
Healthy eating for women in their later years

Being well nourished improves women's mental and physical health and quality of life at all life stages.

As you pass through midlife into older age your nutritional concerns may change. Your nutrient needs won't decrease, but your calorie needs and appetite may. This means you may need to take more care to ensure you have an adequate diet.

Lack of appetite, and concern about cholesterol, weight or blood sugar may all cause you to overly restrict your eating.

Keeping your body in good nutritional shape

The best way to stay well nourished is to eat a good variety of foods from the major food groups each day. Choose nutrient-rich foods according to the following guide:

- Include iron and protein-containing foods once or twice a day – such as red meat, chicken, fish and eggs, or vegan alternatives like dried beans or nut butter. If chewing or swallowing is a problem, choose soft foods such as minced meat or casseroles. You may also find soft foods easier to eat if your appetite is not good, as they require less effort to eat.
- Aim for three serves of dairy food each day for calcium and protein. This can include milk, soy milk, cheese or yoghurt, custards and dairy based desserts such as rice pudding, which are easy to eat even if your appetite is not good.
- Have some vegetables or salad with lunch and dinner, and a couple of serves of fruit each day for vitamins and fibre.
- Add a carbohydrate serve to each meal for energy (such as bread, dry biscuits, rice, pasta, potato or breakfast cereal).

For more information, see:

- [Nutrition needs when you're over 65](#)
- [Good food for elders](#).

Poor food intake in older women

Reduced appetite is common as you age and there are many reasons for it:

- Your senses of taste and smell may become less acute, making food less flavourful.
- Illness or medications can reduce your appetite and affect the taste of foods.
- You may not be doing enough physical activity to stimulate your appetite.
- Lack of saliva, poor dental health or trouble swallowing can also make eating an effort, which can then reduce intake.

On top of these difficulties, changes in digestion may cause some nutrients to be poorly absorbed into the body. Over restricting food quantity or variety due to concerns about weight, blood sugar or cholesterol may be inappropriate in the elderly. Concern for these conditions needs to be balanced against the need for good nutrition.

Malnutrition in older women

Malnutrition can mean lack of calories or a lack of nutrients needed for the body to function at its best, such as iron or B12.

Malnutrition is extremely common among elderly people – 38 per cent of those who live at home are at risk. The percentages are even higher for people in hospital or aged care. Being malnourished increases the risk of falls and illness, and delays recovery.

Signs of malnutrition

As the signs of malnutrition overlap with other conditions, they are not always easy to recognise. Losing weight without trying is a red flag for malnutrition, but malnutrition can also occur without weight loss. Being overweight does not protect against malnutrition. If you are not eating a good diet, it is possible to carry excess fat but lack the nutrients that are needed for your body to function at its best.

Tips for improving appetite and food variety

If your appetite or food intake is not good, the following tips may help:

- Eat small, frequent meals and snacks – large meals can be off-putting for people with poor appetites, and small amounts taken often can add up to a substantial amount of food. Good snacks include:
 - milk-based drinks
 - crackers and cheese
 - toast with peanut butter
 - toasted cheese sandwiches
 - yoghurt.
- Eat meals or snacks before filling up on low-nutrient foods or drinks such as coffee or biscuits.
- Tasty foods with extra seasonings may help improve your appetite. Try adding flavourings such as lemon juice, herbs and spices.
- Make drinks such as Milo more nourishing by using milk rather than water.
- If your appetite is very poor, drinks may be easier to take than food, but avoid filling up on drinks that are insufficiently nourishing, such as soft drinks or fruit juice. Examples of healthier options include:
 - nourishing soups containing vegetable and meat
 - split peas and lentils
 - milk drinks like smoothies made with milk, fruit, yogurt or ice cream
 - supplements such as Sustagen, Proform and Ensure – these are ‘food drinks’ containing all the nutrients and calories present in food.
- Physical activity such as a daily walk helps stimulate the appetite, as does eating in pleasant surroundings such as at a set table or with company, when possible.
- Maintain good oral care. If you have dentures, make sure they fit well.
- Use support systems to help maintain good nutrition and wellbeing:
 - If necessary, ask family, friends or community supports for help with shopping.
 - Use a shopping list, so you don’t forget important foods.
 - If health problems make cooking difficult for you, consider using **Meals on Wheels** or buying frozen meals from the supermarket.
 - Make the most of opportunities for socialising such as local council-run activities for older people, which often include meals.

Healthy eating for common health conditions for older women

Eating healthily can help with a range of common health conditions that women may experience in later life.

Constipation

Constipation is a common problem that not only causes discomfort, but can also reduce appetite. It can be helped by drinking plenty of fluids and increasing your fibre intake. For more information, see **Fibre in food**.

Loose bowels

Weak pelvic floor muscles or digestive problems can cause loose bowels or the need to use your bowels urgently. If this is the case, you may benefit from limiting coarse, fibrous foods such as grainy breads, muesli, fruit skins and dried beans. Instead, choose white or smooth wholemeal bread or soft or cooked fruit and vegetables.

Bone health

Your bones become less dense as you age. This increases the risk of osteoporosis, a condition where the bones become fragile and easily broken. Getting enough calcium and vitamin D and doing weight-bearing exercise (if possible) can help maintain bone strength. For more information, see [Osteoporosis](#).

Weight management for older women

While it is beneficial in your older years not to be too thin, being overweight can make joints and mobility worse as you age.

Losing weight at any age is hard, but as you get older this is compounded by difficulty in exercising and your lower calorie needs. A realistic goal might be to gain no further weight or perhaps to lose a few kilograms slowly.

If you are able, doing regular exercise such as walking or water exercises will help build muscle and burn calories.

For more information on how to manage your weight healthily, see [Weight loss and fad diets](#) and [Healthy weight – tucker talk tips](#).

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

Royal Women's Hospital

Content on this website is provided for information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not in any way endorse or support such therapy, service, product or treatment and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. The information and materials contained on this website are not intended to constitute a comprehensive guide concerning all aspects of the therapy, product or treatment described on the website. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions and to ascertain whether the particular therapy, service, product or treatment described on the website is suitable in their circumstances. The State of Victoria and the Department of Health & Human Services shall not bear any liability for reliance by any user on the materials contained on this website.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2020 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.