

How your nutritional needs change as you age



As you age, your nutritional needs evolve. Your body composition changes, you produce less saliva, and you're more likely to underproduce stomach acid. Additionally, your lifestyle may be less active than it once was. These changes often mean you need fewer calories but more essential nutrients. To meet these needs, it's important to adjust your diet accordingly.

We asked Dr Natalie Colson (Griffith University) about how to make these changes. Dr Colson is a molecular geneticist and accredited practising dietitian. She has over 15 years of experience as an educator and researcher. In our interview, Dr Colson responded to common questions about how dietary needs change over time. She discussed the common nutritional challenges faced by older adults. She also gave practical tips and solutions to these issues.

To eat for good health as you age, Dr Colson recommends a nutrient-dense diet. To achieve this, she emphasises the importance of:

- Fruits and vegetables (aim for 5 serves of vegetables and 2 serves of fruit every day, where a serve is about 75g)
- Lean proteins
- Wholegrains
- Dairy products (or plant-based substitutes)
- Healthy fats such as olive oil and fatty fish

She also recommends being cautious of saturated fats and highly processed, sugary foods, and excess salt.

Here's some more information on the key nutrients that become critical with ageing, and what foods you can find them in:

Protein

[Protein](#) is vital for maintaining muscle and bone mass. It supports recovery and healing processes. Some healthy sources of protein include:



- Lean meats and seafood
- Low-fat dairy products
- Legumes (beans, lentils, and peas)
- Nuts and seeds
- Wholegrains like oats, quinoa, or brown rice

Calcium

[Calcium](#) is important for bone density and reducing your risk of fractures. You can find calcium in:

- Low-fat dairy products (including lactose-free milks)
- Fortified plant-based milks and breakfast cereals
- Cruciferous vegetables (dark leafy greens) like broccoli and bok choy

Vitamin D

To absorb your calcium, you need enough [vitamin D](#). Your body produces vitamin D from sunlight, but it can also be found in food. You can find vitamin D in:

- Egg yolks
- Fortified foods (including fruit juices, cereals, and plant-based milks)
- Mushrooms
- Fatty fish (such as salmon and mackerel)

All fish contain some mercury, but it's generally safe and even recommended to eat 2-3 serves of fish a week, including any type of tuna or salmon, canned or fresh.

B12 and iron

B vitamins (especially [B12](#)) and [iron](#) are crucial for brain health and energy levels. Both are predominantly found in animal products. This includes fish, eggs, dairy, and of course, meat.

However, while red meat is a significant source of these nutrients, it's best consumed in moderation. The [Cancer Council](#) recommends no more than 455g cooked (700g raw) lean red meat per week. It's also recommended to minimise your intake of processed and charred meats.

You can find B12 and iron in foods other than meat, too. There's B12 in fortified foods, nutritional yeast, and nori (the seaweed used to wrap sushi rolls). There's also 71% of the recommended daily dose of iron in just 1 cup of spinach.

Alternatives to red meat

Had enough red meat this week and unsure what to use as substitute?

Here are some satisfying alternatives to a serving of red meat:

- 65–100g cooked chicken
- 80–120g cooked fish fillet (preferably oily, recommended at least twice a week)
- Two small eggs
- ⅓ cup cooked legumes (lentils, chickpeas, beans) or nuts

For those who eat meat, it's important to also eat plenty of plant-based foods like fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains.

Omega-3 fatty acids and antioxidants

These are [both vital for brain health](#). They can help reduce inflammation and oxidative stress and improve your mood. Good sources include berries, walnuts, and wild-caught salmon.

It's important not to avoid fats entirely, even if you have high cholesterol. Instead, it's better to choose healthy fats such as Omega-3 over unhealthy fat sources like saturated fats.

According to the [Cancer Council](#), eating foods rich in omega-3 can help reduce your risk of heart disease and even lessen the symptoms of arthritis.

Magnesium and zinc

Both [magnesium](#) and [zinc](#) are important for immune function and healing, as well as your mood and [mental health](#).

You can find both these nutrients in:

- Whole grains
- Nuts
- Seeds
- Legumes

So, how can you make sure your food has enough of these nutrients?

