

Build a Healthy Eating Routine as You Get Older

Good nutrition is key to staying healthy, active, and independent as you get older. And it's never too late to make healthy changes!

Follow these tips to build a healthy eating routine that works for you.



Choose a mix of healthy foods

There are lots of healthy choices in each food group! Choose a variety of foods you enjoy, including:



Whole fruits — like apples, berries, oranges, mangos, and bananas



Veggies — like broccoli, sweet potatoes, beets, okra, spinach, peppers, black beans, edamame, and jicama



Whole grains — like brown rice, millet, oatmeal, bulgur, whole-wheat bread, and pasta



Protein foods — like lean meats and chicken, eggs, seafood, beans and lentils, nuts and seeds, and tofu



Low-fat or fat-free dairy — like milk, yogurt, cheese, lactose-free dairy, and fortified soy beverages (soy milk) or soy yogurt



Oils — like vegetable oil, olive oil, and oils in foods like seafood, avocado, and nuts



Depending on your culture and tastes, you might choose different foods than the ones listed here — and that's okay! You can find healthy foods that work for you at [DietaryGuidelines.gov/sites/default/files/2020-12/DGA_2020-2025_CustomizingTheDietaryGuidelines.pdf](https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/sites/default/files/2020-12/DGA_2020-2025_CustomizingTheDietaryGuidelines.pdf).

Get enough protein and vitamin B12

Protein can help prevent muscle loss as you age, and many older adults don't get enough. Lean meats, poultry, and eggs are good sources of protein – but most older adults already eat the recommended amount of these.

So branch out and try these tips to include a variety of healthy protein choices in your eating routine:



Seafood – eat fish or shellfish instead of meat a couple times a week



Soy – drink unsweetened fortified soy beverages (soy milk) and add tofu to your stir-fry, soups, and stews



Dairy – drink low-fat (1%), fat-free (skim), or lactose-free milk with meals and add low-fat yogurt and cheeses to your eating routine



Beans, peas, and lentils – use black beans, red lentils, or chickpeas in place of meat in your favorite recipes

Many older adults have trouble getting enough **vitamin B12**. You can get B12 from:

- Foods from animal sources – like meat, seafood, dairy products, and eggs
- Fortified plant foods with added vitamin B12 – like fortified soy milk and some whole-grain breakfast cereals



What about taking supplements?

It's best to get most of the nutrients you need from foods and drinks. But some older adults may need supplements to get enough of certain nutrients, like vitamin B12 and vitamin D.

Talk with your doctor **before** you start taking any supplements.



Cut down on added sugars, saturated fat, and sodium

Check the Nutrition Facts label to choose foods with less of these 3 things:



Added sugars include sugars that are added to foods and drinks, foods packaged as sweeteners (like table sugar), and sugars from syrups and honey. Choose water instead of sugary drinks and limit sweet treats like cake, cookies, and candy.



Saturated fat is higher in foods from animal sources like butter, cheese, whole milk, and fatty meats like ribs and sausage. It's also in some plant foods like coconut oil and palm oil. Choose foods with unsaturated fats instead – like seafood, avocados, nuts and seeds, and olive oil.



Sodium comes from salt – and most of the sodium we eat comes from packaged foods and restaurant meals. Try cooking more at home and flavoring foods with herbs and spices instead of salt.



Find out how many calories you need

The number of calories you need each day depends on your age, weight, height, sex, and how much physical activity you get. In general, you need fewer daily calories as you get older. Paying attention to how many calories you get — along with getting regular physical activity — can help prevent weight gain.

Go to [MyPlate.gov/MyPlate-Plan](https://www.MyPlate.gov/MyPlate-Plan) to find out how many calories you need — and the amount of food you need from each food group.



