

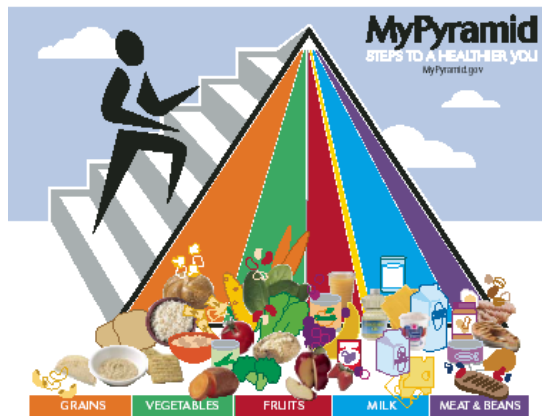
# Healthy Living: The Nutritional Needs Of Older Adults

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It's hard to watch the news and not know there is a lot of concern about obesity in the United States. Overweight adults and children have become a focus of attention as concerns about the prevalence of chronic disease and their associated costs became hot topics for network programs and health news reports. Every morning news program features a new "weight-loss guru" or a group of individuals competing to lose the most weight. The diets being promoted offer conflicting information about what to and what not to eat. One day it's "o.k." to eat carbohydrates or proteins; the next it's not.

Thus far, the media has primarily focused on young adults, and more recently on children. The nutritional status of older adults, however, has not gotten as much attention. Older adults have basically been advised to eat the same thing as younger adults, just in smaller quantities.

In response to criticism about the lack of individualization in the government's advice about nutrition, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) recently published a new series of "food pyramids" called *MyPyramid* that are designed to address the nutritional needs of various age groups<sup>1</sup>.



For over a decade, Americans have relied on the USDA for dietary guidelines about what and how much to eat. But according to the Harvard School of Public Health, the new *MyPyramid*, "doesn't convey enough information to help you make informed choices [and] continues to recommend foods that aren't essential to good health, and may even be detrimental in the quantities included in MyPyramid."<sup>2</sup> The USDA is accused of bending to political pressure from lobbyists who want meat and dairy products to be recommended in inappropriately higher quantities.

Released in January 2005, the new Dietary Guidelines for Americans *do* recommend: weight control, physical exercise, reducing trans and saturated fats, and limiting sugar intake in favor of whole grains. The guidelines fail to encourage eating fish, poultry and beans in place of (even lean) red meats and still recommend eating dairy products that can be high in saturated fats.

So, who and what do you believe if you are one of the 34 million adults over the age of 65 or a family caregiver trying to support an adult to remain independent in their home?

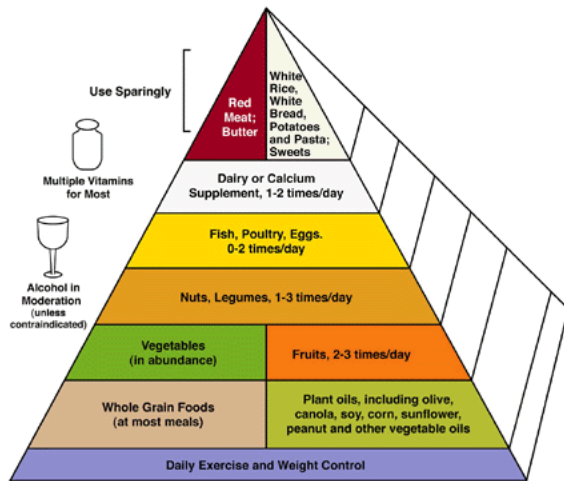
Most people agree that enjoying a wide variety of foods contributes to their quality of life. Food is often associated with socialization and meaningful involvement with friends. It is well documented that keeping active, having fun, and maintaining a positive mental outlook also contribute to aging well.

As a person ages however, physiological and functional changes result in different nutritional needs. The aging process affects absorption, utilization and excretion of nutrients.<sup>3</sup> For example, older adults have higher requirements for:

- Folic acid and vitamins B-6 and B-12 to prevent declines in cognitive functioning
- Protein to maintain weight and muscle mass

- Vitamin E to help protect cells from damage, lessen cataract formation and reduce macular degeneration, and reduce the risks of coronary heart disease
- Ascorbic acid, Vitamin A and Zinc for wound healing
- Vitamin D and Calcium to reduce fracture risk and increase muscle strength.<sup>4</sup>

What foods and dietary supplements should older adults eat to obtain adequate amounts of these nutrients? Here is a closer look at the Harvard plan.<sup>5</sup>



Harvard’s “Healthy Eating Pyramid” is reportedly based on the best scientific evidence available. Starting at the base, the pyramid is “grounded” on a base of physical exercise and weight control. The other components of the pyramid include:

