

Chapter 2

EAT WELL, AGE WELL

Eating well is important at any age, but it is especially important as you get older.

For many seniors, though, eating well all the time can be a challenge.

Why do I need to eat well?

What is the connection between eating well and aging well?

What can I do to eat better for my age?

Why am I finding it harder to eat well now that I am a senior?

How can I set goals that I can actually meet?





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Why do I need to eat well?

No matter when you start, healthy eating can help you maintain and even improve your health – especially if you combine it with exercise.

Together, healthy eating and regular physical activity can mean the difference between independence and a life spent relying on others.

It can give you the energy you need to stay active and do the things you want to do – like working or volunteering, playing with your grandchildren or enjoying a walk around the block.

It can also prevent or slow down the progress of many chronic illnesses, such as heart disease and diabetes, osteoporosis and some forms of cancer. And it can help you cope better with both physical and mental stress, surgery and even the common cold or flu.

What is the connection between eating well and aging well?

Growing older means getting used to a body that's different from the one you had when you were younger. But it doesn't mean that you will immediately come down with all sorts of health problems or diseases: bad health and poor quality of life is not automatic as soon as you become a senior. In fact, many people find it a time of great growth and happiness.

Healthy living – which includes both healthy eating and getting regular physical activity – can help you adjust to the natural aging process and retain your youthful vigour.

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It's not always easy, but it is important



World War II veteran Reginald (Rusty) Wilson participated in the very first focus group we held to help decide the content and format for this handbook, at K'la How Eya Aboriginal Centre in Surrey, B.C.

Rusty has diabetes, which means he needs to be very careful about what and when he eats, but he gets tired of cooking for himself and trying to eat properly all the time.

He spoke for many seniors when he said: “Sometimes you don’t feel like getting up and boiling your vegetables, so you just have a slice of bread.”

This handbook is our attempt to provide Rusty – and anyone else who gets tired of cooking – with information about the importance of nutrition, along with easy ways to enjoy healthy eating.

Here are some basic facts about aging.

Everyone ages at a different rate, but you can almost certainly expect:

- Changes to your cardiovascular system. As you get older, your heart muscle has to work harder to pump the same amount of blood through your body. At the same time, your blood vessels become stiffer and fatty deposits may form on the walls of your arteries.

This narrows the passageway the blood has to travel through and makes your heart work even harder, which may lead to high blood pressure (also called hypertension).

- Changes to your weight. You may find that you need fewer calories now than when you were young because you are less active. Your body may also lose muscle and gain fat. As a result, you may put on weight as you age, increasing your risk for a number of illnesses.
- Changes to your bones, muscles and joints. As you age, your bones will naturally shrink in size and in density (how thick or heavy they are). You may become shorter and may find your bones break more easily. Your muscles, tendons and joints may also become stiffer with age, and you may not be as strong as you once were.
- Changes to taste, thirst and digestion. All your senses dim a little with age, including taste and smell, which can make eating less interesting. You will also tend to feel less thirsty as you get older, so you may not drink as much water as you should. And it will take longer for digested food to move through your system, so you may experience chronic constipation.
- Changes to your kidneys. Your kidneys will become less efficient with age and will not remove waste from your bloodstream as well as they once did. At the same time, a chronic condition such as Type 2 diabetes or high blood pressure, which many people experience with age, may damage your kidneys.

FAST FACTS:

Scientific studies have shown that vegetables and fruit – especially dark green, orange, yellow and red ones – contain natural disease-fighting ingredients called phytochemicals. (See Chapter 3 for more on these.)

If everyone simply ate five to 10 servings of vegetables and fruit every day, the current cancer rate could be reduced by as much as 20 percent.



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- Changes to your eyes. With age, your eyes are less able to produce tears, your retinas get thinner and your lenses gradually turn yellow. As a result, you may experience eye problems, such as cataracts, glaucoma or macular degeneration, as you get older. People with high blood pressure or diabetes are at the greatest risk of developing glaucoma.

The Basics of Healthy Living

Eat a variety of foods.

Eat in moderation. Size matters, so watch your portions!

Eat more:

- vegetables and fruit
- whole grains
(for example, breads, pasta, roti, oatmeal and brown rice)
- legumes (such as dried beans, peas, lentils)
- fish
- calcium-rich foods
(including low-fat milk, yogurt and cheese)
- unsaturated fats
(from vegetable oils, nuts and seeds)
- lean meat and poultry.

Eat less:

- saturated fats
(found in butter, ghee, lard, deli meats, bacon and sausages)
- trans fats
(found in processed foods, cookies, cakes and deep-fried foods)
- refined or enriched grains
- salt and sugar
(including sugary drinks as well as jams, candies and baked goods).

