

AgePage

Healthy Eating After 50

“I have trouble chewing.”

“Food just doesn’t taste the same anymore.”

“I can’t get out to go shopping.”

“It’s too much trouble to cook for one person.”

“I’m just not that hungry.”

Sound familiar? These are a few common reasons some older people don’t eat healthy meals. But, making healthy food choices is a smart thing to do—no matter how old you are!

Here are some tips to get you started:

- ◆ Eat many different colors and types of vegetables and fruits.
- ◆ Make sure at least half of your grains are whole grains.
- ◆ Eat only small amounts of solid fats, oils, and foods high in sugars. Limit saturated fat (found mostly in foods that come from animals) or trans fats (found in foods like some margarines, shortening, cookies, and crackers).

Two Plans for Healthy Eating

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans from the U.S.

Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) suggest two eating plans. Eating a variety of foods from each food group in either plan will help you get the nutrients you need.

One plan is called the USDA Food Guide (also known as MyPyramid). It suggests that people 50 or older choose healthy foods every day from the following:

Fruits—1-1/2 to 2-1/2 cups

What is the same as 1/2 cup of cut-up fruit? One medium whole fruit or 1/4 cup of dried fruit

Vegetables—2 to 3-1/2 cups

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

Grains—5 to 10 ounces

What is the same as an ounce of grains? One roll, a small muffin, a slice of bread, 1 cup of flaked, ready-to-eat cereal, or 1/2 cup of cooked rice, pasta, or cereal



Meat/beans—5 to 7 ounces

What is the same as an ounce of meat, fish, or poultry? One egg, ¼ cup of cooked beans or tofu, ½ ounce of nuts or seeds, or 1 tablespoon of peanut butter

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

What is the same as 1 cup of milk? One cup of yogurt or 1-½ to 2 ounces of cheese. One cup of cottage cheese is the same as ½ cup of milk.

Your doctor may have suggested that you follow a certain diet because you have a health problem like heart disease or diabetes. Or, you might have been told to avoid eating certain foods because they can change how well your medicines work. Talk to your doctor or a registered dietitian 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, sodas, and alcohol.

The second eating plan is called the DASH Eating Plan. DASH stands for Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension. Following this plan will help you lower your blood pressure. See the resources at the end of this Age Page for more information on 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. You use the energy you get from food to do the things you need to do each day.

Just counting calories is not enough for making healthy choices. For example, a medium banana, 1 cup of flaked cereal, 2-½ 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 of the nutrients you might need than others do. Milk gives you more calcium than a banana, and peanut butter gives you more protein than cereal. And a banana is likely to make you feel fuller than a tablespoon of peanut butter.

Here's a tip: In the USDA Food Guide, eating the smallest amount suggested for each food group gives you about 1,600 calories. The largest amount has 2,800 calories.

How Much Is on My Plate?

How does the food on your plate compare to how much you should be eating? For example, one very large chicken breast could be more from the meat/beans group than you are supposed to eat in a whole day. Here are some general ways you can check:

- ◆ 3 ounces of meat, poultry, or fish = deck of cards
- ◆ ½ cup of fruit, rice, pasta, or ice cream = ½ baseball
- ◆ 1 cup of salad greens = baseball
- ◆ 1-½ ounces of cheese = 4 stacked dice
- ◆ 1 teaspoon of butter or margarine = 1 dice (or die)
- ◆ 2 tablespoons of peanut butter = ping pong ball
- ◆ 1 cup of flaked cereal or a baked potato = fist

Having Problems With Food?

Does your favorite chicken dish taste different? As you grow older, your sense of taste and sense of smell may change. Foods may seem to have lost flavor. Also, medicines can change how food tastes. They can also make you feel less hungry. Talk to your doctor about whether there is a different medicine you could use. Try extra spices or herbs on your foods to add flavor.

As you get older, you might not be able to eat all the foods you used to eat. For example, some people become *lactose intolerant*. They have symptoms like stomach pain, gas, or diarrhea after eating or drinking something with milk in it, like ice cream. Most can eat small amounts of such food or can

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 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: Get at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity on most, if not all, days of the week.

