

On Nutrition: by Helayne Waldman, Ed.D., N.E.,

Nutritional Needs Change as Body Ages

Recent research is confirming what many nutritionists have long observed in clinical practice: paying close attention to changing nutritional needs as we age pays big dividends in improved energy and digestion, *plus*, in mitigating the innumerable risk factors that creep up on us as the years roll by – i.e., the risk of diabetes, heart disease, cancer, Parkinson’s, and Alzheimer’s, to name just a few.

The bad news is that far too many seniors are undernourished. The good news, however, is that there are numerous simple but powerful steps you can take to improve the situation. Let’s look at five of my favorites.

Eat whole, unrefined

carbohydrates. Like the rest of the population, seniors eat far too many “fake” foods like white bread, pasta, chips, sodas and desserts. These processed foods have lost their nutritional value through extensive processing and, to make matters worse, they quickly convert to sugar once they hit the bloodstream. The result is an increase in blood glucose, a stage-setting precursor for diabetes and other metabolic disorders.

So throw out the white rice, the white bread and the white noodles. Instead, try brown rice, roasted buckwheat (kasha), quinoa, or barley. Substitute pure drinking water or herb tea for sugary soft drinks, and have a sweet and delicious mango, peach, or bowl of cherries for dessert. Not only will you be eliminating useless food from your diet, you’ll be adding



critical nutrients such as vitamin A, vitamin C, the B vitamins and magnesium. What’s more, the fiber content in whole grains will help move food through the digestive tract more efficiently. This is essential as we age, as food tends to remain in the intestines for longer periods of time, resulting in harder stools, constipation, and an increased risk of colon cancer.

Take a full spectrum digestive enzyme with each meal. Several other things happen, digestively speaking, as we age. First older people produce less saliva, and about 30 percent of us lose the ability to make stomach acid (hydrochloric acid, or Hcl).

The combined loss of digestive enzymes in saliva and Hcl interferes with the absorption of key nutrients like vitamin B12 and folic acid. Not only can the resulting deficiencies cause neurological changes such as loss of memory or hearing, they can also portend a dangerous rise in toxic amino acid byproduct known as homocysteine, which has been implicated as a major risk factor for heart attack, stroke and Alzheimer’s.

If homocysteine levels remain elevated (>9 or 10), emerging data

strongly suggests that supplementation with folic acid and vitamin B12 are the best means of normalizing levels to protect heart health. In fact, some physicians routinely give B12 shots to their senior patients, as it also causes a noticeable boost in energy levels.

Enjoy a probiotic drink, fermented foods (like home made sauerkraut), or a probiotic capsule before each meal.

Probiotics, or “good” bacteria, are nature’s way of providing defense within our intestinal tract against the constant bombardment from parasites, bacteria, pollutants and other food contaminants. But aside from merely keeping our bellies feeling good, a healthy dose of “good guy” micro flora is important for the health of the immune system and for the production of vitamin K and other vitamins. And if that weren’t enough, these microscopic superheroes seem to also exert a beneficial effect on cholesterol levels.

Recall that when we take antibiotics we kill all of the bacteria in our intestines – the good along with the bad. We also inadvertently kill off our bacterial buddies when we drink chlorinated (aka tap) water, or eat antibiotic-treated meat or fowl. Eating fermented foods and/or taking a daily probiotic is a good insurance policy to help keep your gut healthy and happy.

Make friends with fat. In the past couple of decades, we’ve all been conditioned to be “fat phobic.” But let’s look at the facts, and then the fats.

Fat makes up the better part of every cell membrane in our body. Our ancestors knew this, and instinctively ate a diet rich with nuts, seeds, fatty fruits like avocados and olives, dairy products, and meat or fish, when it was available. Fat is the source of slow burning energy that keeps our bodies humming and our minds strong. In fact, fat is the single most pervasive macronutrient in our brains. So why the hostile relationship with fat?

In a nutshell, since the middle of the 20th Century, we've been consuming the wrong *kind* of fat. And not coincidentally in that same timeframe, the incidence of cardiovascular disease has skyrocketed. By the wrong kind of fat we mean margarine, shortening, and the highly processed oils that dominate supermarket shelves and fast food products today. The media calls them "trans fats," but "fake fats" would be more apt. When our bodies meet up with these fake foods, they become a bit bewildered. They store the trans fats where "real" fats ought to go. But instead of behaving like real fats, they wreak havoc on our cells, our arteries, and our brains.

What to do? Throw out the margarine and the shortening. Renounce fast foods which are positively dripping with these insidious fats, and monitor your intake of crackers, pies, chips, and

donuts assiduously. In addition, be aware that the fats our bodies really crave these days are the type that our ancestors ate in abundance. They're known as Omega 3 fats, and are plentiful in cold water fish like wild salmon, halibut, anchovies, sardines and tuna. You can also get ample amounts of Omega 3 oils in nuts and seeds, particularly walnuts and flax seeds.

For cooking, your best bet is to avoid oils that are genetically modified (like soy and canola), and focus on organic oils that stand up well to high temperatures, such as grapeseed oil, rice bran oil, and macadamia nut oil. Use olive oil for cold uses like salad dressing, as it provides another type of wonderfully healthy fat, the Omega 9s. Eat butter sparingly and never have anything to do with margarine again. Ever.

Savor the sun. One of the main risks of falling among older people is muscle weakness caused by vitamin D deficiency. This is a problem much more pervasive than previously realized, according to a recent issue of the British Medical Journal. Housebound adults in particular do not get adequate exposure to sunlight (our primary source of Vitamin D).

And vitamin D is not just about your muscles and bones. This hormone-like vitamin has also received scientific accolades over

the past few years for its role in enhancing immunity and in providing protection from certain forms of cancer.

So get outside and soak it up: 15-20 minutes a day without sunscreen should do the trick. If your skin is sensitive or you haven't been outside for a long while, start with five minutes and work your way up. Then feel free to slather away with sunscreen to prevent burning.

In the wintertime, or if you simply hate the sun, take a good quality Vitamin D supplement such as cod liver oil, which not only provides the needed vitamin D, but contains a hefty dose of those fabulous Omega 3 fats as well.

In addition to the suggestions above, be sure to eat plenty of high quality protein (to help maintain muscle mass), take a full spectrum multivitamin supplement, and of course, eat your veggies!

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