Drink more water.

Do something active everyday.

What can I do to eat better for my age?

Research proves that the need for certain nutrients (substances that nourish the body) increases with age.

For example, fibre becomes even more important as your metabolism slows down, to keep your bowels healthy and regular. You also need more of some vitamins and minerals for energy and strong bones. (See Chapters 3 and 4 for details on important nutrients for seniors.) And you may need greater amounts of protein, especially if you've had surgery or a chronic illness. (See Chapter 3 for more about protein.)

The challenge is to eat in a way that helps you maintain a healthy weight, while providing you with the nutrients you need for good health. The best place to start is with Canada's Food Guide (Appendix B).

Canada's Food Guide explains that the four main food groups are:

1. vegetables and fruit
2. grain products, including bread, rice, pasta and cereals
3. milk and alternatives, such as cheese, yogurt, kefir and fortified soy beverages
4. meat – fish, shellfish, poultry, lean meat – and alternatives, such as eggs, beans, lentils, chickpeas, tofu, nuts and nut butters.

The guide also tells you how many Food Guide Servings you should eat in a day to make sure you are getting enough of the vitamins, minerals and other nutrients you need for good health. Then it's up to you to adapt the food guide to help you meet your particular needs and tastes. For example, if you are a vegetarian, you will want to focus on alternatives to meat, such as beans and tofu. If you are lactose intolerant (milk and milk products cause abdominal pain and bloating), you will want to substitute lactose-free products.

By following Canada's Food Guide and taking a multivitamin/mineral intended for people over age 50, you are well on your way to eating well, living well and aging well.



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Why am I finding it harder to eat well now that I am a senior?

You are not alone. For many seniors, eating healthy, well-balanced meals can be a real challenge.

You may be cooking for just one or two now. You may find that you are much less active than you were when you were younger or that your sense of taste or smell is not as sharp as it used to be, so you are not as hungry or interested in food. You may also find it difficult to get out to the grocery store or to prepare proper meals.

It's tempting to live on just tea and toast. But you will feel better – you will have more energy, greater zest and interest in life – if you eat well.

Reading through this handbook is a good start to healthy eating. You can also talk to your doctor or a dietitian (see the box on this page) for nutrition information and advice.

Dial-A-Dietitian

Dial-A-Dietitian specializes in easy-to-use nutrition information for self-care, based on current scientific sources. Registered dietitians can provide brief nutrition consultation by phone. If you need more in-depth counselling, they will guide you to hospital outpatient dietitians, community nutritionists or other nutrition services in your community. This service does not replace the medical counsel of your doctor. Translation services are available in 130 languages.

In Greater Vancouver, call 604 732-9191.

Elsewhere in B.C., call toll-free 1 800 667-3438.

Or visit www.dialadietitian.org.

How can I set goals that I can actually meet?

The easiest way to move towards healthy eating every day is to set goals that you really can meet. For example, say to yourself:

- I will eat one more fruit and one more vegetable today.
- I will try a fruit or vegetable this week that I have never tried before.
- I will eat fish once this week.
- I will choose whole grain bread for my sandwich.
- I will drink one more glass of water each day.
- I will be more active today.
- I will throw out my deep fryer.
- I will do most of my shopping around the outer edges of the grocery store, because that's where the fresh foods are.

A few small changes can mount up to a very big difference to your health – before you even know it's happening!

Healthy Eating

QUIZ # 1

True or False?

1. Healthy eating is too expensive.

False. Some of the least expensive foods are also the most nutritious. Vegetables and fruit, whole grain breads, cereals and pasta, brown rice, baked beans – all are low in fat, high in fibre and cost far less than processed or packaged foods. (See Chapter 7 for tips on how to eat well on a budget.)

2. Low-fat eating is boring and tasteless.

False. Healthy eating can taste every bit as good as high-fat eating. It is easy to adjust the meals you love to be lower in fat, without losing flavour (you may never even taste the difference). There are also many very tasty low-fat recipes out there. Believe it or not, you will eventually find that you enjoy healthy eating even more than your old style. (See Chapter 8 for tips on lowering the fat in your recipes and Chapter 11 for good low-fat recipes.)

3. Snacking between meals is bad for you.

False. Eating a snack between meals or eating five or six small meals during the day can make you feel more energetic and help you manage your weight. Healthy snacks include fruit, vegetables, low-fat yogurt or a low-fat muffin. (We've included a great recipe for pumpkin raisin muffins in Chapter 11.)