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WHAT TO EAT NOW FOR A GOOD LIFE

Seven simple steps

The Australian · 2 Jan 2025 · 1 · FIONA HARARI reports

We may well be what we eat, but when it comes to food and ageing well, Karen Charlton prefers comparisons with an old car. “Just because you are over a certain age doesn’t mean everyone has the same nutritional requirements,” says the professor of nutrition and dietetics at the University of Wollongong. “You might know a really healthy 80-year-old and you might know an 80-year-old who can’t look after themself.”



Food, the source of life, is also a source of conflict. Should you stick to three meals, or snack all day? Butter or olive oil? Eat whatever you like when you’re elderly because you deserve it?

What about the impacts of age and eating? Being overweight or obese is linked to a myriad of health issues. Yet being aged and underweight can be linked to an increased risk of falling, and to osteoporosis, when the creation of new bones can’t keep up with the loss of old ones and bones become weak and brittle.

“Food fundamentally affects all body systems and organs over time,” says professor of community health and wellbeing at the University of Queensland Lauren Ball. She is also a board director of Dieticians Australia.

“Over the long term we know that poor diet is the leading risk factor for physical health (issues) in Australia, more than physical activity.”

In the quest to age well, however, food may have been neglected on the scale of importance.

“We don’t give enough priority to diet and nutrition, and we think we will be fine,” says Professor Charlton. “But there’s more and more evidence that there are certain physiolo-

gical changes that happen when you age that you can't change."
Your metabolic rate declines. Your body composition changes.
'Over the long term we know that poor diet is the leading risk factor for physical health (issues), more than physical activity'
LAUREN BALL PROFESSOR OF COMMUNITY HEALTH AND WELLBEING AT UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND
You probably move less and expend less energy so you lose muscle mass. Body fat shuffles from your arms and legs to your abdomen.
Ageing and eating, says Professor Charlton, is like handling an old vehicle. "It's still moving and getting you from A to B, but it might require a little more effort. So it's more important to maintain that ageing car."
Step one is fuel. In an everexpanding world of food options, the plant-rich Mediterranean diet has been shown repeatedly to be an ideal regimen for ageing well. "People who eat a Mediterranean diet do live longer and live a healthier way," says Professor Charlton. "But very few Australians eat anything related to a Mediterranean diet."
The Australian Dietary Guidelines suggest that older people, like much of the population, consume a variety of nutritious foods daily, and limit alcohol and foods and drinks containing fat, added salt and sugars.
Written in 2013, the guidelines, which do not apply to frail elderly Australians or those with complex health conditions, are being reassessed and are due to be updated in 2026. But that delay in itself has some concerned about navigating the best path towards ageing and eating well.
"Fundamentally, we haven't cracked the code of what we need to do. And the main reason for that is that our food system – the way we get our food – has changed so much ... It's like it's a new world that we're in," says Professor Ball.
Because our food system keeps changing, "we need to do research based on contemporary dietary patterns. We have access to such a diversity of foods that weren't available before, and our choice has never been greater."
Foods that might have been handmade previously – sauces, condiments, sometimes even entire meals – are now often overly processed. "Relying on science, guidelines and policies that are outdated reduces the likelihood that people are being nourished and supported to live and age well in Australia," says Professor Ball. So what can you do to try and age well?
Drink up
Your desire to drink tends to reduce with age because your thirst sensations drops. At the same time, some people will consume less water because it can lead to too many night time toilet visits, disrupting sleep. Staying hydrated is an important but often overlooked factor of ageing well. Dehydration can lead to delirium, a drop in blood pressure, a drop in attention, and can adversely affect kidney function.
"It's very easy for an older person to be dehydrated and not realise it," says Professor Ball, who recommends drinking two and a half to three litres of water a day.
If you can't stomach that much water, there are other options, tea and coffee among them, although they both contain caffeine, which can increase calcium loss in the urine.

“But if you’re having enough dairy,” says Professor Charlton, “the amount of calcium loss due to caffeine is not huge.”

Tea, in particular, contains a lot of bioactives, the non-nutritive components in foods and drinks that still provide benefits, from protecting against inflammation to protecting cardiovascular health.

