

Eating well



for healthy older people

Te kai tōtika e ora ai te hunga kaumātua

Introduction

Older people have had a lifetime experience of eating well. You know a lot about the foods you like to eat. Changes in lifestyle offer a chance to think again about your food choices. New foods are available that also offer some new tastes to try and enjoy.

Older people generally have very similar nutritional needs to younger adults. You may not require as much food though, if you are not as active as you were in younger years. When you eat less, it is important that the foods you choose are rich in nutrients.

Research shows how important physical activity is for everyone, including older people. Physical activity keeps muscles toned, improves circulation and helps people to feel good. Current guidelines recommend at least 30 minutes of physical activity every day – walking, gardening, housework all contribute to keeping fit and well. Some time spent outdoors in the sun on most days is recommended. This ensures an adequate supply of vitamin D.

Sometimes it becomes more difficult to shop for, prepare and cook nutritious foods. Meals may be more enjoyable if you invite friends and family to join you for a regular meal, or try a ready-to-eat meal from a supermarket freezer. Find a favourite sunny spot to enjoy your meal and use your best china!



Food and nutrition guidelines for healthy older adults

The keys to healthy eating are variety and moderation. We have a wonderful food supply in New Zealand. There is a wide range of fresh vegetables and fruit, new types of breads and cereals, interesting milk products and good quality lean meat, fish and poultry.

Eat well by including a variety of healthy foods from each of the four major food groups.

- 1 Eat plenty of vegetables and fruit.
- 2 Eat plenty of breads and cereals, preferably wholegrain.
- 3 Have milk and milk products in your diet, preferably reduced- or low-fat options.
- 4 Include lean meat, poultry, seafood, eggs or alternatives.
 - Prepare foods or choose pre-prepared foods, drinks and snacks:
 - with minimal added fat, especially saturated fat
 - that are low in salt: if you use salt, choose iodised salt
 - with little added sugar: limit your intake of high-sugar foods.
 - Drink plenty of liquids each day, especially water.
 - If choosing to drink alcohol, limit intake.
 - Purchase, prepare, cook and store food to ensure food safety.
 - Maintain a healthy body weight by eating well and by daily physical activity.

Vegetables and fruit – at least five servings a day

Examples of a serving are:

1 medium potato or kūmara (135 g)	1 medium carrot or root vegetable (135 g)
1/2 cup cooked green vegetables (50–80 g)	1/2 cup salad (60 g)
1 tomato (80 g)	1 large kiwifruit (80 g)
1 apple, pear, banana or orange (130 g)	2 small plums or apricots (100 g)
1/2 cup of canned or stewed fruit (135 g)	1 glass fruit juice (250 ml)
25 g dried fruit, eg, 2 tablespoons of raisins, 3 dates	

- Eat at least three servings of vegetables and two servings of fruit a day. This provides an excellent range of vitamins, minerals and anti-oxidants, all essential for good health.
- Choose fresh varieties in season for best value. Frozen and canned vegetables and fruit are convenient alternatives.
- Cook vegetables quickly until they are just soft enough to eat. The longer vegetables are cooked, the more vitamins and minerals they lose.
- Only one serving of juice or one serving of dried fruit counts towards your total number of servings for the day.

Bread and cereals – at least six servings a day

Examples of a serving are:

1 medium slice of bread (26 g)	1 roll (50 g)
1 cup cornflakes (30 g)	1/2 cup of cooked cereal (130 g)
1 cup cooked pasta or rice (150 g)	1/2 cup of muesli (55 g)
2 plain sweet biscuits (14 g)	1 muffin (80 g)

- Breads and cereals are high in nutrition – they contain carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals and plenty of fibre.
- Look for some of the newer breads – high-fibre white, oat bran, soy and linseed, for instance. These breads provide extra fibre (that can help prevent constipation).
- Breakfast cereals include porridge, muesli and ready-to-eat cereals. They are a great way to start the day – filling and generally low in fat.
- Pasta and rice are high in nutrients and low in fat. They are quick to prepare and easy to eat.



Milk and milk products – at least two servings a day

Examples of a serving are:

1 glass milk (250 ml)	1 pottle of yoghurt (150 g)
2 slices of cheese (40 g)	1 serving of milk-based pudding (150 g)

- Choose low-fat milk, yoghurt and cheese if you need to lose weight.
- Choose whole-milk products if you are thin and need additional energy (calories).
- Milk and milk products provide calcium that is essential to maintain strong bones.

Lean meats, chicken, fish, eggs, lentils, beans – at least one serving a day

Examples of a serving are:

2 slices of cooked meat (100 g)	3/4 cup mince or casserole (195 g)
1 egg (50 g)	1 medium fillet of cooked fish (100 g)
1 medium steak or chop (120 g)	2 drumsticks or 1 chicken leg (110 g)
1 pāua (120 g) or kina (100 g)	3/4 cup cooked, dried peas, beans or lentils (135 g)

- These foods give you protein, iron, zinc and other nutrients.
- If you eat fish, have it at least once a week (either fresh or canned).
- Choose lean meats or cut off any fat, and remove skin from chicken.
- Where possible, cook meat without fat – boil, grill or casserole instead.

