[IMAGE]

Nutrition for Older Adults

By Editorial Staff

The older body has unique nutritional requirements. It really boils down to four things: eating quality food, choosing the proper supplements, limiting alcohol consumption, and considering natural alternatives to prescription drugs.

Our bodies change considerably as we age. While many of these changes are obvious, some are not. The nutritional needs of an older body are very different from a younger one. As young people, we could work long hours, eat poorly, and otherwise neglect our bodies - and still keep going. As mature adults, our bodies just won't tolerate that kind of abuse.

Our bodies are now more sensitive to what we feed them. When we provide our bodies with the right nutrition, they respond well. When we don't, it can cause serious problems. Neglect your body long enough and you are almost certain to be the victim of a serious, if not life-threatening, ailment.

There are essentially four areas to consider when looking at caring for the older body nutritionally: eating quality food, choosing the right nutritional supplements, reducing alcohol consumption, and using extreme caution with prescription drugs.

Woman holding large bowl of vegetables. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark **Quality Food**

As a mature adult, your days of living on sugar and junk food should be behind you. If they aren't, your diet may be preventing you from enjoying the optimal health you desire. At this age, what you eat has a tremendous impact on your health and how you feel:

- Fresh fruits and vegetables help give you the nutrients your body needs, provide simple carbohydrates for energy and also aid in digestion.
- Eating protein every day in sufficient amounts will give you the consistent, "slow-burning" energy you need for the day's activities.
- Consumption of seafood once a week has been shown to improve cognitive skills and reduce memory loss.

- Intake of complex carbohydrates (sugars) should be reduced to a minimum. While these will give you instant energy, they also will leave you flat after the "sugar high" and can contribute to unwanted weight gain.
- Preservatives and MSG can cause reactions that are more severe than when you were young. This is also true of restaurant food. Be sure the food you are eating is freshly prepared.

Obesity/Overweight: Sadly, less than 40 percent of older Americans are the weight they should be. A quarter of all men and half of all women over age 65 in America are considered overweight. Obesity is associated with diabetes mellitus, hypertension, coronary artery disease and several forms of cancer (breast, colon, uterine). It is important to note that body shape may be more important than body mass: Central or truncal fat (i.e., around or above the waistline) is more closely associated with cardiovascular diseases, stroke and diabetes than fat centralized around the hips.

Undernutrition: This occurs in 5 percent to 20 percent of seniors and is related to increased rates of mortality, infection, osteoporosis and degenerative diseases. Other causes include anorexia; cancer; chronic obstructive pulmonary disease; congestive heart failure; depression; hypothyroidism; and malabsorption of nutrients. Protein and vitamin/mineral deficiencies are common in these individuals; although people require fewer calories as they age, they should not reduce nutrient intake.

The right diet makes a big difference in your way of life; it can even make you more attractive. A study from the *Journal of the American College of Nutrition* found that higher consumption of vegetables, olive oil and monounsaturated fat and legumes, and a lower intake of milk/milk products, butter, and sugar products, reduced skin wrinkling. The mechanism behind this may be related to reduced oxidation of the skin achieved by consuming vegetables, legumes and olive oil.

Unfortunately, most of us don’t think too much about what we eat. That’s a big mistake, particularly as we age. Consider keeping a journal of what you eat over the course of a week or two. You may find this very revealing. Think about changes you should make based on a review of your dietary journal, and take your journal in on your next appointment and ask your doctor for suggestions about how you can improve your diet.

Keeping yourself at the appropriate weight and staying fit are keys to living a long, active, attractive life. What you eat plays a major role in both.

Bulletine board with healthy tips pinned to it. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark **The Right Nutritional Supplements**

Like it or not, the current research clearly points to nutritional supplementation as an effective way to maintain the health of older adults. There is a long list of benefits associated with vitamins. Among these, vitamins help in the fight to retain bone mineral density, fend off cancer and even protect your eyesight.

Reduced bone mineral density is probably your biggest enemy to an active life. As we age, our bones generally become smaller and more brittle. The danger of a life-impairing fracture from a fall becomes more real. The good news is, your bones don't have to deteriorate. A study in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* found that increased amounts of magnesium, potassium, and overall fruit and vegetable intake, increased bone mineral density. Other studies have found that magnesium, K_1 and D_3, and calcium also improve bone mineral density.

