- Aging

DIET FOR THE AGES

What scientists say you should eat in every decade

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You are what you eat but our requirements for nutrients and energy change as we age. “The efficiency with which the gastrointestinal tract absorbs all nutrients deteriorates with age, particularly from our 40s onwards, and the efficiency with which our bodies use these nutrients also declines,” says Dan Mccartney, researcher in the anti-ageing effects of human nutrition at Technological University Dublin.



“Some of our research has shown a cumulative effect of poor diet habits that only manifests later on when a tipping point is reached.”

Julian Griffin, director of the Rowett Institute, a centre for nutrition and health research at the University of Aberdeen, says scientists are beginning to understand more about how diet affects health with each passing decade.

“It’s never too late to make changes,” he says. “And what we eat now could impact our health in 10, 15 years.”

Here’s what scientists say we should focus on eating in every decade.

With relatively high lean muscle mass, your body is well equipped to mop up excess blood sugar and clear waste from the liver and kidneys. But as the decade progresses, your choices will need to be more considered.

“With age, men and women have a reduced capacity to synthesise vitamin D from sunlight so it’s wise to get into the habit of taking a supplement in the winter months,” says Linia Patel, a researcher in the department of clinical sciences and community health at the University of Milan.

Rhiannon Lambert, a registered nutritionist and author of The Unprocessed Plate, says men can be late to the party when it comes to embracing dietary diversity.

“Rather than simply focusing on getting your five a day, this is an age for men to focus on eating different fruits, vegetables, herbs and spices for a variety of fibres and plant compounds,” she says. Red onions, cabbage, figs, kiwi fruit, green beans and lentils will all support gut health, and herbs and spices matter too, so add basil, coriander, turmeric and cinnamon to cooking.

Meanwhile zinc (found in seafood, meat, nuts and seeds) and the B vitamins (in leafy greens, wholegrains, eggs and dairy) all enhance male fertility. Cells that make healthy sperm (and eggs) are “recruited” about three months before conception, so making changes to diet should start about six months before trying to conceive.

Requirements for iron, at 14.8mg a day, are higher for women up to the age of 50 largely because menstruation can use up iron reserves, especially if periods are heavy. Good sources include meat, sardines, watercress, cashew nuts, edamame beans and dried apricots.

The UK National Health Service recommends that all women of child-bearing age take a 400mcg folic acid supplement daily for the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, as it helps to prevent birth defects.

“Vitamin B12 intake works in tandem with folic acid,” Mccartney says. “Low levels of B12 independently raise the risk of neural tube defects, so it is important to get enough.”

If you are vegetarian, vegan or have switched to mostly plantbased eating, you’ll need to supplement with B12, which is found in meat, fish and dairy.

Eating more oats, quinoa, walnuts, almonds, chickpeas and kidney beans in your 40s may add years to your life expectancy.

A study published in Nature by researchers from Harvard, the University of Copenhagen and the University of Montreal found that ramping up your intake of nuts, wholegrains and pulses has a strong influence on your chances of reaching the age of 70 free of significant chronic disease and with cognitive, physical and mental health in order.

According to the NHS, a man’s risk of heart disease starts to rise significantly in his 40s.

“Men should start paying particular attention to the quality of the fats in their diet and think about swapping saturated fats such as butter for unsaturated olive or avocado oil,” Lambert says.

Take stock of your alcohol intake too. An NHS survey found 34 per cent of men in the 45 to 64 age group drank more than the recommended upper weekly limit of 14 units. Even small reductions can lower blood pressure and help you to shed excess weight, both of which help to protect the heart.

Women in their 40s have higher baseline levels of inflammation than men, a chronic underlying risk factor for disease later in life.

“A real focus on eating a Mediterranean-style diet with olive oil, tomatoes, berries and chia seeds providing polyphenols and other compounds will reduce inflammation,” Patel says.

Eat more fatty fish, including herrings and sardines, or consider taking an omega-3 supplement.

“As a nation we don’t eat enough polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFA), such as the longchain omega-3 fats EPA and DHA that are found in oily fish,” Griffin says. “My own studies have shown that switching high intakes of saturated fat for more PUFA or the mono-unsaturated fatty acids in olive oil might be good for prevention of late-onset Alzheimer’s disease.”

