



Healthy eating and healthy aging for adults

Why is it important to eat well as I age?

Eating well can help you stay healthy, strong and independent as you age, especially when combined with physical activity. A healthy eating pattern can help:

- Prevent and manage health conditions like high blood pressure and high cholesterol
- Build a healthy immune system
- Keep your bones and muscles strong
- Support your brain health
- Prevent, slow or reverse frailty. Frailty is when older adults have reduced function and health. That can mean having a harder time with daily tasks like eating, bathing, using the toilet and moving about. It can also mean that minor illnesses like the flu cause more harm than they usually would
- Lower the risk of falls. Falls are a leading cause of injury-related deaths and hospitalizations for older adults in British Columbia

What changes can I expect as I get older?

As you get older, you may notice changes like:

- Slowly losing muscle mass and function. This happens naturally, as early as in your 40s. You might also notice changes in your weight. Being physically active, eating nutritious foods and getting enough protein can help
- Having a smaller appetite. Not being able to eat as much makes it even more important to make snacks and mealtimes nutritious and enjoyable
- Not feeling thirsty as often. Try to get into the habit of drinking fluids regularly so you stay hydrated, even if you do not feel thirsty
- Being constipated more often. Fluids, physical activity and fibre can help

Your body's ability to use or absorb some nutrients may also change. And your risk for some health conditions will increase.

Building healthy habits now can help you manage these changes, protecting and promoting your health as you age.

What nutrients are important as I get older?

Protein

Protein helps maintain muscle mass and supports recovery from illness and injury. As you get older, it may become harder to meet your protein needs. Try these tips to boost your intake:

- Add canned beans, peas or lentils to your soups, salads, pasta sauces and casseroles. Choose options with little to no added salt
- Try a stir-fry with tofu or other soy foods like bean curd, soybeans, edamame or tempeh
- Use shredded chicken, pork, sliced lean meats or fish in a sandwich or wrap
- Prepare hard-boiled eggs to snack on throughout the week
- Enjoy yogurt with fruit or mix plain yogurt into soup or chili. Greek yogurt is higher in protein
- Use cottage cheese as a dip for sliced vegetables or top it with fresh or canned fruit
- Have cheese, hummus or canned fish with crackers or toast
- Add nut butter to your toast or hot cereal
- Snack on a handful of nuts, seeds or edamame
- Have a glass of milk or unsweetened fortified soy beverage

Calcium

Calcium is important for healthy bones, teeth, muscles and nerves. Women aged 51 and older

and men aged 71 and older have higher calcium needs. Include several food sources of calcium every day to help meet your needs. This includes:

- Dairy products and unsweetened fortified plant-based beverages
- Tofu (check the ingredients list for calcium)
- Edamame, soybeans, white beans, navy beans
- Fish and shellfish such as sardines, herring, canned salmon with bones, shrimp, clams
- Dark green vegetables like okra, bok choy, kale

Vitamin D

Vitamin D helps your body absorb and use calcium for healthy bones, teeth and muscles. Health Canada recommends that adults aged 51 years and older take a daily 400 IU vitamin D supplement in addition to eating foods that have vitamin D. Foods with vitamin D include fresh or canned salmon, mackerel, cow milk, fortified plant-based beverages, margarine and egg yolk.

Fibre

Fibre can be soluble or insoluble.

Soluble fibre helps to manage blood sugar and lower blood cholesterol. It's found in oats, barley, beans, peas, lentils, nuts, seeds, and some fruits and vegetables.

Insoluble fibre helps with constipation and is found in fruit and vegetable skins, whole grains, wheat bran and legumes.

Add more fibre to your diet gradually to avoid gas and bloating. As you slowly increase your fibre intake, drink plenty of fluids. They work together to help with constipation.

Healthy fats

Fat provides energy, helps absorb nutrients, and is important for brain and nerve function. Choose foods with unsaturated fats, such as:

- Fatty fish like salmon, herring, mackerel and trout
- Nuts, seeds and soy products like tofu

- Oils such as olive, canola, peanut, sunflower, safflower, corn, soybean and flax

Water

Water helps to:

- Prevent dehydration. Dehydration can make it hard to focus and cause tiredness, headaches, dizziness and fainting. This can lead to falls
- Manage your blood pressure
- Protect and cushion your joints and organs
- Control your body temperature

As you get older, your sense of thirst may decline. It's important to drink water throughout the day, even if you do not feel thirsty. Other healthy fluids that can help you stay hydrated include:

- Unsweetened coffee and tea
- Unsweetened lower fat milk and fortified plant-based beverages such as soy, oat, almond
- Low sodium soups

If your urine is light yellow or clear, it usually means that you're getting enough to drink. If your urine is dark yellow and has a strong smell, you likely need more fluids.

What eating patterns can support my health as I get older?

There's no one-size-fits-all eating pattern for healthy aging. Many styles of eating can support your health. Some examples of healthy eating patterns include Canada's food guide and the Mediterranean, DASH and MIND diets.

In general, aim to:

- Eat plenty of vegetables and fruit, choosing a variety of colours
- Have protein foods at most meals and snacks. Include plant-based options like beans, peas, lentils, nuts and seeds daily
- Include whole grains and healthy fats in your meals and snacks

Most older adults do not eat enough vegetables and fruit. Try these tips to help you eat more:

- Top your breakfast cereal, oatmeal or yogurt with fresh, dried or frozen fruit
- Add frozen or canned vegetables to your soups, chilis, pasta sauces and casseroles
- Top toast with nut butter and banana or with avocado and cherry tomatoes
- Keep cut-up vegetables in the fridge and a bowl of fruit on the counter

What do I need to limit?

