

Nutrition for Seniors

by Heather D. Woods, ND

When it comes to aging, the prevention of age-related illness is just the start. Real rejuvenation is also possible. It is not to be found in any fanciful Shangri-La, nor in the fountain of youth once sought by Ponce de León, nor in any particular drug or magic potion. It is, rather, to be found in the choices we make every day. Depending on how we choose, we can age painfully, losing energy and function with each passing year, or we can maintain our health and vitality, and even, with a little bit of knowledge and attention, reverse many of the losses of age and restore youthful vigor. Retirement can be the time to explore oil painting and hang gliding, or learn a foreign language and travel to a new country to practice it—not just a time to catch up on the articles in those old magazines in your doctor’s waiting room.

What is the most troublesome complaint of aging? Although cardiovascular problems are the number one cause of death, they are not necessarily what bother people the most. “Of all the things I’ve lost, what I miss most is my mind,” has become an all too common lament of the baby boomers. The people who made up the youth culture of the ‘60s are now starting to place huge demands on an already creaky health care system with their age-associated diseases, including Alzheimer’s. Like most of the signs of aging, memory loss—whether it takes the forms of senility, Alzheimer’s disease, or just garden-variety “senior moments”—is all too often accepted as normal, and neurological problems are threatening to outstrip cardiovascular disease as the leading health problem in this country.

Why does one person continue to be mentally sharp and active into her nineties and another begin to decline in her forties? The reasons can be complex and varied. Certainly genetics plays a role, and there is no one simple solution. And yet, there is much less mystery than most people realize about the way to maintain healthy mental function. One of the first and strongest statistical associations to show up in studies of Alzheimer’s disease is that the more sugar consumed, the higher the risk. Diabetes also increases risk of memory problems.

Saturated fats and cholesterol, which come from animal-based foods, have been implicated in carotid artery occlusion. When these arteries, which supply nutrition and oxygen to the brain, get clogged, the brain can’t help but lose function. The same saturated fats affect arteries to the heart, causing cardiovascular problems, and gum up the receptor sites for insulin on our cells, a factor in maturity-onset diabetes. Although by now most people know that saturated fat and cholesterol in excess may not be good for them, the American diet is still full of both. Eating more whole foods, emphasizing fresh vegetables, beans and whole grains rather than hamburgers and doughnuts, are simple changes. Combined with a few other commonsense measures, they can have profound effects on the mental and physical health of many people—and could have an equally profound effect on the financial survival of our healthcare system.

Cholesterol is not present in foods of vegetable origin. It is not necessary in the diet, as the liver makes all that we need. Lacto-ovo vegetarians can still get excessive amounts of cholesterol and saturated fat from their diets. Vegans, the strictest vegetarians, get very little saturated fat, and no cholesterol. Not surprisingly, a recent large-scale study in England, comparing the effects of diet on blood pressure, found that vegans have the lowest blood pressure and are also leaner. There was no significant statistical difference between fish eaters and vegetarians; these two groups fell in between the meat eaters, who of course had the highest blood pressure and the most body fat, and the vegans, who clearly came out ahead in reduction of risk for heart disease and stroke. Incidentally, vegans also tend to have a low incidence of osteoporosis, since the excess protein in meat causes the body to excrete calcium. A high-protein diet is also very stressful for the kidneys, and healthy kidneys are essential to maintaining normal blood pressure. American foods, especially processed foods, tend to be excessively high in fat, salt, sugar, and protein. Is it really any mystery why we have the disabilities and illnesses that we do? Having more vegan meals and staying away from most processed foods is an obvious way to improve health.

Excessive inflammation is a common denominator in many diseases of aging, from arthritis to arteriosclerosis to memory lapses. The quality and quantity of dietary fats influences level of inflammation as well as many other aspects of health, down to the composition of our cell membranes. Americans in general eat too much fat, and the wrong kinds. One of the main reasons why the quality and quantity of fats in the diet is important is that the body uses different kinds of fats to make different kinds of prostaglandins. These chemicals mediate the body's inflammatory and immune responses. Some prostaglandins promote inflammation, and some diminish it. Increasing the anti-inflammatory ones tends to promote health, reducing the risk of clogged arteries and arthritis, as well as damage to brain cells that handle short-term memory. By consuming less animal and more vegetable fats, we can ensure that our intake of the essential fatty acids (EFAs) linoleic and alpha-linoleic is adequate, and help our bodies be less prone to excessive inflammation in general.