Metabolic rate – the speed with which your body uses energy – dips significantly during this period, with the World Health Organisation estimating a decrease of about 2.9 per cent in men and 2 per cent in women over each subsequent decade. This means you may need 200 to 300 fewer

calories a day than you did in your 20s, making you likely to gain weight unless you adjust your diet. But in a double whammy, it also becomes more difficult to get enough nutrients from food, as the body becomes less efficient at absorbing some vitamins and minerals.

Replace refined or processed foods where you can and consider taking a daily multivitamin – these have been shown by scientists at Brigham and Women's Hospital, Harvard, to slow cognitive and biological ageing in the over-60s.

You should aim to eat more foods containing vitamin C: citrus fruits, peppers (particularly yellow ones), strawberries, blackcurrants, plums, cherries, kiwi fruit and broccoli are all excellent choices. Consumption helps to defend the cells and tissues from potentially harmful free-radical substances, protecting against disease, but also stalling the loss of muscle mass as you age.

A University of East Anglia study of more than 13,000 people aged between 42 and 82 found that those with the highest amounts of vitamin C in their diet or blood had the greatest estimated muscle mass, compared with those with the lowest amounts.

As well as vitamin C, tomatoes have beneficial antioxidant compounds such as lycopene, which helps to protect against many diseases, including prostate cancer.

"Cooking tomatoes changes lycopene into a form that can be more easily absorbed by the body, so add them to pasta sauces and stews," Lambert says.

Oestrogen supports the bones and, as levels drop, bone tissue is broken down faster than it can be replaced.

Since your body's ability to absorb the bone-friendly nutrients – calcium, potassium and vitamins D and K – also drops, your risk of osteoporosis rises.

The recommended intake for calcium rises from 700mg to 1200mg a day after menopause: cheese, milk, plant milks and dried figs all provide it. Eggs will help with vitamin D, and brown rice has bone-friendly magnesium, while eating five or six prunes a day will provide vitamin K and plant compounds that have been shown to improve bone health.

"Women have smaller livers and less lean tissue to dissipate and dilute the effects of alcohol," Mccartney says.

"This gets worse with ageing as the liver loses capacity to metabolise alcohol effectively."

The upshot? Hangovers are likely to be more severe. You have been warned.

According to the NHS, vitamin B12 deficiency affects one in 10 people over 75, with some medications adversely affecting absorption.

Researchers at the Quadram Institute in Norwich showed that older, healthy adults with low vitamin B12 levels, but still above the threshold for a deficiency, had sharper cognitive decline.

If you don't eat food from animals you will need a B12 supplement. Marmite (and Vegemite) contains large quantities, and mushrooms, bananas, peanut butter, yoghurt, trout and peas supply a range of the other B vitamins.

"A significant body of research has found that some B vitamins are associated with cognitive decline," Mccartney says. "The brain likes to burn glucose, and B vitamins are important for that process, so if lacking in your diet it can manifest as brain problems."

Anaemia and low iron stores are rare among men under the age of 64, but the risk rises for those over the age of 70. About 25 per cent of all healthy adults in their 70s and older developed iron-deficiency anaemia within five years of having enrolled in one study in Australia and the US.

The risk was 20 per cent higher among those taking a low-dose daily aspirin (sometimes recommended by the NHS to make your blood less sticky).

Eat more of the dark meat on chicken, as well as pumpkin and sesame seeds, quinoa and button mushrooms to get more iron. Check with your GP for a blood test if you are concerned about a deficiency.

We are all less active so less hungry by this age and that makes it all the more important to get nutrient-dense foods.

“At any age, men tend to eat about one-third more food on average each day than women,” Mccartney says. “For this reason it is easier for men to meet micronutrient requirements just because of that bigger volume of food, whereas women can miss out on important vitamins if they don’t consume enough of a variety of healthy foods.”

A reduction in the body’s ability to recognise thirst makes you more prone to dehydration, which, in turn, can cause mental confusion. Older women are statistically more prone to dehydration than men, so make sure you drink plenty of fluids – tea and coffee count – and foods with a high water content such as bone or vegetable broths, fruit smoothies, watermelon, cucumber and oranges.