A major source of fluids for older people, the good news is that, in moderation, those cups of tea, says Professor Charlton, can count towards your total daily liquid consumption.

Embrace the blues ...

Colour matters, and when it comes to food there are many top hues. Professor Charlton, with a team at the University of Wollongong, is investigating which foods might prevent brain function decline in the early stages of memory loss. She suggests consuming fruits and vegetables that are purple, deep red, or blue.

Their high content of flavonoids are thought to have a positive impact on the brain, reducing inflammation and potentially improving connections in the areas that are linked to learning and memory.

Think plums, berries, cherries, tea, red wine, eggplant and red cabbage.

... and greens

In the alphabet of organic compounds essential for nutrition, vitamin K plays an important role in blood coagulation, helping the body to form clots that stop bleeding. While it’s also found in soybean and canola oils, the major source of vitamin K is green leafy vegetables: spinach, salad leaves, kale, broccoli and brussel sprouts among a verdant variety.

Vitamin K is also essential for bone health, and a Western Australian study has suggested it can reduce the risk of fractures later in life. Probing the link between Vitamin K1 intake and fracture-related hospitalisations, the study of 1400 older Australian women over a decade and a half found that those who ate 125g of leafy greens a day – equivalent to one generous serving – were 31 per cent less likely to have fractures than those who consumed half that amount.

Boost those nutrients

Appetites often wane with age, predisposing older people to eating less. But nutrient requirements remain the same – and in some cases increase when you are elderly.

Obtained from sunlight, vitamin D is needed for bone health and immune function. But with ageing the skin has a reduced capacity to synthesise it.

Because it’s harder for older people to obtain enough vitamin D from sunshine alone, the international Endocrine Society recently recommended that people aged 75 and above take vitamin D supplements or increase their uptake in food.

Power up on protein

It might be taking on carbohydrates as a buzz word in the Western world’s love-hate relationship with food, but protein remains vitally important with age.

An Australian over 70 requires more than 20 per cent extra protein per day than someone in their early 50s. Yet protein malnutrition is not uncommon among older people, says professor of nutritional and genetic epidemiology at the University of South Australia Elina Hypponen.

To improve immunity and bone health, and to reduce blood pressure, Professor Charlton advises that older Australians eat between 1 gram and 1.5 grams of protein (eggs, dairy, meat, fish, chicken and legumes) per kilogram of body weight every day.

Remember your gut

When it comes to ageing, having a healthy gut has traditionally focused on high fibre foods: eating more of them and drinking more water, specifically, to avoid constipation, the bowels tending to slow down with age.

But increasing knowledge about the Enteric Nervous System – the nerve cells that line the gastrointestinal tract from the rectum to the oesophagus – is increasing our understanding of brain/gut health, and the connection between digestion and the way we think and feel.

A joint Australia-China study involving researchers at Melbourne's Monash University recently found that eating more fruit and probiotic food, or exercising – thereby impacting gut microbes – can slow mental decline.

Participants with cognitive impairment were found to have less diversity of their gut microbiota than those who were cognitively healthy. But when participants with reduced gut microbiota ate more fruit and exercised more, the bacteria in their guts flourished and became more diverse.

Protect the bones

Ageing well can also mean starting early. From the age of 50, you are already at a higher risk of developing osteoporosis.

"Keeping bones healthy is extremely important because we don't want them to break when we're older," says Professor Hypponen.

Most adults need 1000mg of calcium a day to maintain bone strength. But with age, calcium is less effectively absorbed and can be lost through the kidneys. So older people require more – about 1300mg a day for women over 50 and men over 70.

As with all advice, medical input is important. So is the realisation, says Professor Hypponen, that we don't just eat to live. "Food is not just part of a healthy lifestyle. It's also part of life's enjoyment." So what does her eating future resemble? "I suppose getting to 90 I would probably be taking my vitamin D supplements, I would be looking at getting a good amount of protein, my diet would be varied and healthy in a way that I enjoy." She would ditch fatty foods, which she dislikes anyway. But she would embrace her love of cheese – with gusto.