

Nutrition for Seniors

A guide to healthy habits for eating well as you age

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About Ngaire

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Ngaire Hobbins is an expert dietitian and published author specialising in ageing and brain health.

Her extensive experience spans various areas of nutrition, including clinical dietetics, research and consultation – working in hospitals, private practice, aged and community care and in close collaboration with producers and consumers within the food industry.

Ngaire is passionate about helping seniors relish the power of good food to get the most out of life and thrive instead of suffering unnecessary physical and mental frailty and decline with age.

Her books *Eat to Cheat Ageing* (2014), *Eat to Cheat Dementia* (2016) and *Better Brain Food* (2017) draw on her clinical expertise, providing evidence-based, sensible, practical advice in everyday language to help older people and people living with dementia continue to live with vitality and independence into their later years.

With a shared commitment to enhancing the lives of ageing adults through care and education, Home Instead Senior Care has proudly partnered with Ngaire to bring you *Nutrition for Seniors: A guide to healthy habits for eating well as you age*.

We hope this guide will give you a better understanding of our body's unique nutritional needs as we grow older, helping you to live and age well.

Nutrition for Seniors

A guide to healthy habits
for eating well as you age

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The information contained in this booklet is for general information and guidance only. Whilst every effort has been made to ensure that the information provided in this booklet is correct and current Home Instead Senior Care cannot accept legal responsibility for any errors or omissions that may have been made.

Introduction

We know that it is important to lead an active, healthy lifestyle and this doesn't change as you get older. However, what does change is our body, and with that our nutritional needs.

Eating well is key to ensuring you get the most out of life in your senior years. This booklet explores nutrition for seniors and what we need to eat to fuel our vitality, preserve our independence and prevent unnecessary physical and mental frailty and decline with age.



Top 10 Nutrition Myths for Seniors

- 1. Your stomach shrinks as you get older.** Although your appetite and your capacity to eat may change, your stomach doesn't shrink when you get older. In fact, not eating well enough only accelerates the ageing process.
- 2. Weight loss is healthy.** Unfortunately this is not the case when we are older. Instead, dieting or unintentional weight loss should be avoided in our later years with any weight loss a natural result of combining good exercise with an eating plan rich in protein. In fact, a bit of extra padding in later age is beneficial to support your body and brain in the years ahead.
- 3. You need to eat less as you get older.** Whilst your metabolism slows and your energy output decreases, food and eating is what protects and fuels you and is your key to ageing well. You may need to eat less of some things, your body will need more of others, particularly foods rich in protein, vitamins and minerals.
- 4. Only eat what you feel like.** The ageing process can play tricks on our appetite and the triggers that tell us if we are hungry or full. As a result, older people might eat less than their bodies really need. It's important to realise the vital importance of continuing to eat despite the tricks, so your body continues to get the energy and nutrients it needs to function. An outright loss of appetite is not normal, and could be symptomatic of an underlying health problem. If you are having problems, try to eat small meals regularly throughout the day, even if you don't always feel like it.
- 5. You need a low-fat diet.** Contrary to deeply entrenched popular opinion, a low-fat diet is not always the best, especially for older people. Fat is an important source of calories and some seniors might need to eat a bit extra to maintain weight. For most however, eating foods containing mostly unsaturated fats is best for heart, body and brain health. Fats found in foods such as olive oil, nuts, seeds, avocado, and oily fish are ideal.
- 6. Eat more vegetables.** Whilst nutrient-rich vegetables continue to be essential in your diet, protein foods need to be at the centre of your plate, with the vegetables surrounding it from now on. That's because you need more, not less, protein as you get older. Protein keeps our muscles, our immune system, our body organs and brains, all our systems working and renewing minute by minute. Vegetables are always important, but if your appetite is small, ensure you get the protein in first, then enjoy the vegetables.

