

- Muscles / Wounds and injuries / Fractures

Muscle strength prevents falls, fractures

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ALTHOUGH we know what we can do to support healthy ageing — such as eating a balanced diet, regular physical activity and keeping up with brain exercises — there are some aspects that are not commonly discussed.



As we age, there is an involuntary loss of skeletal muscle mass and strength. This condition is known as sarcopenia, says Herbalife Nutrition chief health and nutrition officer Kent L. Bradley.

The impact can be serious. One very concrete example of this is the rise in hip fractures as we age, says Bradley.

Hip fractures highlight the compounding effect of ageing and the vital role of our muscles. When we lose muscle mass and strength, we are more prone to falls. More than 95 per cent of all hip fractures are because of a fall and the Health Ministry reports that hip fractures are more common among women.

“However, when we have adequate muscle strength, we can reduce the likely event of a fall and thus minimise the risk of fractures. There is strong evidence suggesting that nutrition plays an important role in the prevention and management of sarcopenia,” says Bradley.

DIET AND EXERCISE

Sufficient protein intake by older adults is encouraged to help them sustain muscle strength and function.

For healthy older people, their diet should provide at least 1.0 to 1.2g of protein per kilogramme of body weight each day.

For older people who are malnourished or at risk of malnutrition because they have an acute or chronic illness, their diet should provide 1.2 to 1.5g of protein per kilogramme of body weight daily, with an even higher intake for individuals with severe illness or injury.

Daily physical activity or exercise (resistance training or aerobic exercise) should also be undertaken by all older people, for as long as possible, says Bradley.

Following a healthy diet earlier on in life, such as the Mediterranean diet, can lower the risk of sarcopenia in older adults.

In the context of a Malaysian diet, foods like canned sardines, anchovies with edible bones, tempeh, shrimp paste, cinaluk, and budu can be beneficial in guarding against sarcopenia. Registered dietitian and senior director of worldwide nutrition education and training for Herbalife Nutrition, Susan Bowerman, says muscle loss can occur at any age, not just in older people.

This may be due, in part, to a high carbohydrate and low protein diet as well as a lack of resistance exercise — factors that are crucial for muscle building.

Even if older adults stay active and engaged in regular bouts of resistance training, the body's ability to build and maintain muscle mass will suffer if there's not enough protein on the plate, she says.

As people age, their calorie needs gradually decline — due to a combination of factors that include a lower metabolic rate and reduced activity levels.

In order to avoid weight gain, many people cut back on calories and eat less food. But, without careful planning and the right food choices, a drop in calorie intake could mean that the total amount of protein they eat might drop, too.

“The first step to improve your diet is to cut back on refined carbohydrates and sweets. From there, you'll want to seek out foods that provide the most protein for the fewest calories,” says Bowerman.

Adequate dietary protein, coupled with resistance exercise, is a good way to minimise the loss of muscle mass.