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# Nutrition and hydration in later life

## Key messages

- Moving more, eating a nutrient-rich diet and staying hydrated helps to maintain energy levels, healthy bones, muscles, and joints, stronger immune system and protect from certain long-term conditions.
- Aim for at least 5 portions of different fruit and vegetables every day.
- Eat two portions of fish each week, one of which should be an oily fish.
- Include beans, peas and lentils, oats, and starchy carbohydrates choosing wholegrain versions of bread, rice and pasta.
- Aim for 6-8 cups/ glasses of fluids a day. For women, at least 1600ml per day (3 pints) and for men, at least 2000ml per day (3½ pints).
- A daily supplement of 10 micrograms of vitamin D is recommended for older adults, which is particularly important when sunlight in the UK is at its weakest between October to March.

## Did you know?

- Maintaining weight can be a challenge for some older people, due to illness or reduced appetite. Losing weight is NOT a normal part of ageing.
- Many older people restrict their fluid intake as they are worried about controlling their bladder. However, not drinking enough does not help with this.
- Older people may not recognise the feeling of thirst as well as they used to but still need to drink enough. There is a higher risk of dehydration during illness and hot weather, when exercising, or difficulty with eating/ swallowing.
- Too much salt in the diet can increase the risk of high blood pressure. Limit the amount of salt you add to food, processed meats, and salty snacks.
- Vitamin B12 intake can be low in older people, which is essential to maintaining energy levels. Choose lean meat, fish, poultry, eggs, milk and other dairy foods or eat foods fortified with vitamin B12 such as breakfast cereals and yeast extract.

## Why is it important?

- Eating a balanced and varied diet can improve our physical and mental wellbeing and reduce the risk of certain health conditions, such as heart disease, diabetes and some cancers.
- Vitamin D, good quality protein foods and calcium, together with strengthening exercises can help maintain muscle and bone health and reduce falls and fractures.
- Fibre-rich foods can prevent constipation and promote healthy gut bacteria.
- Oily fish such as salmon and mackerel are rich in omega 3 fats which can help to protect against heart disease.
- Dehydration can lead to headaches, tiredness, confusion, dizziness, constipation, and urinary tract infections.
- Malnourishment can mean more visits to the GP, longer recovery from illness and a higher risk of being admitted to hospital.

## What can affect our appetite as we get older?

- Changes in our sense of taste and smell,
- Long term conditions, such as arthritis, dementia, diabetes and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease can affect dietary intake,
- Living alone and not motivated to cook for one,
- Changes in dexterity so unable to use cooking skills (chopping, mixing etc),
- Shopping can become a challenge if less mobile than before,
- Wearing ill-fitting dentures or having poor dental hygiene,
- Low income and fuel poverty,
- Anxiety and depression, and
- Life events (retirement, bereavement, becoming a carer etc) may affect your resilience.

## What can you do to stay nourished and hydrated?

- Drinking water throughout the day can be helpful towards staying hydrated. All hot and cold drinks count.
- Eat smaller portions - little and often, rather than three bigger meals.
- Visit a dentist if there are problems with teeth or dentures.
- If losing weight unintentionally consider having more calorific foods, for example: full fat milk and yoghurts, hot chocolate made with full fat milk, crackers/toast with butter, milky puddings, adding cheese to pasta/potatoes/eggs, creamy sauces, cook rice with coconut milk.
- Eating with someone else can often help with appetite – ask a friend/ family member over, join a lunch club or community group.
- Gentle exercise can help stimulate appetite.

**If an older person is losing weight unintentionally, has a small appetite or finding it difficult to chew or swallow food, get help from their GP, nurse or dietitian.**

## Helpful contacts

**Healthy Dudley** public health website for information on healthy eating  
[www.healthydudley.co.uk/healthy-lifestyles/healthy-eating/](http://www.healthydudley.co.uk/healthy-lifestyles/healthy-eating/)

**NHS** practical tips on supporting someone you care for with eating  
[www.nhs.uk/conditions/social-care-and-support-guide/practical-tips-if-you-care-for-someone/how-to-support-someone-you-care-for-with-eating/](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/social-care-and-support-guide/practical-tips-if-you-care-for-someone/how-to-support-someone-you-care-for-with-eating/)

**Age UK** general healthy eating advice and information for older people  
[www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice/health-wellbeing/healthy-eating/](http://www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice/health-wellbeing/healthy-eating/)

**British Nutrition Foundation** nutrition science and information for all ages and stages  
[www.nutrition.org.uk/nutrition-for/older-people/](http://www.nutrition.org.uk/nutrition-for/older-people/)

**British Dietetic Association** a wide variety of information fact sheets written by dietitians [www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts](http://www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts)

**Malnutrition Task Force** eating and drinking well in later life [www.malnutritiontaskforce.org.uk](http://www.malnutritiontaskforce.org.uk)



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Longer, safer, healthier lives

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