- 7. You only need to drink water when you're thirsty.** If you feel thirsty you are already a bit dehydrated and that's a problem as neither your body or your brain can work at peak capacity if you are dehydrated. Dehydration can bring on confusion, delirium, hampers kidney function and worsens a multitude of other conditions that commonly affect older people. Seniors tend not to sense thirst as efficiently and are therefore at greater risk of dehydration, making fluid intake an essential element of overall nutrition.
- 8. Supplements are sufficient.** Of course we can't live off vitamins and supplement tablets alone. Your body works best when it is working – that means eating and digesting food. What's more, most supplements promoted to help you live longer, boost memory, fight off dementia and more, fail to live up to their claims. And there's another problem – many interact with common medications or just don't work the way they would if you ate them in the food they originally came from. You could spend a lot of money for no gain when you could do better by simply eating. Not only that, but you would miss out on one of life's greatest pleasures – cooking and eating with family and friends.
- 9. You must always eat a 'proper meal'** Making sure you eat regularly is essential to help you live well and remain independent as you age. However, eating three full meals a day can be a struggle if you have a loss of appetite or find cooking too difficult or time-consuming. You can opt for prepacked meals, frozen dinners or take-away foods, but some of these don't contain the protein and other nutrients especially important to support ageing bodies and brains, and others are high in sodium or saturated fats. If three good meals are too much of a challenge, 5 or 6 small meals or well-chosen snacks can be just as beneficial. The saying 'making good choices' still rings true with old age – just make sure the 'something' you do eat it is nutritious.
- 10. Malnutrition is part of getting older.** Malnutrition can affect anyone, at any age and it is not a normal part of the ageing process. However, seniors are at greater risk of malnutrition and it's important that you don't dismiss the warning signs as being a part of 'old age'.



Appetite Changes with Age

It seems simple – eat when you're hungry and don't when you're not.

But unfortunately, it's not that simple and mistakes are often made. Feeling hungry, or feeling full happens due to a combination of signals and processes including habit, stimulation of the senses and the relay of messages from hormones in our digestive system to our brains.

Inconveniently, many of these are affected by ageing, triggering changes in appetite. When inaccurately relayed messages about hunger or fullness combine with the effects of medications or illness, it is common to get 'not hungry' signals despite not having had the food and nutrients your need.

As you get older, it is important to make a conscious effort not to fall into the habit of eating less and less. The process of eating, especially small frequent meals can help bring your appetite back on track.



WHAT AFFECTS YOUR APPETITE?

- 1. Changes in your digestive system.** The appetite centre of your brain receives messages from your stomach and the rest of your digestive system to give you the feeling of fullness, and then reminds you to eat again in a few hours. Unfortunately, as we get older this system loses its accuracy and the wrong messages get relayed, tricking you into eating less than you really need.
- 2. Changes in your sense of taste and smell.** As we age we lose our taste buds and our sense of smell diminishes. Both can be further affected by illness and medications. It's not surprising we lose enthusiasm for eating when these senses diminish.
- 3. Changes in your saliva.** As we get older we produce less saliva and this can be exacerbated by medications. Saliva plays an important role in our ability to taste foods, our ability to swallow and the health of our teeth.
- 4. Medications.** Medications can affect your appetite, particularly some blood pressure medications, statins for lowering cholesterol, anti-reflux medications, diuretics, anti-epileptic or anti-psychotic medications, anti-depressants, antihistamines, diabetes medication, opiates (including codeine) and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs for pain relief. It's important to regularly review the medications you take with your doctor.
- 5. Illness and medical procedures.** Anytime you are fighting illness or infection it is normal for your appetite to decrease. But food plays an important role in helping your body repair itself so it's essential to eat through your illness despite what your appetite is telling you.
- 6. Nutrient deficiencies.** A poor appetite can be self-perpetuating as eating poorly means you can easily have missed out on essential vitamins and minerals including vitamin B1, magnesium, sodium, iron or zinc that can all be associated with a reduced appetite.
- 7. Emotional wellbeing.** Stress, depression, anxiety or grief after losing a loved one, a serious illness or accident can cause a loss of appetite. You may find your appetite completely absent, feel full after only one mouthful of food, or you may also feel like your throat 'closes up' or your mouth feels too dry to swallow when you try to eat.
- 8. Bowel issues.** Constipation, diarrhoea and nausea, whatever the cause, all affect your appetite and food intake. Your bowels work better when you get a good quantity of food and fluids passing through them and when actions of muscles in your belly, hips, legs and even arms move your body.



Ways to combat lack of appetite

- 1.** Recognise the 'not hungry' messages as mistakes and try to eat when you know you should.
- 2.** Eat by the clock if you need to, having something every two to three hours. Your brain benefits from the repetition and reminders of eating regularly, so make eating an enjoyable and helpful habit.
- 3.** If you have lost weight, you need more meals – e.g. 5 or 6 small meals a day containing high protein, high calorie, nutritious foods
- 4.** If you just can't face food, a high protein supplement drink between meals or instead of meals for a while can give you the nutrients you need until your appetite returns.
- 5.** Be kind to yourself. Use treats to tempt your appetite. A few treats here and there along with more nutritious foods can remind your appetite that food is pleasurable and important.

If your appetite is poor, make sure what you are eating you are benefiting from – give high protein, high calorie foods priority and add vegetables, fruits, grains and nuts to that.

