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Food through the ages

As we get older our nutritional requirements change with our body, hormones and activity, writes Susie Burrell.

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Healthy eating is not a one-size-fits-all model, and this is especially the case when you consider that there are vast differences in body composition, hormones, activity levels, and nutrient requirements for different age groups.

Younger people generally have a lot more muscle mass, and are often a lot more active and, as such, need to focus their diets around fuel-rich foods.

Those in their 50s and 60s, at risk of lifestyle diseases such as heart disease and type-2 diabetes, generally need fewer kilojoules but more nutrients such as essential fats, calcium and selenium. So if a targeted approach to your nutrition sounds like something you need, here is guide to healthy eating through the ages and stages of adulthood.

Youth blesses us with plenty of muscle mass and a metabolism that needs fuelling with good-quality carbs from starchy vegetables, wholegrain bread and cereals. While the volume of good-quality carbs required differs depending on circumstances, active people do have higher energy requirements and will need goodquality carbs at each meal. Iron-rich foods, such as lean red meat, eggs, legumes, and wholegrain cereals, are particularly important, especially for women with low iron levels. For meat eaters, eating red meat three to four times a week will help to meet iron requirements.

Our metabolic rate slows as we age, meaning we typically need fewer kilojoules to maintain our weight, while type-2 diabetes, thyroid dysfunction and bowel cancer start to rear their ugly heads. This means that the average adult needs to pay more attention to their kilojoule and carbohydrate intake and bump up their intake of nutrient-rich foods.

This is the time to reduce heavy carb-rich foods such as rice, pasta and couscous in favour of lighter, vegetable-based carbs. Consider increasing your dietary fibre intake by aiming for 7-10 serves of fresh fruit and vegetables. More seafood and shellfish will boost omega-3, zinc and iodine, nutrients linked to reducing inflammation and optimising your metabolic rate. And get out in the sunlight for a few minutes each day to help ensure your vitamin D levels are healthy.

With creaky joints, more brittle bones and an increasing incidence of cancers, including prostate, breast and bowel cancer, nutrient-rich eating becomes even more important in your 60s and 70s. Women, in particular, need at least three to four serves of calcium-rich food each day to keep their bones healthy, while men need to boost their intake of lycopene (from cooked tomatoes),

and selenium (from brazil nuts) to help support prostate health. Omega-3 rich foods such as oily fish, nuts and seeds should be consumed most days to help reduce inflammation in the body. Good fats, such as extra virgin olive oil, nuts and seeds, will help to keep the heart healthy. As we get older, it is common for appetite to reduce. While eating less can be great for weight control, losing weight and muscle mass is far from ideal. For this reason, focusing on small, regular nutrient-rich meals that ensure adequate protein intake is important.

As a general rule, aiming for 1g of protein per kilo of body weight will help prevent muscle breakdown and unnecessary weight loss. Nutrient-rich proteins include lean meat such as mince, chicken breast, tuna, salmon, sardines, eggs, greek yoghurt, cheese, milk, and legumes, including kidney beans and baked beans. In addition, the texture of foods may need to be adjusted to account for swallowing or teeth-related issues, and hearty soups, nourishing smoothies and slow-cooked meals strike a perfect balance between texture and nutrition. – Sydney Morning Herald
The writer is a nutritionist and dietitian.