Read the Label

At first, reading labels on many packaged foods may take some time. The facts there can help you make better food choices. Labels have a Nutrition Facts panel. It tells how much protein, carbohydrates, fats, sodium, key vitamins and minerals, and calories are in a serving. The panel also shows how many servings are in the package—be careful because sometimes what you think is one serving is really more.

Each can, bottle, or package label also has an ingredients list. Items are listed from largest amount to smallest.

try yogurt, buttermilk, or hard cheese. Lactose-free foods are available now also. Your doctor can test to see if you are lactose intolerant.

Is it harder to chew? Maybe your dentures need to fit better, 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.

Do I Need To Drink Water?

With age, you may lose some of your sense of thirst. Drink plenty of liquids like water, juice, milk, and soup. Don't wait until you feel thirsty. Try to drink several large glasses of water each day. Your urine should be pale yellow. If it is a bright or dark yellow, you need to drink more liquids.

Be sure to talk with your doctor if you have trouble controlling your urine. Don't stop drinking liquids. There are better ways to help bladder control problems.

What About Fiber?

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

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

- ◆ Eat cooked dry beans, peas, and lentils often.

- ◆ Leave skins on your fruit and vegetables if possible.
- ◆ Choose whole fruit over fruit juice.
- ◆ Eat whole-grain breads and cereals.

Drink plenty of liquids to help fiber move through your intestines.

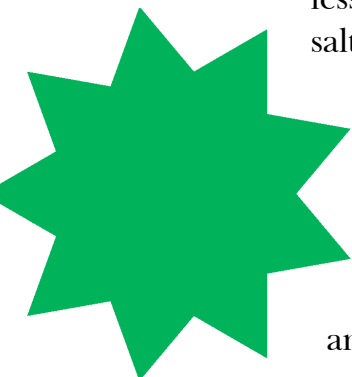
Should I Cut Back on Salt?

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. Most fresh food contains some sodium. Salt is added to many canned and prepared foods.

People tend to eat more salt than they need. If you are over age 50, about $\frac{2}{3}$ of a teaspoon of table salt—1,500 milligrams (mg) of sodium—is all you need each day. That includes all the sodium in your food and drink, not just the salt you add when cooking or eating. If your doctor tells you to use

less salt, ask about a salt substitute. Some contain sodium.

Also, don't add salt during cooking or at the table, and avoid salty snacks and processed foods.



Look for the word sodium, not salt, on the Nutrition Facts panel. Choose foods labeled “low-sodium.” Often, the amount of sodium in the same kind of food can vary greatly between brands.

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

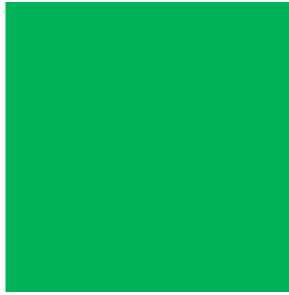
What About Fat?

Fat in your diet comes from two places—the fat already found in food and the fat added when you cook. Fat gives you energy and helps your body use certain vitamins, but it is high in calories. 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 dairy products and salad dressings.
- ◆ Use non-stick pots and pans, and cook without added fat.
- ◆ Choose an unsaturated or monosaturated vegetable oil (check the label) or a nonfat cooking spray.
- ◆ Instead of frying, broil, roast, bake, stir-fry, steam, microwave, or boil foods.

Keeping Food Safe

Older people must take extra care to keep their food safe to eat. As you get older, you are less able to fight off infections, and some foods could make you very sick.



Be sure to fully cook eggs, pork, fish, shellfish, poultry, and hot dogs. Talk to your doctor or a registered dietitian, a nutrition specialist, about foods to avoid. These might include raw sprouts, some deli meats, and foods that are not pasteurized (heated to destroy disease-causing organisms), like some milk products and juices in the refrigerated section of the grocery.

Before cooking, handle raw food with care. Keep it apart from foods that are already cooked or won't be cooked, like salad, fruit, or bread. Be careful with tools—your knife, plate, or cutting board, for example. Don't cut raw meat with the same knife you will use to make a salad. Rinse raw fruits and vegetables before eating. Use hot soapy water to wash your hands, tools, and work surfaces as you cook.

