



# Food for thought

*9 ways to eat better in older age*

# Should diets change as we grow older?

## Yes!

For many reasons, our daily food intake can decrease as we age. We may begin to engage in less physical activity, which means we simply don't feel as hungry as we used to. More likely, however, a combination of other factors can lead to a decline in nutrient intake as we reach advanced age. These include:

- Social isolation
- Medical conditions and medications
- Dental discomfort
- Our physical and mental ability to cook for ourselves
- Housing and accommodation changes limiting access to cooking facilities
- Mood and mental health challenges
- Caring responsibilities e.g. caring for a partner
- Mobility and transportation limitations, which can reduce access to fresh ingredients.

In addition to these factors, physiological changes can often lead to decreased hunger signs as we age. Issues such as slower gastric movement, altered hormonal responses, decreased basal metabolic rate, and altered taste and smell can all also lower our appetite.

For all these reasons and more, maintaining a well-balanced diet can become difficult for older Australians.

This ebook outlines the nutritional areas to pay attention to, and some possible solutions to poor diet in older members of our family and community.

## Why we need better nutrition as we age

It is likely that we are going to eat less as we age. That's why we can require more nutritious food to meet our need for vitamins, minerals and energy. Eating too little, or not enough 'good' food can lead to further complications associated with ageing.

Among other things, as we grow older we need to pay particular attention to:

### Calcium intake

Calcium in our bodies is used for strengthening bones and teeth, regulating our muscles, regulating heart functioning, helping our blood to clot and helps our nerves convey messages around the body. It's not just women that need to be aware of adequate calcium intake as they age. As we begin to draw down our calcium reserves from our bones as we reach the age of 50 for women and 70 for men, we need to consider adding more to our diet, or our bones can become brittle and break easily. Adding approximately 20% more calcium is a common guide. Good sources of calcium include milk and milk products, green leafy vegetables, tofu and soy products, fish, seeds and nuts.

### Vitamin D

You may be aware that one of the best sources of vitamin D is sunlight. If we become more sedentary and confined to the indoors as we age, our natural exposure may decline. Vitamin D also helps us absorb calcium, so it's more important as we get older. Dietary sources of vitamin D include fatty fish such as sardines and salmon, milk, egg yolk, mushrooms and fortified foods such as some cereals.

### Omega-3s

Essential fatty acids are needed for good health at all stages of life, but may also have specific benefits for mental health and assist in protecting against many degenerative diseases of the brain such as dementia. Nuts, fish, avocado and beans are excellent sources of Omega-3s.





## Fibre

Relying more heavily on processed foods and ready meals can have many consequences for older Australians. Not least of all is an inadequate amount of dietary fibre. Fibre is important for the proper functioning of our digestive tract but can also lower cholesterol and reduce the risk of stroke. A diet high in fibre is at the core of a healthy diet and increasing your intake simply relies on eating more wholefoods instead of processed ones. Wholefoods are plant based foods that are unprocessed such as legumes, fruits and vegetables.

Other dietary issues to be mindful of as we age include:

- Dehydration: getting enough water is particularly important in warm weather but should be a focus at the expense of other liquids, particularly juice and soft drinks. If you are on restricted fluids, follow the advice of your doctor.
- Excess salt and sugar: if our sense of taste starts to fail we are more susceptible to adding too much salt and sugar to any foods we eat. Many processed and snack foods are already very high in these elements and should be reduced if possible.



- Boredom and isolation: paying attention to how we eat, not just what we eat, is known to be one of the keys to eating well. The positive influence of social contact through food preparation and consumption is now becoming understood in dietary science circles. In some countries, such as Brazil, the communal aspect of nutrition is part of the national guidelines to staying healthy and eating well. Brazil's official dietary recommendations put the 'how' at the centre of things, with advice such as: "Whenever possible, eat in company, with family, friends or colleagues. This increases the enjoyment of food and encourages eating regularly, attentively, and in appropriate environments."

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# Here are 9 ways to help you eat better

IT MAY BE YOU OR SOMEONE YOU CARE FOR THAT'S GROWING OLDER AND FACING CHALLENGES WITH EATING WELL. HERE ARE OUR TIPS TO HELP YOU ALONG THE JOURNEY.

