

Choosing the Right Foods for Your Senior

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Nutrition is so vital to a senior's health. We aide in meal preparation to ensure your loved one is eating right!”

Dawn Pudlin, General Manager CK Ft. Myers

For each stage of life, there are the proper foods that will promote growth and energy levels. At the infant stage, we require breast milk or formula with DHA. In adolescence, healthy bones and a strong heart are needed to keep up with growth spurts and sports. As an adult, diet becomes even a larger part of our lives because we have established our eating habits. It's easy to go for junk or fast food because it's cheap and easy to get. Yet, this causes health

problems, such as diabetes, heart disease and even cancer.

With each stage, the right amount of calories must be achieved for the proper weight and brain development. At the senior stage, the amount of calories varies based on lifestyle and other health problems that arise from aging. For example, sedentary seniors require 1,600 to 2,000 calories a day, whereas active seniors require 1,800 to 2,000. Mental clarity decreases as do energy levels. Bones loose calcium, which is important for bone health and leads to osteoporosis. The heart weakens and other diseases can develop such as cancer, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's. The importance of a healthy meal plan is to provide a path that can be redirected, help aid in preventing disease and keep seniors fit.

If you care for a senior, whether a loved one or client, you understand the challenge of getting the [right foods](#) into his or her diet as well as getting your senior to eat. And as you age, you will know which foods are good for you too. But first, let's review the food groups. With hectic schedules, family life and work, it's easy to neglect or reduce the amount of intake in one or all of these groups. The food groups are:

Vegetables and legumes/beans

Fruit

Grain – wholegrains are preferred

Protein – lean meats and poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, nuts and seeds

Dairy – rich in calcium and vitamin D

When choosing the diet, a term to remember is micronutrients. A deficiency in micronutrients is caused by reduced food intake as well as eating the wrong foods. This deficiency is found mostly in seniors who live alone. They have no one to guide them (i.e. create a grocery list) and/or they live on a fixed income. They will scrimp on food in order to pay their bills. It's interesting to note that Americans' sense of smell and taste decreases with age. Medication can also affect a seniors' sense of taste and smell as well as cause stomach problems, leading them to not want to eat at all. Seniors must not skip meals, and if need be, they can use substitutes such as nutritious shakes or smoothies. Don't forget about dental problems! They, too, can cause a senior to not want to eat due to loose or missing teeth and/or jaw pain.

So, which foods should you choose for your senior? Let's look at some guidelines.

Senior Food Guidelines

Fish – Fish rich in omega-3 fatty acids help prevent inflammation, which has been linked to cancer, rheumatoid arthritis and heart disease and can reduce the risk of Alzheimer's disease. Salmon, an oily and cold-water fish, is a great choice and should be eaten twice a week. Other choices include sardines, tuna and mackerel. Also, to reduce inflammation, it's best to use canola oil for cooking.

Calcium – Foods rich in calcium include milk, leafy greens, yogurt and cheese. Calcium strengthens bones and lowers blood pressure and is important for muscle function. It's also great for immune system support. If your senior is lactose intolerant, a 6-ounce piece of salmon has as much calcium as a glass of milk.

Fiber – Fiber helps with digestion, and poor digestion causes constipation and tiredness. Blood sugar levels can fluctuate without the proper amount of fiber in a diet. Bran is always the "go to" for proper fiber intake. However, there are other foods that are rich in fiber, such as a variety of nuts, wholegrain bread, brown rice, pasta, fresh fruits and vegetables. Another benefit to having enough fiber is that it reduces the risk of heart disease.

Vitamin C – Whenever you get a cold, someone in your family always recommends an increase in vitamin C. Studies show it can reduce the length of a cold, when taken in large amounts as well as sharpen brain and memory skills. Vitamin C has antioxidant properties that may prevent cancer and heart disease. It also helps produce collagen, repair and strengthen bones and aid in healing wounds. Foods rich in vitamin C are oranges, chili peppers, kale and broccoli.

Vitamin D – Vitamin D is known as the "sunshine" vitamin. According to the NHS, this vitamin enables our bodies to absorb ultraviolet B (UVB) rays. However, you must be outside in the sun to get the proper amount of vitamin D. This is one reason why seniors need to get out of the

house for physical activity, such as taking a walk in a park. Vitamin D can also be found in dairy products and fatty fish.

Vitamin B12 – This vitamin makes DNA and red blood cells as well as helps with brain functions. Humans cannot produce this vitamin, so it must be obtained through food, such as beef, ham, pork, eggs, lamb, tuna and bread. Also, as we age, the body's ability to absorb it decreases and vegans are prone to a vitamin B12 deficiency. You can also get b vitamins from these foods, which help the body obtain and make energy from them.

There are many diets older adults can benefit from (e.g. low-fat), especially for chronic conditions. For a healthy diet with nutrients that increase mental sharpness and energy levels, the Mediterranean Diet is recommended. It also helps maintain optimal health levels and reduce the risk of stroke. Foods included on this diet are peanuts, beans, vegetables, Greek yogurt, lean meats and fish as well as olive oil. Meat is not the star of this diet; it's actually a side dish. Food that is known to sharpen the brain, reduce memory loss and reduce the risk of Alzheimer's are broccoli, kale, oranges, avocados and blueberries. There are many sources for information on the best foods for seniors as well as the latest medical news for older Americans, such as WebMD and Annals of Neurology (e.g. cognitive decline).

In addition to healthy eating, seniors need to be mindful of portion sizes. Seniors (or caregivers) should cut up meats and fish into small serving sizes. This ensures portion control and portions can be frozen to save money. Seniors can also buy bags of frozen vegetables and only use what is needed for each meal. It's vital to read food labels to keep an eye on fats and sugars in products. The USDA creates easy-to-read food labels, which indicate if a food item is organic and/or non-GMO. If your senior has a high-blood pressure, the diet should consist of low-sodium foods.

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Dawn Pudlin

Comfort Keepers Fort Myers

+1 (239) 590-8999

[email us here](#)

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