

Proper Nutrition for Seniors

The circle of life keeps turning. When we were young, our parents pushed us to eat - often by having the spoon of cereal sail through the air land into our open mouth. But, as our parents age and we become *their* caregivers, we need to worry about them eating enough.

Proper nutrition is, of course, an issue for all of us. Many health problems could be cleared up or prevented altogether if people would eat the right type of food in the proper (usually less) quantities.

In order to understand the topic in depth, we must make a distinction between two different issues – between the influence of nutrition on the aging process on the influence of the aging process on nutrition and eating habits.

What we eat affects how we will age which is why it is essential to have essential vitamins and minerals in your diet through the consumption of food in all the food groups. But when we get old, all the rules of eating change. Foods that are very problematic (such as having too much fat) are suddenly highly recommended – in some cases, to excess. The elderly are often encouraged to eat fatty foods since fat helps combat a number of heart diseases, for example.

There are a number of reasons why the elderly don't eat properly.

First, there are **physical difficulties**. It's not always easy for the elderly to go to the store and bring home enough food. They can have trouble managing to prepare it (cutting carrots, for example) and cooking it properly. Eating it can be physically demanding and they just don't have the energy to finish. A senior may have impaired vision or poor motor control making it difficult to bring the food to his mouth. Or they might simply forget to eat. Or they can't afford to eat. To save money, they may buy less food than they need or they may resort to buying food with less nutritional value.

For older people, **food tastes different**. The sense of taste deteriorates with age, due to a loss of taste buds on the surface of the tongue. Food that was once appealing may suddenly taste too salty or too sweet, which makes the individual avoid nutritious foods they once enjoyed. Some of the elderly lose their senses of thirst or hunger or develop digestive difficulties. Also the body is less efficient at absorbing iron, calcium and vitamin B12.

Often the **medicines** the elderly take have side effects like loss of appetite or a hampering of the body's ability to absorb nutrients from whatever food is eaten. Just when an elderly person is ill and needs more nutritious food than usual, he may end up becoming malnourished and/or dehydrated.

Here's a simple test.

1. Can the older person go shopping independently?
2. Can he prepare and cook his own food?
3. Is he eating at least two meals a day?
4. Is he eating enough fruits, vegetables and protein?
5. Is his diet varied?
6. Does he remember to eat?

If the answer to any of these questions is "No", then some form of intervention is required for a potential life-threatening situation.

There are a number of things that can be done.

1. **Improve/change what and where he eats.** Whoever prepares and serves the food should ensure that it is attractive and tasty, so that even a person with no appetite will still be motivated to eat. The food should be easy to chew, swallow and digest. The place setting should ideally be as nice as an upscale restaurant.
2. **Provide special enriched foods** such as beverages and puddings. They contain the protein, fat, carbohydrates, vitamins, mineral and fibre that the elderly need in the same way as there are special baby formulas.
3. **Food supplements** are an excellent way to encourage weight gain. When an old person gets all the nutrients he needs, he has more energy and is more mobile. Movement maintains muscle tone and increases appetite. Dr. Danit Shahar of the International Center for Health and Nutrition at Ben Gurion University says that for some people nutritional supplements are as crucial to their health as medicine. When dieticians recommend using a supplement, people don't always take them seriously. Some don't like the flavours or don't follow the directions on the labels of the products."

Because our society has, deservedly, placed a lot of emphasis on reducing food intake, there is a natural tendency to view seniors' food reduction as "at long last he's watching his calories." This light-hearted attitude is not appropriate. It is critical that all who are involved in senior care – either family or caregivers – understand the incredible importance of sufficient food intake.