

## **Combat Aging With The Right Food**

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Living Well

A column from SVNA by Cyd Emmons

Aging is nothing if not consistent. Your steps get a little slower, your short-term memory lags a bit, and everything you do seems to take just a little longer. Those sorts of things you notice.

You're less likely to notice that your metabolism has slowed or that your body isn't absorbing calcium and vitamins as efficiently as it once did. The older body doesn't metabolize protein as well either, and muscle mass can decrease as much as 25% while body fat increases. In fact, there's a physical slowdown in all of the body's systems as we age.

So is there an upside here? There is. A good nutritious diet can compensate for these system slowdowns according to Salisbury Visiting Nurse Association's consulting nutritionist Anita Grinevics, M.S., R.D. (registered dietician), who was recently certified as a specialist in gerontologic nutrition.

In fact, good nutrition is as important to elder health as it is to children's health. "A well-rounded, low fat, low salt and high fiber diet is what older people need," Grinevics said. Some of her top food picks are cruciferous vegetables—cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, and Brussels sprouts—and vegetables that contain folate, a B vitamin that is found naturally in leafy greens such as spinach, citrus, dried beans, asparagus, and even lettuce and, in its synthetic form as folic acid, in fortified cereals and other foods and in vitamin supplements.

According to the Mayo Clinic, early evidence suggests that low folate levels may be linked to Alzheimer's disease, depression, and age-related hearing loss. Folate helps produce and maintain new cells and helps to prevent changes in cell DNA that may lead to cancer.

### **Fruit and Fiber**

Grinevics is also a big booster of fruit, and not just the darlings of the moment like blueberries that are so good for the urinary tract, but the ubiquitous apple. A native of the orchard-laden Hudson Valley, she is definitely pro-apple and, she said, "apples are an underrated fruit. They have lots of fiber and are so portable."

High fiber foods rate very high on her list. Fiber can help keep the digestive tract functioning well and reduce dependence on laxatives, which can lead to a dangerous electrolyte imbalance and dehydration. Dehydration is, in fact, a major issue for elders and proper hydration is one of Grinevics' biggest concerns for her older patients.

The USDA's (U. S. Department of Agriculture) familiar food pyramid which illustrates the proportion of the diet that should come from the basic categories of foods, is now re-designed, Internet-based and known as--what else?—MyPyramid. There is a MyPyramid for Older Adults with cartoon-like illustrations of whole grains, vegetables and fruits, low-fat, non-fat and lactose-reduced dairy products, low-saturated and trans fat oil choices and low-fat and vegetable alternatives in the meat group, plus eight glasses of water, various forms of physical activity, and a pennant on top emphasizing the importance of vitamins B 12 and D and calcium. MyPyramid has a lot going on.

The message, though, is the same as that of the various other food pyramids out there, including pyramids for those Americans accustomed to ethnic foods, such as Asian, Hispanic, or Mediterranean. Nutrient-dense foods are the point of all of them, particularly for older adults, because obesity is on the rise among the 70 and older set. (An interesting little item I turned up while researching this topic is that 100 tons of food will pass through an individual's digestive system over a lifetime. How much of that amazing amount of food that you've eaten and will eat is really good for you?) The key is eating wisely while consuming fewer calories and increasing physical activity.

### **Quality of Life**

While the USDA emphasizes the benefits of getting most nutrients from food, Grinevics recommends that older adults take a multivitamin as well. And, in her opinion, the fact that you're older doesn't mean you don't need to worry about cholesterol any longer. "It's a quality of life issue," she said. "I don't like to see elevated cholesterol at any age."

But, as important as a balanced and nutritious diet is for older people, millions of them don't eat well and, according to the FDA, are at a disproportionate risk of endangering their health because of poor nutrition. In 2000, the USDA reported that nearly one and half million households with elderly residents did not have the right kind of food needed to maintain good health or simply not enough to eat. Certainly, since the price of food has risen precipitately over the last eight years, that problem undoubtedly has gotten far worse.

Lacking the money to buy good food isn't the only factor contributing to poor elder nutrition, however. Loneliness and depression, weakness, lack of convenient transportation, lack of shopping and cooking skills—particularly among widowers—oral or dental problems and medication-related issues can all contribute to poor elder nutrition.

Elder nutrition sites, which offer healthy, balanced midday meals, plus the opportunity to socialize and take part in exercise or other programs, are a terrific resource. Lakeville's Town Grove serves Sharon and Salisbury residents, Falls Village residents have their own site on the second floor of the old town hall (there's an elevator) and in Canaan

meals are served at Wangum Village. Call the social service agent in each town for all the details.