Keep active and maintain a healthy weight

Both overweight and underweight increase the chance of developing health problems. Keeping active helps to maintain a healthy body weight and muscle strength. Thirty minutes of activity are recommended but you can break this into three spells of 10 minutes each.

- Maintain or increase your regular daily activity
 - household tasks such as dusting and cleaning count here!
- Walk whenever you can. Walking is excellent exercise
 - just make sure you have comfortable, well-fitting shoes.
- Join a walking group or tramping club if you prefer to walk with others.
- Gardening is a very rewarding, healthy outdoor activity.
- Swimming appeals to many older people, especially during the summer.
- Join a sports club – bowls, croquet, golf or tennis.
- Cycling is a popular activity. Remember to wear a helmet.
- Old time or line dancing are popular and they keep you very fit.



If you are outdoors in the middle of the day during summer, remember to wear a hat, cover up and use sunscreen. Before 11:00 am and after 4:00 pm the sun's rays are less harmful – a good time to get your daily dose of vitamin D from the sun!

If physical impairment limits your activity –

- Strengthen arm muscles by lifting weights – try cans of food to start!
- Exercise leg muscles to improve strength and flexibility.
- Try seated activity, for example, chair dancing.

Everyone benefits from increasing their physical activity.

Have plenty to drink

It is especially important for older people to drink plenty of fluids. At least eight cups of liquid are needed each day to replace fluid that is lost from the body.

- Water is a great beverage – keep a jug of water in the fridge, or maybe try a cup of warm or hot water first thing in the morning.
- Tea and coffee add flavour but don't over-do the caffeine – up to five cups of coffee a day is plenty.
- When the weather is hot and humid, make sure you have more to drink.
- Drink more water if you are doing a lot of physical activity.
- Fruit juices, lemon and barley or lime juice are interesting cold drinks to have for a change.
- It is really important not to restrict your fluid intake. If getting up during the night is an issue, you may like to consume more of your fluid earlier in the day.

If you want to put on weight

Becoming underweight can be a problem for some older people. It is even more important to eat nutritious foods when your appetite is small to ensure you get maximum nutrition for minimum effort. Bone fractures are particularly common in thin older women, so take care to have plenty of milk and milk products to help keep bones healthy.

- Have small regular meals and nourishing snacks throughout the day – include breakfast, morning tea, lunch, afternoon tea, dinner and supper.
- Nourishing snacks include sandwiches or toast with a topping, yoghurt, milk puddings or milk drinks, soup, a scone or a muffin.
- Keep some favourite toppings on hand – cheese, peanut butter, eggs, baked beans or canned fish. These all go well on bread or toast.
- Use blue- or silver-topped milk and full-cream yoghurts.
- Enjoy desserts such as custard, ice cream, fruit crumble, trifle and rice pudding – there are many more traditional favourites.
- Frozen dinners are also very useful – they are quick and easy.
- Try a protein/milk based supplementary drink. (Commercial products are available from a supermarket or chemist.)

If you need to lose weight

High blood pressure, diabetes*, heart disease and arthritis are common among older people. Losing a little weight often helps to keep these conditions under better control.

Fill up on fresh vegetables and fruit, bread and cereals. These foods are lower in energy (calories) than high fat, high sugar foods and have the advantage of being best value for money.

Eat three meals a day but try not to eat between meals. Choose foods low in fat, salt and sugar and keep as active as you can.

- Foods like chippies, pies and most take-aways are high in fat and salt – eat them as a very occasional treat.
- Trim all visible fat off meat and take the skin off chicken.
- Use only a scraping of margarine on bread or toast.
- Try low-fat milk, yoghurts and salad dressings.
- Cook without adding extra fat or oil – boil, steam, casserole or stew, bake, grill or microwave foods. You can also stir-fry foods using a very little oil, or try a little spray-on oil.
- Use less salt in cooking. Try using herbs and spices to season food. If you use salt, use iodised salt.
- Taste your food before adding salt at the table – aim to eat your meals without adding extra salt.
- Sugar adds pleasure and enjoyment to food, but use it moderately. Enjoy a small serving of cake, sweet biscuits, lollies or chocolate as a treat.

Increase your physical activity. This is one of the keys to losing weight. Aim to be physically active for at least 30 minutes every day. You can break into three 10 minute spells if this is easier.

* If you have diabetes, ask your doctor to refer you to a dietitian for further advice about food. Your local Diabetes Centre is also able to help.

Go easy on alcohol

- If you are taking medication, check with your doctor before drinking alcohol as alcohol affects the effectiveness of many medicines.
- For older people, one drink per day may be protective against heart disease. More than this can be harmful.
- Dilute alcohol with a lot of mixer such as soda or mineral water. Ice also helps to dilute alcoholic drinks.
- Low alcohol beer is a good option.
- If you are watching your weight, drink less alcohol – it is high in energy (calories).

