



KENDAL[®]
at Oberlin
Together, transforming the experience of aging.[®]

Feed Your Body Right: Nutritional Needs After 50

No matter your age, a healthy, balanced diet allows you to feel and look your best while helping prevent or manage serious health issues, such as heart disease, diabetes, osteoporosis, and even some cancers. Certain foods have even been shown to enhance brain function, increase mental performance, and decrease the risk of memory loss for older adults. However, getting adequate nutrition as you age can be challenging.

In this guide, we discuss how your nutrient needs change as you age. We also identify nutrients that are key to maintaining your health and explore the foods you should be eating to ensure you're giving your body the fuel it needs to keep you active and healthy.



Your Changing Dietary Needs

One of the joys of growing older is refining your palate. According to [MedlinePlus](#), a service of the U.S. National Library of Medicine, we are born with more than 10,000 taste buds in our mouths, with most of them on the surface of our tongue. As we age, we have fewer and fewer taste buds, and those we have become less sensitive as the nerves that send taste signals to our brain wear out over time.

Unfortunately, that de-sensitization never ceases. As a result, many adults over 50 experience a decline in the sense of taste. Older adults tend to lose sensitivity to salty and bitter tastes first, so you may be inclined to salt your food more heavily than before. On the other hand, older adults tend to retain the ability to distinguish sweet tastes the longest, leading some to overindulge in sugary foods and snacks.

And that's not all that changes! Every year over 40, [our metabolism slows](#). If you continue to consume the same number of calories as you did when you were younger, you will likely gain weight. This is especially true for those who are less physically active. The number of calories you need to consume begins to decline with age, so every calorie you take in should be packed with nutrition.

Understanding what is happening to your body is the first step in taking control of your nutritional status. The next step is building the foundation of a healthy diet.

How Many Calories Do Older Adults Need?

The number of calories you need each day depends on your age, gender, and activity level. The chart below lists average calorie levels for adults 51 years and over according to the [Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics](#).

ACTIVITY LEVEL	WOMEN 51+	MEN 51+
Sedentary (not active)	1,600	2,000
Moderately active	1,800	2,200 to 2,400
Active	2,000 to 2,200	2,400 to 2,800

Foods to Eat to Maintain a Balanced Diet

Eating a variety of healthy foods from all food groups can help you get the vitamins and nutrients your body needs as you age. According to the [Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics](#), a healthy eating plan for adults 50+ emphasizes fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat or fat-free dairy. It includes meat, poultry, fish, beans, and nuts and is low in saturated fats, trans fats, cholesterol, salt (sodium), and added sugars.

Here are some of the best foods older adults should try to include in a nutritious diet:

- **Berries:** Berries are an excellent source of vitamin C, fiber, potassium, and magnesium. Their dark, brightly colored skins contain phytochemicals and flavonoids—powerful antioxidants that occur naturally in plants—that may reduce cancer risk. [According to a study at Brigham and Women's Hospital](#) in Boston, eating flavonoid-rich blackberries and strawberries may delay cognitive aging by as much as 2.5 years. Blueberries and cranberries may help prevent bladder infections, while blueberries and raspberries contain lutein, which promotes healthy vision.
- **Citrus Fruits:** While oranges aren't a good source of iron themselves, foods high in vitamin C assist in the absorption of iron. Vitamin C is a [powerful antioxidant](#) and helps support your immune function. Other foods high in vitamin C include red and yellow peppers and tomatoes.
- **Dark, Leafy Greens:** Dark Leafy greens have many health benefits, one of which is providing iron to your body. One cup of cooked spinach has 36 percent of your daily requirement. Other good choices are Swiss chard, turnip greens, and kale. Broccoli, a dark, non-leafy green, is full of vitamins and minerals that support your overall health. Broccoli contains calcium and vitamin K, both of which have been linked to bone health.
- **Tomatoes:** Tomatoes are rich in lycopene, a powerful antioxidant that may help protect cells against free-radical damage that has been associated with the development of dementia, Alzheimer's disease, and heart disease.