Limiting sodium, sugar, saturated fat and alcohol can help manage or lower the risk of chronic conditions such as high blood pressure, heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

If you have one or more chronic conditions and want to learn about nutrition recommendations specific to your needs, call **8-1-1** to speak to a registered dietitian.

Sodium

You need some sodium to be healthy, but too much can increase the risk of heart disease and high blood pressure. Most Canadians eat too much sodium. We get most of our sodium from processed foods like bakery products, soup, cheese, salty snacks, deli meats, hot dogs, frozen appetizers and entrées, restaurant meals, sauces and condiments. To lower your sodium intake:

- Limit processed foods that are high in sodium. Eat them less often and in smaller amounts
- Use the nutrition facts table to help you choose foods lower in sodium
- Prepare your own meals often, using ingredients that have little or no added sodium
- Use less salt to flavour foods. Instead, try garlic, onion, ginger, lemon, lime, vinegar, herbs and spices. Try different combinations to keep food interesting. This can also help if your sense of taste or smell has changed

Sugar

Having too many sugary foods and drinks can fill you up and take the place of more nutritious foods. It can also lead to dental issues like gum

disease which can make it hard to eat and enjoy food. Aim to limit:

- Fruit drinks, fruit punch, 100% fruit juice
- Drinks with added sugars, such as sweetened coffees or teas, iced tea, hot chocolate, soft drinks, sports and energy drinks, sparkling waters, flavoured milk and plant-based beverages, and alcoholic drinks
- Cakes, cookies, muffins, chocolate, candy, ice cream, fruit leathers, sweetened cereals

Saturated Fat

When it comes to fat, the type of fat eaten over time is more important for health than the total amount eaten. Limit foods high in saturated fat to lower your risk of heart disease, such as:

- Fatty meats, processed meats
- High fat yogurt, cheese and ice cream
- Lard, ghee, butter, palm oil, coconut oil, hard margarine
- Deep-fried foods

Alcohol

According to Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health, no amount or kind of alcohol is good for you. Alcohol increases the risk of falls, injuries and many chronic diseases, including heart disease, cancer and gastrointestinal diseases.

Even at low levels, alcohol can impair your brain function, balance, reaction time and judgment, and have long-term effects. Aging slows down the body's ability to break down alcohol, making it more likely to cause harm.

If you drink alcohol, consider limiting to one to 2 drinks per week as a lower risk option. Or consider not drinking for benefits like better overall health and better sleep.

How do I use the nutrition facts table when choosing groceries?

Most packaged foods come with a nutrition facts table. These tables can help you choose nutritious products. The percent daily value (%)

DV) shows you if the food has a little or a lot of certain nutrients.

- 5% DV or less is a little
- 15% DV or more is a lot

You can use the % DV to choose foods that are lower in sodium, sugars and saturated fat, and higher in key nutrients like calcium and fibre.

The table also shows other nutrients, like grams of protein per serving. If you want to eat more protein, compare similar foods and choose one that has more protein in a given serving size.

What are some tips for eating well on a budget?

Consider the following to help reduce the cost of groceries:

- Look for produce that's discounted due to "natural imperfections" such as odd shapes or slight bruising
- Eat more plant-based proteins as they tend to be cheaper than meat, fish and poultry. For extra savings, cook dried beans and lentils instead of buying canned versions
- Use frozen, canned, or dried vegetables and fruit instead of fresh. These can be just as nutritious and fresh. Choose products without added sugar and salt when possible
- Make your grocery list by looking at the weekly flyer and choosing items that are on sale
- Buy foods sold in bulk or in larger packages if the price is cheaper per unit. Ask friends or family to split larger portions if needed
- Get creative with leftovers to avoid food waste

What else can I do to support healthy aging?

Be active every day

Regular physical activity can help maintain independence in older adults. It can also lower the risk of falls, fall-related injuries, and age-related conditions such as heart disease and dementia.

For support with physical activity, call **8-1-1** to speak to a qualified exercise professional.

Ask for help when you need it

Aging comes with many changes. These changes can make things challenging. You may have a hard time:

- Accessing groceries or preparing food
- Eating food. For example, you may have a smaller appetite, trouble chewing or find that foods taste different
- Scheduling medications and remembering which medications interact with food
- Maintaining your weight
- Finding opportunities to connect with others. Part of eating well is about making mealtimes enjoyable. Eating with others can help

Call **8-1-1** to get help with challenges like these. You can speak with a registered dietitian, nurse, qualified exercise professional or pharmacist.

For more information

Healthy eating for seniors handbook

www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/family-social-supports/seniors/health-safety/active-aging/healthy-eating/healthy-eating-for-seniors-handbook

Includes recipes, tips for eating well with chronic disease, information on supplements and more.

Healthy eating on a budget

<https://food-guide.canada.ca/en/tips-for-healthy-eating/healthy-eating-budget/>

Meal planning using leftovers

<https://food-guide.canada.ca/en/cooking-skills/meal-planning-using-leftovers>

HealthyBC self-assessment tool

www.healthlinkbc.ca/living-well/getting-older/healthybc-self-assessment-tool

An online questionnaire for people aged 50+ with links to resources that support healthy aging.

For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/healthfiles or your local public health unit. For non-emergency health information and advice in B.C. visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call **8-1-1** (toll-free). For the deaf and hard of hearing, call **7-1-1**. Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.