Nutrition Facts

8 servings per container

Serving size 2/3 cup (55g)

Amount per serving

Calories 230

% Daily Value*

Total Fat 8g 10%

Saturated Fat 1g 5%

Trans Fat 0g

Cholesterol 0mg 0%

Sodium 160mg 7%

Total Carbohydrate 37g 13%

Dietary Fiber 4g 14%

Total Sugars 12g

Includes 10g Added Sugars 20%

Protein 3g

Vitamin D 2mcg 10%

Calcium 260mg 20%

Iron 8mg 45%

Potassium 235mg 6%

* The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.

Check the label

The Nutrition Facts label can help you make healthier choices. Look for this key info:

- Serving size — if you eat more than 1 serving, you'll get more of everything on the label
- Calories — keep in mind how many calories you need each day, and how many are in 1 serving

Then look at the % Daily Values:

- 5% or less is **low** — try to choose foods low in added sugars, sodium, and saturated fat
- 20% or more is **high** — try to choose foods high in fiber, calcium, potassium, iron, and vitamin D

Drink more water

Staying hydrated is important for your health, but you may start to feel less thirsty as you age. Water helps you stay hydrated without adding calories, and many older adults don't drink enough. Try having a glass of water with every meal!

Low-fat or fat-free milk, including lactose-free versions, and fortified soy beverages (soy milk) are also healthy drink choices. But skip drinks with added sugars, like sweet tea, lemonade, and soda — sugary drinks make it hard to get all the nutrients you need without getting too many calories.

What about alcohol?

If you choose to drink alcohol, drink in moderation — 1 drink or less in a day for women and 2 drinks or less in a day for men.



Some people shouldn't drink alcohol at all, such as people with certain medical conditions or who take certain medications. Alcohol may also affect you more as you get older, so be careful about how much you drink — and remember that drinking less is always better for your health.



What about fruit juice?

Most of the time, **choose whole fruits** instead of juice. Whole fruits have fiber you need to stay healthy. If you do drink juice:

- Choose 100% fruit juice — which doesn't have any added sugars
- Have a small serving — aim for 4 ounces or less
- Try mixing 100% fruit juice with water or sparkling water to reduce calories



Make healthy eating work for you

- Eating healthy can be more fun with other people! Try sharing healthy meals with friends and family – or look for group meals for older adults at local senior centers or community senior meal sites. Get tips for eating healthy together at [MyPlate.gov/Life-Stages/Older-Adults](https://www.MyPlate.gov/Life-Stages/Older-Adults).
- Food safety is especially important for older adults. That’s because the risk of getting sick from germs in food increases with age. Find tips to cook and store food safely at [FoodSafety.gov](https://www.FoodSafety.gov).
- If you have trouble chewing or swallowing food, try cooking or preparing foods to give them a softer texture. Eat slowly and take small bites to reduce the risk of choking. You can also talk with your doctor, dentist, or registered dietitian nutritionist about ways to make eating more comfortable.
- If you can’t afford enough healthy food, there are lots of programs that can help. Ask about discounts for older adults at grocery stores and farmers markets – and visit [USA.gov/Food-Help](https://www.USA.gov/Food-Help) to learn about free food programs for low-income seniors. You can also go to [eldercare.acl.gov](https://www.eldercare.acl.gov) to find your local Area Agency on Aging – they can help you find donation-based meals for older adults.

Not sure where to start? **Try cooking a healthy dinner just once a week.** Cooking more at home is a great way to start making healthier choices. Find recipes, recipe videos, and other resources at [MyPlate.gov/MyPlate-Kitchen](https://www.MyPlate.gov/MyPlate-Kitchen).

Remember, it’s never too late to start eating healthy

Healthy eating can lower your risk of health problems like:

- Overweight and obesity
- Heart disease
- Type 2 diabetes
- Some cancers

And if you currently have a health condition, healthy eating may help you manage it. Talk with your doctor about a healthy eating routine that’s best for you.

So **start simple** – it’s never too late to make a healthy change.

- Learn about the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and get more resources to help you eat healthy at [DietaryGuidelines.gov](https://www.DietaryGuidelines.gov)
- Find more healthy eating tips and recipes at [MyPlate.gov/Life-Stages/Older-Adults](https://www.MyPlate.gov/Life-Stages/Older-Adults)

