

New recommendations focus on how nutritional needs change as we age

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Older adults “need to be a little more careful about choosing food,” says Alice H. Lichtenstein. “The amount of nutrients per calorie should be relatively high.”

Credit: Depositphotos

Eating right as an older adult takes a bit more effort. Even if you stay the same weight as you age, you have less lean muscle mass and your

metabolism slows down, which means you need fewer calories than you once did. At the same time, your nutrient needs stay the same or even increase. Your body may have trouble absorbing certain nutrients, such as B12 and magnesium.

That's why making every bite count is even more important for seniors.

"One needs to be a little more careful about choosing food. The amount of nutrients per calorie should be relatively high," says Alice H. Lichtenstein, director of the Cardiovascular Nutrition Laboratory at the Jean Mayer USDA Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging (HNRCA) at Tufts.

To help, Lichtenstein and other HNRCA scientists, with the support of the AARP Foundation, recently released an updated MyPlate for Older Adults, a graphic that provides an at-a-glance overview of what constitutes a [healthy diet](#). On May 18, representatives from the HNRCA and the AARP Foundation will meet with policymakers and advocates for older adults in Washington, D.C., to present the graphic and discuss the nutritional needs of seniors, who often don't get enough of important nutrients. Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., chair of the House Hunger Caucus, will be the featured speaker.

While this is the fourth iteration of the graphic since 1999, its creators say it has never been more important to get such tools into the hands of those who can benefit the most.

A recent survey by the AARP Foundation found that while interest in eating nutritious foods increases with age, understanding of nutrition labels declines. "There is a real need to fill that gap and ensure [older adults](#) have the knowledge and resources they need when they are choosing what to eat," says Alex Lewin-Zwerdling, a senior advisor for the AARP Foundation's Hunger Impact Program.

MyPlate for Older Adults is based on the [2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#), and its overarching advice could apply to adults of any age. But the graphic and accompanying website provide tips and reminders that are particularly suited to the needs and concerns of seniors.

Lichtenstein, who served as vice chair of the 2015 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee, says one of the goals is letting seniors know that they have options. As with the familiar MyPlate put out by the federal government, the MyPlate for Older Adults recommends that half of what seniors eat should be fruits and vegetables.

But getting to the store regularly for fresh produce may be difficult for those who no longer drive, or who "may be reluctant in the winter to go out, especially if they think it is going to be icy," Lichtenstein says. That's why the modified graphic gives equal prominence to frozen fruits and vegetables, as well as to low-sodium canned versions, which have longer shelf lives.

MyPlate for Older Adults

Fruits & Vegetables

Whole fruits and vegetables are rich in important nutrients and fiber. Choose fruits and vegetables with deeply colored flesh. Choose canned varieties that are packed in their own juices or low-sodium.

Healthy Oils

Liquid vegetable oils and soft margarines provide important fatty acids and some fat-soluble vitamins.

Herbs & Spices

Use a variety of herbs and spices to enhance flavor of foods and reduce the need to add salt.



Fluids

Drink plenty of fluids. Fluids can come from water, tea, coffee, soups, and fruits and vegetables.

Grains

Whole grain and fortified foods are good sources of fiber and B vitamins.

Dairy

Fat-free and low-fat milk, cheeses and yogurts provide protein, calcium and other important nutrients.

Protein

Protein rich foods provide many important nutrients. Choose a variety including nuts, beans, fish, lean meat and poultry.



Remember to Stay Active!



The graphic also acknowledges that seniors may no longer be cooking for a big family, or even a spouse. "With a bag of pre-peeled carrots or frozen broccoli, you can snip it open and just take out a single serving," she says.

Protein and Heart-Healthy Fats

While the general MyPlate gives dairy its own space, the modified MyPlate points out that cheese and yogurt have something in common

with fish, eggs, poultry and nut butter. "We moved them into the protein quadrant because dairy is an excellent source of high-quality protein," Lichtenstein says. Some studies have indicated that our need for protein may even increase as we age.

Also with age, people's sense of thirst may decline, and certain medicines increase the risk for dehydration. So the new MyPlate for Older Adults makes a special note of the various ways to get enough fluid in your diet: water, tea, coffee, soups and even many fruits and vegetables.

The graphic also depicts vegetable oils and soft margarines, which provide heart-healthy fats, and reminds seniors to stay active with exercises such as walking, biking and swimming. Recognizing that our sense of taste may change as we age, but that sodium intake may be a concern, the MyPlate for Older Adults encourages the use of herbs and spices, rather than salt, for flavor.

Seniors need more calcium and vitamin D to maintain bone and muscle health, and increasing potassium may lower the risk of developing high blood pressure. Simin Nikbin Meydani, director of the HNRCA and its Nutritional Immunology Laboratory, says that optimal nutrition is particularly important for fighting off illness when we get older. With age, some parts of the immune system start to overperform—resulting in inflammation—and some parts start to underperform—making us more susceptible to infections.

"You have to think of the immune system as a factory," she says. "The factory needs to be ready as soon as it is attacked to produce all kinds of defensive mechanisms. And in order to produce those defensive weapons, it needs to have protein, essential amino acids, essential fatty acids, all kinds of micronutrients. And if you don't have that, it can't make what it needs to get rid of those pathogens."

Infections can also take away appetite and decrease the body's ability to metabolize nutrients, further decreasing the immune system's arsenal. "It becomes a vicious cycle," Meydani says.

Even small changes, such as switching from iceberg lettuce to nutrient-rich spinach in a salad, could make a difference in overall health. (Add in some carrots, apples and berries while you're at it.) All it may take is a pictorial reminder.

"It's very important to have easy ways of helping [seniors](#) achieve a healthy diet through user-friendly tools such as MyPlate for Older Adults," Meydani says.

Provided by Tufts University

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