You can also add extra protein and calories to fortify your food so every mouthful is enjoyable, easy to eat and nutrient boosted.

Malnutrition in Seniors

Malnutrition occurs when a person is not eating enough of the right foods and, as a result, are not getting the nutrients their body needs to function properly.

Malnutrition is a major cause of ill health in seniors, contributing to falls, confusion, infection, preventable hospital admissions, postoperative complications, rapid physical and cognitive decline, even premature death.

Whilst malnutrition is a major cause of ill health, ill health can also cause malnutrition due to loss of appetite and poor eating habits.

Malnutrition is not just something that happens in old age. Anyone can be malnourished, at any age, but age increases the risk because people often eat less food than they did when they were younger, even though their needs for nutrients don't decrease. Eating less over time can easily lead to problems.

Signs of possible malnutrition:

- Weight loss
- Reduced appetite
- Lack of interest in food and drinks
- Feeling tired all the time
- Loss of strength and energy
- Getting ill often and taking a long time to recover
- Wounds taking a long time to heal
- Poor concentration
- Feeling cold most of the time
- Low mood or depression

The most common sign of malnutrition is weight loss, particularly unintentional weight loss over a relatively short period of time (e.g. a few months). Whilst most people who are malnourished will lose weight, it is possible to be a healthy weight or even overweight and still be malnourished. If you or your loved one have unintentionally lost weight over the past few months, it's important to consult your doctor and ideally to get a referral to an Accredited Practising Dietitian in your area.

Accredited
Practising
Dietitian





The Power of Protein

Vegetables and fruits are an irreplaceable source of vitamins, minerals and antioxidants but as we age we need more of some things than we did when we were younger and protein is one of them.

Protein is constantly being used to do your body's repair work. Every cell in every organ – your skin, your gut, your blood, all the substance running systems that keep you alive has a lifespan – some have hours, others have days, even months before they are replaced with new ones. Protein is used to keep this minute-by-minute renewal going and is also essential for an effective immune system, to repair wounds and to provide back-up brain fuel supply.

Between meals, our body draws on protein reserves from our muscles. Therefore, you need to eat for your muscles and ensure you are getting enough protein to sustain your body and your muscle reserves. Having a protein food at the centre of each meal will ensure your body won't have to struggle to get the nutrients you need.



Use Them or Lose Them

In addition to eating protein foods, you also need to work your muscles so that any protein you do eat gets the best possible chance of returning to them.

Muscles are reminded to rebuild and repair only when you work them and they need to work against weight or resistance to encourage that. Anything you do to work muscle helps: get up out of your chair, stand tall, carry things, use the stairs, walk instead of drive, sweep the floor – most activities of daily living will work your muscles.

Resistance exercise is the most important for supporting recovery, building strength, maintaining ability and improving your long-term health.

Swimming, aqua aerobics, Tai Chi and other activities that use your own body weight as resistance and gets your heart rate up are also good for rebuilding and repairing your muscles.

Healthy Body, Healthy Mind

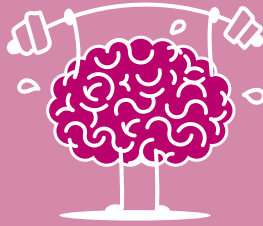
What applies to your muscles applies to your brain. Keep it active, feed it properly and use it or lose it.

Your brain uses different fuels to most of your body and it is very demanding, using 20 per cent or more of your body's total energy supply, functioning with a constant access to blood sugar (glucose).

Glucose is the main fuel for your brain and comes from carbohydrates in food and protein reserves stored in your muscles. While the rest of your body uses stored fat as an alternate energy source, body fat cannot be used to make glucose for the brain, but protein can.

Eating the right food, keeping physically active and mentally stimulated not only keeps up fuel and nourishment but it is critical to protect brain cells from damage which could lead to cognitive decline, Alzheimer's disease or other dementias.





