On nutrition: Index of healthy eating

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Halloween is over and the candy bags are empty. Now begins the season of favorite foods and traditions. And with each passing year, I'm reminded that I want to be around for many more.

I recently listened to a fascinating webinar sponsored by the Linus

Pauling Institute at Oregon State University. "Keeping Life in Your Years: Dietary Factors Affecting Healthspan and Longevity" was presented by Dr. Tory Hagen, professor of biochemistry and lead researcher for the Healthy Aging Research program at Oregon State.

Lest we dismiss this information as just for old people, Dr. Hagen remind us that the natural, irreversible process of aging begins in our 30's. In fact, he defines "middle age" (when we begin to experience physical deterioration) as those years after our 30th birthday. Gulp.

Among other factors that affect how fast and well we age, Dr. Hagen's team is especially interested in diet. In fact, he says that our day to day food choices have an extremely strong influence on our overall health, even to advanced age.

"A high quality diet (compared to a low quality diet) causes you to have a 37% decrease in mortality incidence (dying) after the age of 65," says Hagen. "That's quite good! And this decreased risk of dying is associated with a lower risk for chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer."

In other words, when we focus on eating a higher quality diet, we have a higher chance of staying well.

How do we know if we have a high or low quality diet? Researchers use a tool called the Healthy Eating Index to see how well we align with the USDA Dietary Guidelines for Americans. On a scale of 0 to 100, a score of 80 or higher indicates a high quality diet. A score of 50 or less is considered a poor quality diet. Incidently, in the latest survey of Americans, those of us over the age of 60 scored a 59.5.

How can we improve? A recent article in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* describes how the Healthy Eating Index is scored.

If you eat around 2,000 calories a day, for example, you get a maximum score if you eat about a cup of fruit a day (bonus score for whole fruit rather than juice). Your best score for vegetables is a little over two cups a day with extra points for greens and beans.

Score high if you eat at least three ounces of whole grains each day which includes cereals, breads, crackers and popcorn and five or more ounces of protein foods each day, which includes beans and peas as well as lean meat, poultry, eggs and soy foods. Score additional points if you include seafood and plant-based proteins in your [diet](#).

Maximum points are also earned for eating a higher percentage of poly- and monounsatured fats than saturated fats. (Check your food labels to get this information.)

Leave out any of these [food](#) groupings and your score for each group drops to zero.

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