- **Squash and Pumpkin Seeds:** Squash has many nutrients that are beneficial to your heart health, including vitamin C, potassium, magnesium, and folate. Pumpkin seeds are good dietary sources of magnesium. Sesame and sunflower seeds run a close second.
- **Whole Grains:** Whole-grain bread, cereals, and pasta are high in folic acid and vitamins B6 and B12, which may help improve memory. These complex carbohydrates release food energy slowly over time, which can help maintain steady blood sugar levels throughout the day. Whole grains are also rich in fiber, which protects against heart disease, promotes regularity, and more.
- **Milk and Yogurt:** Dairy products are also high in calcium, but recent studies show not all dairy products are equal when it comes to bone health. Low-fat milk and yogurt contribute to better hip bone density, according to a recently released Institute for the Aging study. Eating low-fat milk and yogurt are also better for your overall health because they have lower levels of saturated fat. Fortified dairy products like milk are also high in vitamin D.
- **Lean Meat, Beans and Nuts:** When you're choosing meats for your dinner table, it's best to pick lean cuts like beef with little or no marbling or skinless chicken breast. Nonmeat sources of protein, like legumes, are also good for your health. Plus, they have the added benefit of increasing your daily fiber intake. Nuts are a good source of protein, but should be eaten in moderation since the fat content is high.



- **Fish:** Omega-3 fatty acids found in fatty fish may decrease triglycerides, lower blood pressure, reduce blood clotting, and more, according to the Mayo Clinic. Fatty fish are also high in vitamin D. Two servings of fish per week are recommended for older adults as part of a nutritious, low-fat, heart-healthy diet, but not all fish are equally nutritious. Choose wild Alaskan salmon, wild-caught Pacific halibut, Pacific white albacore tuna to get the most out of your meals.

Filling Your Plate With the Right Portions

Healthy eating does not only involve choosing the right kinds of foods; it also requires you to eat the right amount of each kind of food. Knowing the appropriate amounts of food to consume can help you maintain a balanced diet and prevent over or under eating.

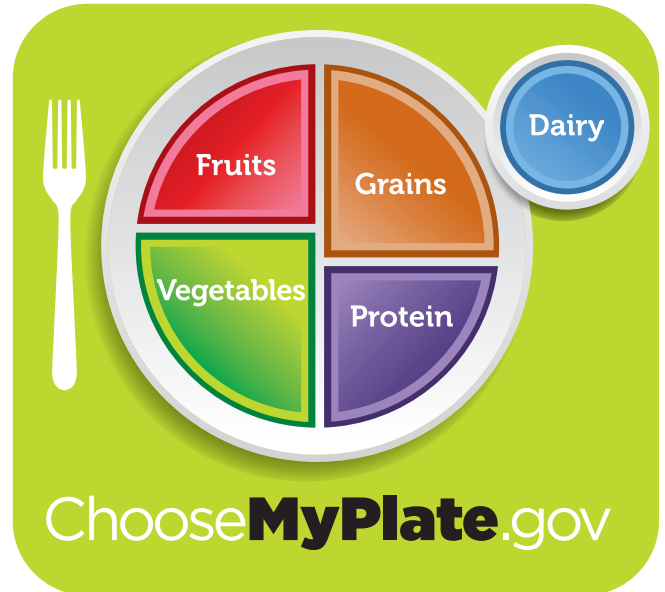
In 2011, nutrition scientists at the Jean Mayer USDA Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging (USDA HNRCA) at Tufts University released [MyPlate for Older Adults](#), a nutritional tool created specifically for older adults in correspondence with MyPlate, the federal government's food group symbol.

MyPlate for Older Adults shows you the exact portions and examples of foods you should have on your plate. These include:

- Brightly colored vegetables
- Deeply colored fruit
- Whole, enriched, and fortified grains and cereals
- Low- and non-fat dairy products
- Dried beans, nuts, fish, poultry, lean meats, and eggs
- Liquid vegetable oils, soft spreads low in saturated fat, and spices to replace salt. (Try to avoid trans fats!)
- Fluids, especially water

MyPlate for Older Adults also promotes physical activity through formalized exercise routines as well as daily errands and household chores, reminding older adults that there are a variety of options for regular physical activity.

www.kao.kendal.org



The Skinny on Snacking

According to research conducted by Richard Mattes, professor of foods and nutrition at Purdue University, Americans now get 25 percent of their daily calories from snacks. Since the 1970s, Dr. Mattes research shows that the average American's snack consumption has increased to about 580 calories per day, the equivalent of a full meal!

Snacks can play a beneficial role in a healthy diet. According to Everyday Health, eating small, healthy snacks between meals can help stabilize blood sugar, curb your appetite between meals, and provide a needed boost of energy in the late afternoon.