KEEPING YOUR BRAIN GOING

- 1. Eat regularly.** Keep up your food supply, especially carbohydrates and protein. Put a protein food at the centre of your meals and add vegetables, fruits and grains for carbohydrates and nutrients to help ensure your brain has a constant access to blood sugar (glucose).
- 2. Hydrate.** Keep your fluids up, drink 6-8 glasses of fluid each day. Water is best if you are eating well. If not, use liquids like milk drinks, soups or juice that combine water with nutrients.
- 3. Eat colours.** Colourful foods contain antioxidants and other substances which can help reduce chronic inflammation. Antioxidants 'mop up' free radicals that might otherwise cause damage to cells in your body and brain as the years go on. Mix up the colourful foods at each meal for the greatest benefit: think a rainbow of vegetables and fruits including berries, herbs, egg yolk, nuts and seeds. Whilst there are a variety of commercial supplements on the market – antioxidants work best when you absorb them from the foods they originally came from.
- 4. Challenge yourself.** Your brain likes to learn and be challenged by new things, this doesn't dissipate with age.
- 5. Be social.** Socialisation is much more than avoiding loneliness – it ensures your brain continues to mastermind the complex thought processes involved in making conversation, behaving appropriately, negotiating, and other things you need to juggle in social situations.
- 6. Exercise.** Exercise keeps blood flowing through the brain, challenges it to coordinate all the different systems needed to work your muscles, your balance, your senses needed to hear, feel and see as well as your memory and ability to follow instructions. Exercise also boosts levels of a special substance that helps form new connections in the brain – extremely important to long term brain health.

Making Meals Enjoyable

Food isn't just about nutrition. Preparing and eating food is a sensory experience about sharing and enjoying, and is often an important part of shared cultural traditions.

We have already acknowledged that with ageing, foods don't always taste the same as they used to but that doesn't mean we can't continue to make meals and eating enjoyable.

Below are our top tips for stimulating your senses and making meals more palatable, presentable and ultimately more enjoyable for seniors.

AMP UP THE FLAVOUR

Enhance the flavour of your meals by adding fresh or dried herbs, spices, onion, garlic, ginger, pepper or cooking with wine or acidic flavours like citrus or vinegar. Adding a good natural, or Greek-style yoghurt to recipes also boosts flavour.

Salt is a common flavour enhancer but some people may need to use it sparingly on medical advice. For those younger and able to eat well, keeping salt to a minimum is a good idea. But for those frailer and especially with very low appetites, or who are at high risk of malnutrition, adding salt to food so it gets eaten might be more important. Salt might not be the best for everyone, but not eating is far more dangerous in later age.

The same goes for sugar – adding lots of sugar is not the best for everyone, but if it adds appeal to foods and encourages people to eat when they really need to, then it has an important part to play. Treat foods like chocolate, cakes and ice cream can help revive flagging appetites, so they actually do have an important place in boosting nutrition for the frailer.





TRY NEW THINGS

Experiment with different foods and cuisines and try new recipes from friends, newspapers, magazines, websites or television cooking shows. Look for ways to combine foods from the different food groups in creative ways and try out different kinds of fruits, vegetables, grains that add colour and texture to your meals. You could also take a cooking class to learn new ways to prepare meals and snacks that are good for you.

PLATE UP

Although our taste buds may diminish, we also eat with our eyes and how we present food can make it more appealing. Adding different colours and textures of food not only adds extra vitamins and minerals, it makes dishes look and taste more appealing. For example, you can add granola to yogurt, dried fruit and nuts to oatmeal and cheese sauce to crunchy vegetables, curry or pasta sauce. Taking care in how you present your meal, balancing the colour, texture and variety of food on your plate, using smaller plates for smaller meals, even adding a little garnish can help make meals more appealing and enjoyable.

Always consider the needs of the person eating and remember that being too generous is just as much of a problem as not being generous enough. People with small appetites can be so put off by a big plate of food they eat nothing at all which is far more problematic and much more wasteful.

COOK FOR COMPANY

Cooking together and sharing the experience of meal planning, shopping, preparing and cooking can also make meals more enjoyable. As can cooking for the enjoyment of others. You could start a breakfast, lunch, or dinner club where everyone can gather together taking turns to cook for each other.

REMINISCE

Cooking meals of yester-year, enjoying the flavours of old and reminiscing on old pastimes can be equally as great as trying new things. Especially if the simple thought of traditional fare can stoke your appetite and rekindle your enjoyment of food.

MAKE MEALS EASIER TO EAT

The physiological changes that seniors experience with age, especially reduced saliva and dental changes, can lead to difficulty chewing and swallowing. Eating soft, moist foods that don't require as much chewing such as smoothies, soups, casseroles, stewed fruits etc. can make meals less of an effort, easier to eat and more enjoyable.

EAT WITH OTHERS

Eating with others is a surefire way to enjoy meals more. Sharing meals with neighbours, family or friends and making regular plans to eat with others will bring back the social aspect of eating where you share good food and good conversation.

GET OUT AND ABOUT

Add a sense of adventure to your meals and venture out for a meal, visit friends and family or even try a picnic and enjoy some fresh air and outdoors.