## 1. Take stock of your diet

Seeking the advice of a dietician is one way to determine how well you're eating. Your Care Manager can arrange the appropriate referrals to see a dietician under your Home Care Package.

You can take a 10 minute quiz [www.quiz.healthyeatingquiz.com.au/quiz/start](http://www.quiz.healthyeatingquiz.com.au/quiz/start) to give you a basic insight into how well varied your diet is, and receive some basic, generalised recommendations for improving your diet. However, for recommendations tailored to your own situation and medical conditions, it is best to see a dietitian and have a personalised assessment.

Another way to measure your intake is to keep a short food diary for a week or two. It will help capture exactly what you're eating (rather than what we think we're eating!). Often, we don't realise how much we're snacking on the wrong foods, or if we're eating enough fresh fruit and vegetables with our main meals. Take note of times that you eat as well as liquids you're consuming. If you do plan on seeing a dietitian, then keeping a food diary for several days beforehand is very helpful. The first thing a dietitian will do take a diet history, and it's incredibly helpful for them if someone has already recorded all that information and brought it with them.

If you've experienced unplanned weight loss or gain without making any intentional changes to diet or exercise, keep track of this weight loss in your diary too. This may be as simple as noting whether or not clothes have become too loose or too tight, or if others have commented on your appearance. Noting bowel movements or headaches (which can be common signs of dehydration) to see when you could be consuming foods that don't agree with you or if your intake of fluids is adequate can also help.

### Unplanned weight loss is:

- Losing between 5 and 10 per cent weight loss compared to your usual body weight within 3-12 months.
- A loss of three kilograms over the preceding three months.
- Losing weight every month for three months in a row.

Unintentional weight loss of these amounts may indicate a person is malnourished and is concerning. Malnutrition increases the risk of falls, osteoporosis, slow wound healing, mortality and contributes to poor quality of life. Malnutrition can also result in premature entry into residential aged care. If you notice that you have lost weight, it is very important to discuss it with your GP and be referred to a dietitian. Take your diary along to your GP and dietitian as well. AccessCare's Care Managers can also refer you to a dietitian through your Home Care Package.

## 2. Try something new

Sometimes, our diet can deteriorate due to circumstances beyond our control. It may be that poor habits have formed after a bout of illness or change in living situation. That's why it's a good idea to try challenging yourself with one new food or recipe every week. It may be a small change, such as trying a new flavour of cracker or a bread with higher fibre, or you could challenge yourself to test a homemade salad dressing or mix herbs into old favourites such as mashed potato.

## 3. Think small

Small changes can make a big difference. Foods such as herbs, shoots and micro-greens, an immature plant with milder flavour, are much higher in nutrition than their fully-grown counterparts. And, traditional fermented foods are key to improving the way our gut microbiology extracts the nutrition from our food. Sourdough bread, apple cider vinegar and fermented foods such as sauerkraut are great for getting our digestive system back on track. If you haven't tried them, now is as good a time as any. A little of these foods goes a long way to improving our diet.



## 4. Keep an eye on the time

If forgetting to eat is an emerging issue, using tools to remind you of meal times might be necessary. There may also be different times of the day when your appetite is better. Whether you're experiencing these issues yourself, or supporting someone who is, some simple tools might help:

- Set a timer to remind you to eat regularly.
- Use timers to remember when you've put food in an oven or on the stove as forgetting these things is common for people of all ages.
- If making frozen meals for convenience, label them clearly with dates so they are used within the right timeframe.
- Consider eating smaller meals more regularly if big meals are too much for your situation.
- Ask for help to clean out fridges once a month; out of date foods should be disposed of. Our sense of taste and smell may diminish our ability to determine if a food is still ok to consume.
- Use large bright stickers on milk or other highly perishable items to help people with poor eyesight easily tell when it's time to discard it.
- Consider purchasing a large digital clock that also displays the day and date so that it's easy to keep track of things.

## 5. Good tools can make the world of difference

Common ailments such as arthritis can make cooking and even opening prepared food packaging difficult. Our strength can decline as we age too, so having good tools to help is important.

Obtaining a referral for an occupational therapist through your AccessCare Care Manager, can ensure you receive a full review of your needs. It will also give you access to new tools to make preparing food and maintaining independence easier.

