefit of calcium is that it helps to lower blood pressure. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that adults over the age of 50 get at least 1200 milligrams per day of calcium —equal to about four cups of fortified orange juice, dairy milk, or fortified non-dairy milks such as almond or soy. Leafy greens like kale and turnip greens are also great sources of absorbable calcium.
- **Limit sodium content:** For those with hypertension (high blood pressure) one of the most important things caregivers can do to help reduce a loved one's hypertension is to prepare foods that are low in sodium. Frozen, processed and restaurant foods are typically extremely high in sodium, and should be avoided or only be a very small part of the diet. Fresh and frozen fruits and vegetables, dry beans, unsalted nuts and nut butters, and grains like brown rice and oats are all foods that are naturally low in sodium.
- **Hydrate:** As people age, they do not get thirsty very often, even though their bodies still need the same amount of liquids. If you notice that your loved one is not drinking liquids very often, make sure that you provide them with it. If you are concerned that your loved one may not be properly hydrated, check his or her urine. If their urine is clear and light, then they are most likely properly hydrated. If, however, their urine is dark and/or cloudy, they will need to start drinking more liquids.



6 Vital Nutrition Tips for Aging Adults (cont.)

Making dietary changes can be difficult for anybody. It can be especially difficult for older adults, though, because people get stuck in habits. If your loved one needs to make dietary changes to increase their health and well-being, there are specific things that you, the caregiver, can do to help with the change. Frechman recommends three important areas in which caregivers can help.

- **Incorporate changes gradually:** Older people are usually skeptical of change. They need to make small changes gradually. For example, if your parent is diabetic and needs to adjust their carbohydrate intake consistency, incorporate oatmeal as breakfast once or twice per week. As they get used to it, oatmeal can be added to three to four times per week.
- **Set an example:** When an older adult has to change their diet for health reasons, they can feel singled out. When sitting down for a family meal, don't make a special meal for your aging loved one and something different for everybody else. By eating with them and eating the same foods as them, the dietary changes being made won't seem so drastic.
- **Make smoothies:** Sometimes older adults simply refuse to make necessary nutritional changes, even if they are doctor recommended. People with dementia, especially, may refuse to eat certain things. Be creative. If your loved one needs protein, try making them a smoothie with wheat germ. Wheat germ is not a supplement that may interact with prescription medications, but an actual food with very high amounts of protein.

For more information on healthy eating habits for your elderly parent, visit the American Dietetic Association American Dietetic Association website.

Adapted from an article by Emilee Seltzer, originally written for AgingCare.com, an online resource that connects family caregivers, shares informative articles, provides answers and support through an interactive Caregiver Forum, and offers search capabilities for senior living options for elderly loved ones.