Eat a variety of wholefoods

The best way to get all your nutrients without excess calories from unhealthy additives is to eat a variety of wholefoods. Wholefoods, such as vegetables, are minimally processed and retain their natural nutrients. So, they're more likely to provide what you need without hurting your heart.

Here's how you can build a [balanced, heart-healthy meal](#):

- Fill half your plate with a mix of fruits and vegetables.
- Fill one quarter with carbohydrates from whole grains or starchy vegetables.
- Fill the remaining quarter with protein sources like lean meats or legumes.
- Include healthy fats, such as olive oil and avocado, and herbs and spices to enhance flavour instead of extra salt.

Aim for 5 veg and 2 fruit

The recommended goal is to eat 5 servings of vegetables and 2 of fruit every day. In fact, according to Dr Colson, higher intake of fruit and vegetables is associated with greater resilience to depression.

Dr Colson's advice for meeting the 5 and 2 goal is to try cooking your vegetables into different foods. For example, cooking extra carrots into your bolognese sauce.

Snack Smart

You can choose nutrient-dense snacks rather than calorie-dense ones. Nuts and seeds are good snacks that combine protein with healthy fats.

If you're a lover of desserts, you can also try healthy sweets. Increase the nutrition and decrease the sugar and saturated fats in your treats. Try fruits with yoghurt or custard instead of ice cream, for example. You can include oat-based biscuits or almond flakes for crunchiness.

Meal Preparation

A weekly meal plan could help you be sure to include key nutrients in your diet. When designing your plan, check what's already in your pantry. Use this as a base for meals you can create throughout the week. Then create a list of ingredients to buy to complete those dishes and provide any missing nutrients.

For example, you can buy milk or fortified alternatives to fulfill your calcium needs. Add this to smoothies, soups, or cereals. Also consider easy-to-prepare protein sources, such as scrambled eggs, grilled fish, or bean salads.

Consult your doctor or dietitian for specific advice about your meal plan.

Common nutritional concerns for older Australians:

Absorption Issues

Producing less saliva or stomach acid can make it [harder for older people to absorb nutrients](#). To address this, talk with your doctor or dietitian about the possibility of supplements. Always check with a health professional before taking new supplements or medications.

You may need to consider the impact of any medications you take on how you absorb nutrients. Health conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure can also affect your dietary needs. Be sure to ask your doctor if you have any health concerns.

Weight management

Whether you want to lose or gain weight, it's best to focus on nutrient-heavy foods.

- Needing fewer calories but more nutrients can mean it's easy to gain weight unintentionally. This can stress your heart, joints, and spine. Nutrient-dense meals can help you meet your nutritional needs without overloading on calories.
- At the same time, a decrease in appetite is common in older people. This can lead to unintentional weight loss or malnutrition. In this case, nutrient-packed snacks throughout the day can help you meet your nutritional and caloric needs.

Constipation and Digestive Health

With slower digestion, [fibre](#) is crucial to prevent constipation. It's not only good for your gut health, but also your microbiome. Here's how you can increase your fibre intake:

- Eat more oats, seeds, nuts, legumes, and vegetables.
- Choose whole grains over refined options. For example, consider brown rice, wholemeal pasta, or wholegrain bread over white.

If you're increasing your fibre intake, do so gradually, to avoid discomfort.

Regular exercise and staying hydrated are also crucial for digestion and overall health.

Oral health

Maintaining good oral health is essential for enjoying a diverse diet. Older adults may face increased tooth decay due to producing less saliva.

You can combat dry mouth by sipping water regularly. It also helps to limit sugary drinks and brush your teeth twice daily.

If you have difficulty chewing or swallowing, you can find protein in soft foods. For example, yogurt, soups, smoothies, scrambled eggs, or tender meats. You can also enhance moisture and flavour with olive oil or gravy. Just stay cautious of added sugars and salt in store-bought dressings and sauces.

Navigating nutrition as you age may seem daunting. But with the right knowledge and strategies, it can be manageable and rewarding.

Put simply, one thing you can do to take charge of your health is to eat a variety of wholefoods rich in essential nutrients.

You can also explore the LiveUp website for more resources and tips on eating well and other healthy ageing choices.



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