By consuming some very beneficial oils, such as flax oil, we can increase the omega-3 oil ratio, which will reduce inflammation even further. All of these fatty acids are delicate so they should not be used for cooking and should be kept refrigerated in dark bottles.

In addition to changing the kinds of fats and oils we consume, and making sure that we have adequate vitamin and mineral intake, we need to avoid toxins as much as possible, decreasing the chemicals that can damage and cause inflammation in our bodies and brains.

Continuing to use our brains, to entertain new ideas, to try new activities, both physical and mental, to keep learning and growing, helps keep the mind young. Learning about health and nutrition can serve a double purpose!

Health doesn't just come out of a pill though. Again, it is all of our daily choices that build health or disease. As we age, it becomes more important to follow good basic health guidelines.

Eat fresh whole foods: Many of the best books and articles, the oldest traditions and the newest scientific studies, can be summed up in these simple words! The closer most foods are to their original form, the better they are.

Avoid toxins: Buy organic, or grow your own as much as possible. In addition to lessening your toxic load, you will be increasing your intake of natural minerals, vitamins, and antioxidants. Cook in nontoxic pots and pans—glass or stainless steel, not aluminum, scratched Teflon, or damaged enamel. Never use lead crystal to serve or store foods, especially wine. Avoid baking powder and antacids containing aluminum. Avoid foods that contain rancid, overheated, artificially hydrogenated, or cottonseed oils. Don't use toxic products around your home or place of work.

Remember to drink water: Many people confuse hunger with thirst and eat when they are thirsty. You should be drinking approximately six to eight glasses of pure water per day. Drink a big glass when you first get up in the morning. If your lips are getting chapped easily, you are quite dehydrated. However, you should minimize your consumption of soda pop. Substitute green tea for other caffeinated drinks.

Eat some fresh fruit and vegetables every day: Fruits and vegetables are also a great source of fiber, so important to lowering cholesterol and to maintaining a healthy digestive tract. Raw seeds and nuts are a great source of essential fatty acids.

Chew your food well: Vegans need to take B12 supplements regularly. Try to avoid eating on the run and under stress. Relax and enjoy meals, whether you're alone or with family.

Eat only when you're actually hungry: If you have to ask yourself whether you are hungry, you aren't. Obesity is associated with increased morbidity and mortality from many causes—cardiovascular disease, some cancers, diabetes, and of course, it can make arthritis worse by putting a strain on joints. If you eat the same amount of calories, but in smaller, more frequent portions, you will tend to lose weight! In addition, small frequent meals help control blood sugar. Sometimes people overeat because they are not getting enough other satisfaction from their lives, or enough emotional nourishment. If you are doing all the right things and not getting results, it's time to consider a consultation with a health care professional.

Moderation and a variety of activities are the key to healthy exercise: Don't believe the "no pain, no gain" fanatics. Always listen to your body. It knows even more than the experts. Pain is an important message from the body, one that only the foolish ignore. Exercise should be fun.

Social connections are very important to health, statistically as important as lab values like cholesterol: Satisfying work, satisfying intimate relationships, creative outlets, helping others, and having faith in some benevolent force in the universe have all been shown to enhance health. Practicing some form of prayer or meditation, or learning and practicing a stress-reduction technique, can make a huge difference for people in stressful situations they cannot control, and are ben-

eficial for everyone. Not all techniques are created equal, and some are best learned from a skilled practitioner. But anyone can make it a point to breathe deeply four times when he or she feels stressed, to take vacations, to plan days off and days to do things just for the joy of it, to turn the mind toward positive thoughts.

Although there is much we can do for ourselves, there are times when we all need some expert help. Medical screening tests have become more accurate, and your doctor may be able to help you assess where you are starting from and what you need to focus on to find the best path to health. A naturopathic doctor can help you put together a comprehensive individualized program. In addition to thorough testing to sort out your individual health issues, there are many natural therapies, techniques, and supplements that are useful for seniors.

We all have a lot of power over our own health. We cannot change our basic genetic structure, but the things we do to take care of ourselves can make a huge difference. Exercise, sleep, stress reduction, eating more organic vegetarian foods, and keeping active both mentally and physically all help ensure that our hearts and minds will remain healthy. These daily measures, so much less dramatic than drug effects, are nonetheless far more profound and effective. They are the keys to retaining health into old age.

To find out about the author, please see "About the Contributors" on pages 181-183.

"A well-balanced vegetarian diet...will go a long way in the prevention of coronary artery disease."

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