We all need to keep our bones strong and healthy, but for women, it's absolutely crucial. Women are especially susceptible to bone loss because they start out with less natural bone tissue than men and lose it faster with age (especially after menopause, when estrogen, a hormone that protects your bones, is no longer produced in large quantities).

Antioxidants are also important for mature adults. Antioxidants such as vitamins C and E can improve your immune function and play a role in the prevention and treatment of specific diseases associated with age. These two vitamins also can reduce the risk of some types of cancer, including prostate cancer.

These same antioxidants can improve your eyesight as well. A study presented in the *Archives of Ophthalmology* found that high daily doses of antioxidants (vitamin C - 500 milligrams; vitamin E - 400 IU; beta-carotene - 15 mg) and zinc (80 mg) lowered the risk of age-related macular degeneration by 28 percent.

Another study found that taking a vitamin D_3 supplement along with calcium may be a more effective way for older women to lower their systolic blood pressure. The researchers noted that vitamin D_3 regulates the body's calcium levels. Calcium, in turn, helps to regulate blood pressure, although the mechanism is not completely understood.

A study in the *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition* found that forms of folic acid are co-factors for enzymes involved in a number of metabolic processes, including DNA synthesis. Deficiencies in folic acid

and vitamin B_{12} have been reported to be fairly common, particularly within the elderly population.

You should talk to your doctor about the right multivitamin for you, taking into consideration your age, gender and level of physical activity. You will want to look at additional supplements, depending on your cholesterol level, digestive needs, bone density and other health issues you may be facing.

Notepad and pen with food journal notes. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark Consider keeping a journal of everything you eat over the course of a week or two. You may find this very revealing. Review your journal with your doctor. The bottom line: Combined with exercise and a good diet, nutritional supplements can greatly increase your quality of life and extend your good years.

Reduced Alcohol Consumption

While drinking to your health seems like a great tradition, it has certain drawbacks, particularly for older adults.

Research published in *Gerontology* found that even light drinking significantly raises blood pressure in middle-aged and elderly subjects (ages 40-69), and only significantly decreases unhealthy cholesterol levels in those younger than 60 years. Heavy drinking at all ages significantly increases blood pressure, despite positively affecting cholesterol levels.

As an easy alternative, consider increasing your intake of filtered water. Dehydration can cause disease. More than one-third of older adults (age 60 or older) have inadequate water consumption. Water offers a number of important benefits. Here are just three:

- Water aids in digestion and metabolic processes. Water transports nutrients to cells and takes wastes away from the cells.
- Water curbs the appetite.
- Water aids in healthy kidney function. During dehydration or insufficient water intake, the kidneys must compensate and kidney stones may form.

Extreme Caution With Prescription Drugs

Reports of the consequences of ADEs (adverse drug events) are constantly in the media. Whether it’s a report of a dangerous drug that has been pulled off the market, or the number of hospital deaths associated

with ADEs, the warning signs are all around. As one group of medical researchers noted in an essay published in the *New York Times*, "Not all treatments have important benefits, but almost all can have harms."

According to two studies published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association,* the estimated prevalence of "inappropriate" medication use in the elderly population ranges from 12 percent to 40 percent; and more than 90 percent of individuals age 65 or older may use at least one medication each week, while up to 40 percent may use five or more drugs per week. The extensive medication use by older adults suggests that significant numbers of patients are affected by preventable adverse drug events. The authors of one of the *JAMA* studies conservatively estimated that among older adults, nearly 2 million ADEs - a half-million of which are preventable and 180,000 of which are fatal or life-threatening - are suffered annually in the U.S.

A cheese burger and fries. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark Most of us dont think too much about what we eat. However, thats a big mistake, particularly as we get older. Make the appropriate changes *today.* A third study noted that fatal adverse drug events are "a major problem in hospitals, especially in elderly patients with multiple diseases." In the study, the likelihood of a fatal ADE was directly related to increases in age, number of diseases and number of drugs used.

What all of the above evidence leads us to is that the use of drugs should be avoided whenever possible. Consult with your doctor about alternative ways to address health challenges - ways that are more nutritionally focused and less drug-focused.

Your body is seeking better food and the right nutritional supplements to keep you active and vibrant. Supplying what your body needs and restricting what can harm it will go a long way toward giving you the highest quality of life for years to come.

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