- **Water/Liquids.** Adults need at least 6-8 servings a day unless contraindicated by a medical condition.
- **Whole Grains.** Whole grains are carbohydrates that provide energy and fiber. Good sources of whole grains include oatmeal, whole-wheat bread and brown rice. They are considered complex because they aren’t digested quickly and that keeps the blood sugar and insulin levels lower. It’s believed lower insulin levels may help prevent the development of adult on-set type 2 Diabetes. Whole grains should be eaten at most meals.
- **Vegetables and Fruits.** Adults should have vegetables at every meal and 2 servings of fruit daily to reduce the risk of heart disease, stroke, and certain types of cancers. A combination of fresh and dried fruits is a good source of fiber and Vitamin C. Fiber helps the colon work more efficiently and is associated with lower cholesterol levels.
- **Plant oils.** The average American gets at least 1/3 of his/her calories each day from fats. Plant oils are a good source of unsaturated fats. These oils are found in olive, canola, soy, corn, sunflower, peanut and other vegetable oils. They are also present in fatty fish like salmon and tuna.
- **Fish, Poultry and Eggs.** These are excellent sources of protein, particularly fish that also reduces the risk of heart disease due to the Vitamin E content.
- **Nuts and Beans.** These are excellent sources of fiber, protein, vitamins and minerals. Beans are usually sold dried or in a can which makes storage easy.
- **Dairy-Calcium Supplements.** Bones require calcium and vitamin D to stay strong and vital. Dairy products like milk and cheese should contain no or low fat to avoid saturated

fats. Supplements are inexpensive and a very acceptable way to get the recommended amount of calcium daily.

- **Eat very little red meat, butter, potatoes, pasta, white bread, and sweets.** Red meat and butter contain saturated fats that can cause high cholesterol. Use a butter substitute if you have to have it for taste. The other foods contain simple sugars that stimulate insulin and raise blood sugar levels.
- **Multivitamins and minerals.** Taking a daily multivitamin with minerals is one way to help fill in gaps in your diet. A supplement that meets the daily requirements of the USP (U.S. Pharmacopeia) is sufficient.
- **Alcohol use.** Drinking in moderation may improve appetite and reduce the risk of heart disease. One drink a day is good point of reference.<sup>6</sup>

You can also find Asian, Latin, Mediterranean and vegetarian recommended foods at the Oldways Preservation and Exchange Trust at <http://www.oldwayspt.org>.

In addition to what to eat, adults need to consider how much food to consume. A *portion* is how much food you choose to eat and a *serving* is the standard amount set by the government.<sup>7</sup> You can also consult the National Dietetic Associations for recommendations on serving size. Most packaged foods now contain a nutrition label for your reference. Here is a website to learn more about the information on the label and how to use it. <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/foodlab.html>.

The aging process, chronic illness, and disabilities can all affect a person's ability to enjoy, consume, digest, and eliminate food. As a result, many older adults are at risk for malnutrition, dehydration and constipation. Risk factors include polypharmacy, poor appetite, eating problems such as chewing and swallowing, illness, low income, isolation, loneliness and eating alone, depression, alcoholism, and decreased mobility.<sup>89</sup> Most older adults also experience a decrease in their sense of smell and taste that can make enjoying a meal difficult. Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia can compound these problems.

It's very easy for Caregivers and even health care providers to overlook the nutritional status of an older adult or a person with a disability. There are two excellent resources on-line for you to consult to determine if a person is at risk for malnutrition. The American Academy of Family Physicians recommends a nutrition checklist with the following warning signs: disease, eating poorly, tooth loss or pain, economic hardship, isolation, polypharmacy, involuntary weight loss or gain, the need for assistance with self-care particularly the inability to obtain or prepare food, and being 80 years or older.<sup>10</sup> You can find out more about the copywrited assessment tool at <http://www.aafp.org/x17367.xml>.

You can also obtain a copy of the Mini Nutritional Assessment Tool at The Hartford Institute for Geriatric Nursing website. This is a tool that clinicians can use to assess the nutritional status of elders. [http://www.hartfordign.org/publications/trythis/issue\\_9.pdf](http://www.hartfordign.org/publications/trythis/issue_9.pdf).

Healthy eating is important at any age. Wise food choices, a balanced diet, and physical exercise are key elements to a healthy lifestyle and the prevention of disease. Family and professional caregivers play a significant role in helping older adults maintain or regain their nutritional status. The more you learn about nutrition the better able you will be to help yourself and care recipient age well.

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<sup>1</sup> Hawkins, B. (2005) *Aging Well: Toward a Way of Life For All People*. Retrieved October 9, 2005. [http://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/jul/05\\_0018.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/jul/05_0018.htm).

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- <sup>2</sup> Harvard School of Public Health (2005). *Food Pyramids: What Should You Really Eat?* Retrieved October 8, 2005. <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/pyramids.htm>.
- <sup>3</sup> American Dietetic Association. (2005) *Nutrition, Aging and the Continuum of Care*. Retrieved January 13, 2005. Now at [http://www.eatright.org/Member/PolicyInitiatives/index\\_21992.cfm](http://www.eatright.org/Member/PolicyInitiatives/index_21992.cfm).
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- <sup>5</sup> Harvard School of Public Health (2005).
- <sup>6</sup> Harvard School of Public Health (2005).
- <sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases: WIN. (2005) *Just Enough For You: About Food Portions*. Retrieved January 12, 2005. [http://win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/just\\_enough.htm](http://win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/just_enough.htm).
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- <sup>9</sup> How To Care: Your Elder Care Survival Guide. (2000) *How to Care: Eating, Nutrition, Diets*. Retrieved September 19, 2005. [www.howtocare.com/diet.htm](http://www.howtocare.com/diet.htm).
- <sup>10</sup> American Dietetic Association. (2002) *Nutrition Fact Sheet: Healthy Aging With a Diet Rich in Vitamin E*. Retrieved January 12, 2005. [http://www.eatright.org/Public/NutritionInformation/92\\_nfs1102a.cfm](http://www.eatright.org/Public/NutritionInformation/92_nfs1102a.cfm).