As you get older, you can't depend on sniffing or tasting food to tell if it has gone bad. Try putting dates on foods in your refrigerator. Check the "use by" date on foods. If in doubt, toss it out.

Here's a tip: Make sure food gets into the refrigerator no more than 2 hours after it is cooked—whether you made it yourself or brought it home from a restaurant.

Can I Afford To Eat Right?

If your budget is limited, it might take some thought and planning to be able to pay for the foods you should eat. Here are some suggestions. First, buy only the foods you need. A shopping list will help with that. Before shopping, plan your meals, and check your supply of staples like flour and cereal. Make sure you have some canned or frozen foods in case you do not feel like cooking or cannot go out. Powdered, canned, or ultra-pasteurized milk in a shelf carton can be stored easily.

Think about how much of a food you will use. A large size may be cheaper per unit, but it is only a bargain if you use all of it. Try to share large packages of food with a friend. Frozen vegetables in bags save money

because you can use small amounts and keep the rest frozen. If a package of meat or fresh produce is too large, ask a store employee to repackage it in a smaller size.

Here are other ways to keep your food costs down:

- ◆ Plain (generic) labels or store brands often cost less than name brands.
- ◆ Plan your meals around food that is on sale.
- ◆ Prepare more of the foods you enjoy, and quickly refrigerate the leftovers to eat in a day or two.
- ◆ Divide leftovers into small servings, label and date, and freeze to use within a few months.

Food stamps from the Federal Government help people with low incomes buy groceries. You may be able to enjoy free or low-cost meals for older people at a community center, church, or school. This is a chance to eat good food and to be with other people. Home-delivered meals are available for people who are homebound. To learn more about these programs, contact the Eldercare Locator listed under *For More Information* to find your local Area Agency on Aging.

For More Information

Here are some helpful resources.

To learn about the DASH diet:

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

Box 30105

Bethesda, MD 20824-0105

1-301-592-8573

1-240-629-3255 (TTY)

www.nhlbi.nih.gov

To learn more about nutrition, meal programs, or help with shopping:

Eldercare Locator

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

www.eldercare.gov

Federal Government nutrition websites:

www.nutrition.gov — learn more about healthy eating, food shopping, assistance programs, and nutrition-related health subjects

www.healthierus.gov — learn how to follow a healthier lifestyle

www.mypyramid.gov — USDA MyPyramid Food Guide

www.foodsafety.gov — learn more about how to cook and eat safely

**National Library of Medicine
MedlinePlus**

www.medlineplus.gov

**USDA Food and Nutrition
Information Center**

10301 Baltimore Avenue
Room 105
Beltsville, MD 20705-2351
1-301-504-5414

www.nal.usda.gov/fnic

For more information on health
and aging, contact:

**National Institute on Aging
Information Center**

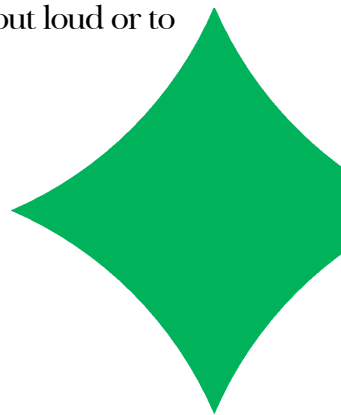
P.O. Box 8057
Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057
1-800-222-2225 (toll-free)
1-800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

www.nia.nih.gov

www.nia.nih.gov/Espanol

To sign up for regular email alerts
about new publications and other
information about the NIA, go to
www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation.

Visit NIHSeniorHealth
(*www.nihseniorhealth.gov*), a senior-
friendly website from the National
Institute on Aging and the National
Library of Medicine. This website has
health information for older adults.
Special features make it simple to use.
For example, you can click on a button
to have the text read out loud or to
make the type larger.



National Institute on Aging

National Institutes of Health
U.S. Department of Health and
Human Services
June 2008

Reprinted February 2010