The trick to healthy snacking is to limit daily snack intake to 100 to 200 calories. Keep your fridge and pantry stocked with wholesome snack options like baby carrots, hummus, pita chips, yogurt, string cheese, fresh fruit, and veggies.

Should I Take Vitamins?

For some individuals, vitamins or multivitamins may be a convenient way to ensure you're getting all of your nutrients. [According to WebMD](#), at least half of older adults age 65 and above take daily vitamins and other supplements.

If you are generally healthy and eat a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, low-fat dairy products, lean meats, and fish, you likely do not need supplements.

Older adults who may need supplements in their diets include:

- Those who do not eat well or consume fewer than 1,600 calories per day
- Those not often exposed to sunlight
- Vegans or vegetarians who eat limited varieties of food
- Those with a medical condition that affects how the body absorbs or uses nutrients, which may include food allergies or intolerance or a disease of the liver, gallbladder, intestines, or pancreas
- Those who have had digestive tract surgery and are unable to digest and absorb nutrients properly



GETTING VITAMINS FROM YOUR FOOD

Eating a wide variety of foods helps you meet your daily vitamin and mineral requirements.

- Calcium is found in milk, cheese, yogurt, spinach, collard greens, and sardines.
- Vitamin B12 is found in meat, fish, dairy, eggs, and fortified soy products and cereals.
- Vitamin C is found in fresh fruits and vegetables like citrus fruits, berries, melon, red and green peppers, dark leafy green vegetables, potatoes, and tomatoes.
- Vitamin D is found in fatty fish, fortified cereals, oysters, fortified dairy products, eggs, and mushrooms.
- Magnesium is found in dark leafy greens, nuts and seeds, fish, beans and lentils, and whole grains.
- Potassium is found in white beans, dark leafy greens, baked potatoes, dried apricots, avocados, mushrooms, and bananas.

For more information vitamin requirements for older adults, visit [Discovery fit & health](#).

If you aren't getting your recommended daily allotment of certain foods, supplements may be a useful way to get nutrients you might otherwise be lacking. But supplements aren't intended to be a food substitute. Adding a supplement to your diet does not mean you can suddenly scarf down your all-time favorite salty dinners or decadently rich desserts and forgo your fruits and vegetables.

Talk to your doctor or a registered dietitian before taking any vitamin or mineral supplements. When speaking with your doctor, remind him or her of all the medications you are taking. (Better yet, bring them along with you!) "Like conventional medicines," [WebMD says](#), "dietary supplements may cause side effects, trigger allergic reactions, or interact with prescriptions and nonprescription medicines or other supplements you might be taking." If you choose to add a multivitamin to your diet, select one that provides no more than 100 percent of the Daily Values for most of the nutrients listed.



The Importance of Drinking Enough Water

Water is of major importance to all living things. According to [The USGS Water Science School](#), about 60 percent of the adult male's and 55 percent of the adult female's body is made up of water. Water serves a number of essential purposes in the body. For example:

- Water is a vital nutrient to the life of every cell, allowing cells to grow, reproduce, and survive.
- Water lubricates joints and acts as a shock absorber for the brain and spinal cord.
- Water helps the body facilitate many important functions such as circulation, absorption, digestion, transportation of nutrients, regulation of body temperature, and the production of saliva.
- Water helps your kidneys flush waste and toxins through urination.



Unfortunately, many adults over 50 do not drink enough water, putting them at risk for dehydration. According to the [Environmental Protection Agency \(EPA\)](#), older adults especially at risk for dehydration include those:

- With a decreased thirst sensation who do not feel the urge to drink often.
- Taking medications that increase the risk of dehydration.
- With physical conditions that make it difficult to drink.

Most experts recommend adults drink eight glasses of water (8 ounces each) each day. This is called the “8 by 8” rule. However, some experts suggest sipping on water constantly throughout the day. For older adults at greater risk for dehydration, the latter may be a better option.

While this may seem excessive, the good news is you can drink more than plain water to ensure you’re getting enough fluids. Tea, coffee, fat-free milk, and low-sugar beverages all help keep you hydrated. You can even try adding flavor to your water with natural juices from fruits and vegetables like lemons, strawberries, and cucumbers.

Eating right and getting the vitamins and nutrients you need is an ongoing commitment, but it doesn’t have to be complicated. Talk to your doctor or a registered dietitian today to see what changes you can make for a healthier, more active you.

This guide is intended as a basic overview of a balanced diet for older adults.
While intended to help people make healthier, more nutritious choices, it
should not be used as a replacement for your physician’s advice.