

Healthy Eating as We Age including Snacking

















Eating healthy as we age when money is tight and food prices are increasing can be challenging, but very necessary. Making smart food choices can help protect from certain health concerns as we age. With so many different diets out there, choosing what to eat can be confusing. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans provide healthy eating recommendations which suggest eating pattern with plenty of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, healthy fats and lean proteins.

Much research shows the Mediterranean style eating pattern inspired by traditional foods from countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea, emphasizing plant-based foods like fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, nuts and olive oil with moderate amounts of fish, poultry, dairy, eggs and limited sweets and red meats focus on fresh and minimally processed foods. A 2021 study analyzing the eating patterns of 21,000 participants found that people closely following the Mediterranean meal pattern had a significantly lower risk of cardiac death. And there is the diet, Dietary Approach to Stop Hypertension (DASH) a flexible eating plan emphasizing fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins and low-fat dairy while limiting sodium, saturated fats, sweets and sugary beverages. has shown significant health benefits. Studies have found DASH lowers blood pressure, helps with weight loss and reduces type 2 diabetes and heart disease. Yet another eating pattern that may support healthy aging is the MIND diet (Mediterranean-DASH Intervention for Neurodegenerative Delay) combines elements of the Mediterranean and DASH diets. Researchers have found that people who closely follow the MIND diet have better overall cognition-ability to clearly think, learn and remember.

To take advantage of any of these diet plans, start with small changes by adopting one or two aspects of the Mediterranean-style, DASH or MIND eating patterns. Several studies show that incorporating even part of these eating patterns can improve health outcomes. One study of 1000 older adults that consumption of green leafy vegetables was significantly associated with slower cognitive decline.

No matter which eating plan we select, the facts are that older adults often need fewer calories and more nutrients, making it essential to select nutrient dense foods. Eat nutrient-dense foods across all the food groups, to meet the unique nutrient needs of older adults. Remember to **limit** added sugars, as they do not offer any nutrient benefits, limit saturated fats as your heart will rebel, and limit sodium which can increase your blood pressure. Ensure you meet the additional protein needs to maintain muscles with added seafood, low-fat dairy, soy products along with beans, peas and lentils. Ensure daily fruits and vegetable for the variety of vitamins, minerals and antioxidants- keeps everything working well. Focus on addition B12 needs, as absorption declines, with lean meats, eggs or fortified cereals. Last and just as important, drink plenty of fluids- stay hydrated to aid in digestion and nutrient absorption.

Addition to your choice of eating patterns, many seniors consume smaller amounts of food and beverages, and may add a few snacks. It can be easy to ignore the nutrient quality of snack food and beverage choices!!!! Yep we enjoy the candy bar, soda, café latte, cookies to chips!!!! Time to limit portions of these high calorie, fat, sodium choices. Select more nutrient dense items.

Shift from: High-calorie snacks	Shift to: Nutrient-dense snacks	Shift from: Medium café latte made with whole milk	Shift to: Small café latte made with fat-free milk
			
Fruit products with added sugars	Fresh fruit		
			
Refined grains	Whole grains	Regular cola	Water or water flavored with fruits or vegetables
			
Snacks with added salt or sugars	Snacks without added salt or sugars		
			
Solid fats	Oils	Sweetened lemon iced tea	Sparkling water with natural lemon flavor
			

Another way to think about the idea of nutrient-dense and calorie- dense food is to look at a variety of foods that provide the same number of calories. Let's say that you want a small snack, these are each 100 calories:

- 7 inch banana
- 20 peanuts
- 3 cups no butter popcorn
- 2 regular chocolate sandwich cookies
- ½ cup low-fat ice cream
- 2 ounces baked chicken breast without skin

Happy eating. Be aware of your food and beverage choices as we age. Focus on nutrient dense with limited calories. Snacking is allowed, monitor your choices and portions. Food prepared with limited fat, lower salt and taste great. Goal: variety from all the food and moderation in your selection and portion sizes.

References: nia.nih.gov/health/healthy-eating-nutrition-and-diet/how-much-should-i-eat-quantity-and-quality, nia.nih.gov/health/healthy-eating-nutrition-and-diet/healthy-meal-planning-tips-older-adults

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