Some examples of improved kitchen tools and appliances include:

- A fridge that provides a freezer at the bottom rather than the top can reduce bending to retrieve common foods such as milk or butter.
- Non-slip cutting boards with spikes for holding food can reduce risk with knives.
- Plates designed for use with one hand or for those who have difficulty picking up food with utensils.
- Easy-use can openers and jar openers that even allow you to open things one-handed.

Other changes such as lower benches in your kitchen, or creating areas that can be reached while sitting instead of standing are small ways to maintain your independence.

## 6. Eat together whenever possible

Boredom and social isolation have a serious impact on diet and can reduce your interest in food. If you're able to join a cooking class or eat in a communal setting, make it a priority. Enjoying food with others is a proven boost to appetite and wellbeing.

## 7. Address any underlying medical issues

There are many physical issues that may get in the way of adequate nutrition or a lack of interest in eating. Some of these include:

- **Difficulty eating or coughing during a meal.** A swallowing assessment by a speech pathologist may be beneficial.
- **Pain while eating or afterwards or ill-fitting dentures.** Visit the dentist for an assessment.
- **Constipation.** A dietitian or nurse can review the causes of constipation and suggest solutions.
- **Medication.** Talk to your GP for a medication review.

Speak to your GP or your AccessCare Care Manager if you have a Home Care Package, to organise the appropriate referrals for specialist support to resolve these issues.

### REFERENCES:

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## 8. Make it easy

Make it easy for yourself, by having a meal delivered to your door. Many local councils offer meal deliveries which have the added bonus of monitoring service. If the door goes unanswered door volunteers will call the council to follow up with the relevant family members to check on the welfare of the person. The City of Kingston offers a delivered meal [www.accesscare.org.au/home-care-services/kingston-city-council-home-care/delivered-meals](http://www.accesscare.org.au/home-care-services/kingston-city-council-home-care/delivered-meals) service for eligible residents. With this service a daily delivery service is encouraged to reduce loneliness and reduces the chances of falls or being admitted to hospital. It's the daily contact with a volunteer who is delivering the meal that is so vital, ensuring social contact and connection each and every day of the week. It's also very reassuring for families to know that their loved one is being checked in on daily and they will be called if the door goes unanswered.



## 9. Set up support services

If shopping and meal preparation are chores that are becoming too much for you, support services are available.

### At AccessCare we can help you with:

- **Planning your care to ensure your needs, preferences and goals are met.** Our Care Managers will support you every step of the way and ensure your care plan is adapted as your needs change.
- **Help to shop.** We can either go to the shops with you and support you to do your shopping, or head to the shops on your behalf with a shopping list.
- **Meal preparation.** Our Support Workers can prepare some meals with you.
- **Having meals prepared and delivered to your door with Delivered Meals.** Textured meals are also available and suitable for those with medical conditions that affect swallowing. Meals can be delivered each day and serve as a valuable monitoring service, or we can have multiple meals delivered on one day if that's what you need.

Your needs are unique and should be assessed individually. Contact My Aged Care on **1800 200 422** for an assessment or call our friendly team to discuss in more detail on **1300 819 200** or email [info@accesscare.org.au](mailto:info@accesscare.org.au)



# We're here to help

AT ACCESSCARE WE DELIVER A BROAD RANGE OF HIGH-QUALITY SERVICES TO MEET YOUR INDIVIDUAL NEEDS:

We are an established provider of home-based support with over 20 years of industry experience.

- Our Care Mangers are highly experienced and tertiary qualified.
- Our high quality care services are delivered through our trusted network of partners.
- Our support workers are industry-qualified with a minimum of Certificate Level 3.
- We provide you with unlimited advice including after-hours services.
- We are a community focussed, not-for-profit organisation.
- All funds go back into providing quality care.

## Talk to us

Managing your own wellbeing, or that of someone close to you, can be difficult as we age. If you have questions about how to do this, we are happy to have a chat and answer your questions. We'll also discuss your unique situation and help you navigate the aged care system. Don't worry, it's completely free and you will be speaking with an experienced home care professional.

**Call us on 1300 819 200 or email [info@accesscare.org.au](mailto:info@accesscare.org.au).**

**To be assessed for a Home Care Package call My Aged Care on 1800 200 422.**



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