Fortifying Foods

Despite your best efforts, your diet may simply not be providing your body the nutrients it needs to sustain you, especially if your appetite is low or you are finding it a challenge to eat enough food to maintain your weight. Real, whole foods should always be your priority but you can fortify foods by adding protein and calories to boost the nutritional value of what you eat. You can fortify foods by adding dried fruits, nuts, seeds, grains and legumes into your meal preparation. Alternatively, your doctor or dietitian may suggest you add high protein powder to supplement your diet.



Difficulty Swallowing

If you have trouble swallowing, a Speech Pathologist can advise you on ways to alter the texture or consistency of foods to help you swallow safely and ensure you continue to get the nutrients you need from eating.

Hard, crumbly or crisp foods and thin fluids such as water, milk, tea, coffee, juice, soup etc. can easily 'go down the wrong way' and may need to be thickened or eaten with an extra amount of gravy or sauce to avoid any issues with swallowing.

A Speech Pathologist will determine a safe consistency of food and fluids for you to swallow and advise on how you can use a variety of household ingredients such as baby cereal, mashed potato, gravy powder, sauce mixes, cornflour or commercial thickening powders to achieve the right consistency of food and fluid for your individual needs.

Help for Healthy Eating Habits

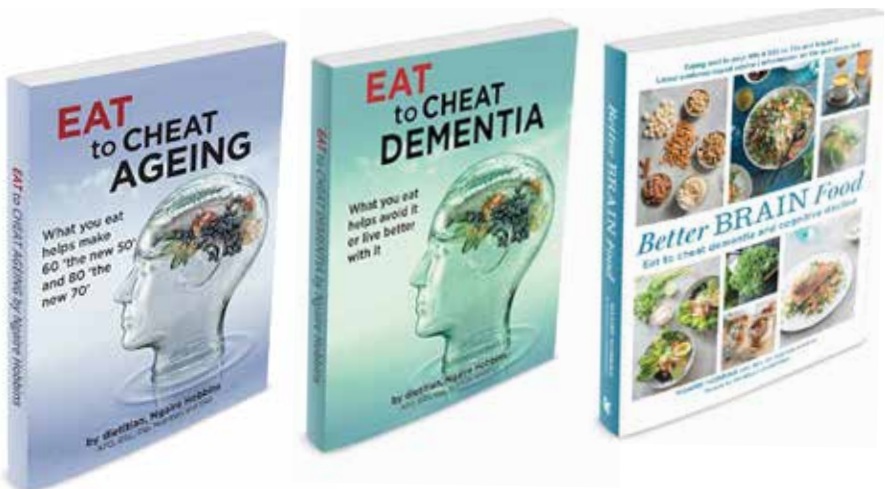
Understanding your nutritional needs is one thing, forming healthy habits is another. With age, shopping, meal preparation, cooking and eating for one can prove difficult. You may no longer drive and getting to and from the shops is a challenge. You may not have the same strength you once did to carry groceries on your own. You may be uninspired cooking and eating for one, hate cleaning up or have simply lost interest cooking after all these years!

A Home Instead CAREGiver can help ensure you continue to eat and live well at home. Our CAREGivers can provide transport to the shops, help you select and carry groceries, unpack, plan and prepare meals. A CAREGiver can assist you to cook meals, clean up and provide welcome companionship during meals at home or accompany you to a café or restaurant to enjoy dining out.

Whatever your needs, a Home Instead CAREGiver can help you achieve optimal nutrition to maintain your strength, independence and vitality.

Discover More

Most healthy eating advice is for people in their 30's, 40's or 50's but some of this information can be unhelpful if you are into your late 60's and beyond. Ngaire Hobbins draws on her wealth of experience to highlight issues in health and nutrition for older people, providing practical ways to help you thrive and live vital, independent lives. For more information on nutrition for seniors, recipe ideas or to buy Ngaire's books in paperback or for your e-reader, visit www.ngairehobbins.com





Home Instead Senior Care is a specialist, national provider of high quality in-home care for older people.

We help with a range of personal and lifestyle needs while providing welcome companionship. Our services include assistance with personal care, light household duties, meal preparation, medication reminders, transport to appointments, shopping and social outings. We take personal responsibility for providing the best in-home care and support to meet our clients' needs and are committed to addressing the individual and national challenges of Australia's ageing population.

Established in 1994, Home Instead now provides senior care across a network of over 1000 offices around the world.

In Australia, Home Instead Senior Care's national network of independently owned and operated offices are committed to changing the face of ageing by enhancing the lives of seniors and their families.

We understand that to you, it's about finding trustworthy care for your ageing loved one.
To us, it's personal.

Contact your local Home Instead Senior care office for a free no-obligation care consultation where we can discuss your needs and provide you with information, advice, care and support to help you and your family find the right home care solution for you.

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