Food safety

Most older people are aware of the importance of keeping food safe. Special care is needed because food poisoning can have a severe effect on older people. Make sure you always –

- Wash and dry your hands before beginning food preparation.
- Serve food either very hot or very cold.
- Always keep foods like cooked meats, sandwiches, milky sauces or desserts covered in the fridge until you are ready to eat them. Store cooked foods above raw food.
- Thaw chicken and meats overnight in the fridge or use the defrost cycle in the microwave. Cook chicken until the flesh is white and juices run clear.
- If you have leftover food, chill it quickly and store it covered in the fridge. Make sure leftovers are re-heated until they are piping hot right through.
- Discard cooked leftover foods after two days.
- Use foods by their 'use by' date.
- If in doubt, throw it out!



Make your meals enjoyable

- Serve your meals differently – try a 'one bowl' pasta meal, salad or stir-fry.
- Set your meal tray in a favourite sunny spot.
- Prepare your meal before you get too tired to enjoy it.
- Buy a frozen prepared meal and re-heat in the microwave or oven.
- Try a mini lamb roast or lamb shank and serve with potato wedges.
- Soup, a wholemeal sandwich and a piece of fruit makes a healthy meal.
- Make a 'one bowl salad' with lettuce, potato salad and tomato wedges, topped with a small can of tuna or salmon.
- Invite family or a friend to join you for a meal.
- Make two meals and freeze one for another day.



Frequently asked questions

Should I buy butter or margarine?

Many older people prefer the taste of butter. Margarine is better if you have heart disease and need to reduce the saturated fat in your diet.

- Whichever spread you choose, use as little as possible.

Are eggs OK to eat?

Eggs are a very useful part of a varied diet. They are high in nutrition, easy to prepare and eat, and good value for money. Eggs have had a bad name in the past because of their cholesterol content, but now research shows this is unfounded for most healthy people.

- You can enjoy eating eggs as part of a varied diet.

Is a calcium supplement recommended for older women?

Calcium is an important mineral to keep bones as strong as possible. Food is the best source of calcium as it is the safest, cheapest and most effective way to get calcium. If you are unable to eat calcium-rich milk and milk products, it may be wise to consider a calcium supplement. Check with your doctor or dietitian.

- Remember to eat at least two servings of milk or milk products per day.
- Calcium-rich milk, yoghurt, cheese, ice cream, canned salmon or sardines (including the bones) are excellent sources of calcium.

Should older people take vitamin D?

Recently there has been concern that house-bound elderly people may not be getting enough vitamin D. This vitamin is absorbed from sunlight on the skin. Vitamin D is also found in eggs, margarine, fish and seafood. In special cases frail very old people may need a supplement but for most people it is better to have short regular exposure to the sun.

- Aim to be outside for about 30 minutes on most days, before 11:00 am and after 4:00 pm.

Will a multi-vitamin supplement keep me healthy?

The best advice is to eat a variety of healthy foods every day. Food has vitamins and minerals in the right proportions and in a form that is most easily absorbed. Many pills provide excessive amounts of vitamins and minerals. Some of these are flushed through the body, but some can build up in the body to harmful levels.

- Fruit and vegetables, bread and cereals, milk and meat all provide excellent sources of vitamins and minerals. Eat these foods every day.

How can I prevent constipation?

High fibre foods, fluid and physical activity are all important.

- Eat plenty of wholemeal or wholegrain breads, breakfast cereals, vegetables and fruit. Prunes, kiwifruit and orange juice are particularly useful.
- Increase fluid intake to 8–10 cups a day. This includes tea and coffee
- Have some regular activity every day, such as walking.

Can I eat foods to alleviate arthritis?

There is no scientific proof that any particular food will improve arthritis. The nutrition guidelines offer the best food plan, with plenty of breads and cereals, a wide variety of vegetables and fruit that you can tolerate, and a small amount of meat, fish or chicken.

For further information

Community Health Centre or Public Health Service

Local community dietitian

Local office of National Heart Foundation

Doctor or doctor's nurse (practice nurse)

Local division of Cancer Society of New Zealand

New Zealand Nutrition Foundation

Diabetes New Zealand

Age Concern

Arthritis Foundation

Recommended reading

Healthy Eating for Adult New Zealanders.

Code 1518. Ministry of Health

Healthy Weight for Adults.

Code 1324. Ministry of Health

Avoiding Listeria.

Code 9007. Ministry of Health

Best of Food for the Heart.

National Heart Foundation of New Zealand

Quick Food for the Heart.

National Heart Foundation of New Zealand

This resource is available from www.healthed.govt.nz
or the Authorised Provider at you local DHB.

ISBN 978-0-478-19273-5 (print)

ISBN 978-0-478-19274-2 (online)



Revised June 2006. Reprinted April 2008. Code 1145