

A healthy diet for older people

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There is no single food or diet that will guarantee good health. That doesn't mean we shouldn't choose a healthy diet, but other factors also play a role. These include our genes, how much physical activity we get (moving more is good), how much time we spend sitting (too much is a risk for poor health), whether we smoke (harmful) and our social interactions (more friends and interests are associated with a longer and healthier lifespan). New search also suggests that the kind and number of bacteria in the large intestine may be relevant to health and longevity.

In spite of the complicating factors, there's good evidence that healthy diets have some common features that are relevant as we grow older.

In the 1960s and 70s, heart attacks were common in people (especially men) in their 40s and 50s. The diet at that time was high in saturated fat which came mainly from lots of fatty meat and butter, and also a nasty trans fat present in margarines and many baked goods.

Age-standardised death rates from heart attacks and strokes in men fell from 1020 per 100,000 in 1968 to 234 per 100,000 in 2008.

It's too simplistic to claim that the move to smaller servings of leaner meat, less butter and changes in margarines were solely responsible for the dramatic downturn in deaths from heart attacks, but they almost certainly played a role.

The typical Australian diet in 2014 now has other problems, mainly related to the fact that we consume more kilojoules than earlier (and more active) generations. Foods that were once occasional treats are now consumed as everyday items. These foods with their high content of sugar, salt and fat totally unbalance the diet, contributing to a dramatic increase in obesity, type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure. The latest research shows that junk foods and drinks now contribute 36% of adults' and over 40% of childrens' kilojoule intake.

We're also eating fewer vegetables, with consumption falling by 39% between 1995 and 2012. Wholegrains are down too and while fruit consumption hasn't changed, average consumption is one piece a day – half the recommendation.

What should we eat?

There's no shortage of people spruiking a range of diets that promise instant health. Some claim that past experts were wrong, adding that obesity and diabetes are due to a single factor such as carbohydrates, fructose or gluten.

My advice is to follow the dietary guidelines. I'll admit to a conflict of interest here, because I spent four years working on the recent set. We combed systematically through over 55,000 studies, graded the evidence, checked many authoritative reports and modelled many different combinations of foods to ensure the advice given provided adequate amounts of all essential nutrients.

Here's what the guidelines recommend for older people:

First, choose a variety of foods from the five food groups each day

- Vegetables – different types and colours, 5 serves (a serve is ½ cup cooked or 1 cup raw)

- Fruit – 2 average pieces
- Grains – at least 2/3 as wholegrains, 3–6 serves (a serve is 1 slice of bread, ½ cup cooked porridge, rice, pasta, buckwheat, polenta, bulgur, quinoa, barley, ¼ cup muesli)
- Lean meat or poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, legumes, nuts, seeds – 2–2½ serves (a serve is 65g of meat, 80g poultry, 100g fish, 2 eggs, 1 cup cooked legumes, 170g tofu, 30g nuts or seeds)
- Milk, cheese or yoghurt or alternatives – 2½–4 serves (a serve is 1 cup milk, 200g yogurt, 40g cheese or 1 cup soy, rice or other drink with at least 100mg calcium/100mL)

Note that the higher levels from the meat group are for men over 50 while the higher levels for milk, cheese, yoghurt or alternatives are for women over 50.

Oils and spreads are not given a special food group, but the guidelines assume people will include some of these foods to use in cooking or on bread. An alternative would be to include more nuts or seeds.

Water is also important, with the amount needed dependent on activity levels and sweat losses. Thirst is generally the best guide to fluid needs but may be less effective in older people due to a decline in kidney function, some medications and changes that may occur in the frail aged. There is no problem in taking water in the form of coffee (2–3 cups a day) or tea (4–6 cups a day). Many foods also provide fluid, especially vegetables and fruit.

For those who are small or have little physical activity or need to lose weight, these foods will meet the body's needs for kilojoules. Those who are taller or physically active may need more and can choose extra serves of the food group foods or include some 'discretionary' choices, such as alcoholic drinks or foods that contain extra fat or sugar. As people age, most need smaller portions of these 'extras'.

Salt

Salt is sodium chloride and we need some sodium. However, foods such as seafood, meat, poultry, eggs, milk and vegetables such as spinach are natural sources of sodium and it is an unavoidable ingredient in bread and cheeses. The foods from the food groups can thus meet our needs for sodium without any need for extra salt. Excess salt is a major factor in high blood pressure and conditions such as Meniere's syndrome, both of which are more common in older people.