

Nutritional needs change with age

By mallory evans The Review Published: September 5, 2013 3:00AM



As seniors age, their bodies change, and so do their nutritional needs. It can be valuable for seniors to adjust their eating habits to meet those needs.

Sue Hurton is a registered and licensed dietitian at Copeland Oaks retirement and senior assisted living community in Sebring. Hurton and her team members take personal preference and health needs into consideration when developing meals for the residents of Copeland Oaks.

"Everyone needs to eat a variety of foods, but seniors have special nutritional needs," Hurton said. "Seniors really need calcium and vitamin D, fiber, potassium and vitamin B12. Knowing your fats is important too."

Registered and licensed dietitian Dawn Wagner works at Alliance Community Hospital. She pointed to the USDA "Choose my plate" campaign, which replaced the food pyramid.

The plate image suggests filling half of the plate with fruits and vegetables, then splitting the remaining space between grains and protein. In addition to monitoring meals this way, Wagner said seniors should be wary of sodium when examining food labels.

Wagner said salt is naturally occurring in a lot of food, but it also is used as a preservative in processed foods. Processed foods are commonly used by seniors cooking for one or on a budget.

"In our seniors, the older you get, the harder it is to cook, so you use the convenient stuff, which has a lot of sodium in it," Wagner said. "The more convenient something is, the more sodium there is as a food preservative."

According to the Bell Institute of Health and Nutrition, sodium intake for everyone should be less than 2,300 milligrams per day and 1,500 milligrams for people over

51 years old.

Wagner advises seniors to try mixing their own herb blends rather than using salty seasonings or expensive store-bought blends.

She said seniors with congestive heart failure need to be especially careful with their sodium intake.

Similarly, monitoring carbohydrates and starches is especially important for diabetic seniors. "Diet plays a very important role in those chronic diseases. You have to monitor what you're eating," Hurton said.

Dehydration is a problem for many seniors who forget to drink or feel they don't need it. Water is needed for

nutrients and medications to absorb into the body. Dehydration also causes constipation in some people.

Hurton said fruits and vegetables like watermelon and celery help provide the body with water.

Fruits and vegetables are essential to a senior's diet. Hurton drew a connection between these foods and blood pressure. "A lot of seniors have high blood pressure, and that's where your fruits and vegetables come into play. Half of your plate should be vegetables," she said.

The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics recommends that seniors eat dark green, red and orange vegetables, plus beans and peas. When eating canned vegetables, choose reduced-sodium varieties.

Paying the Price

The costs associated with fresh or healthful foods can keep seniors from buying the foods that will provide them with the needed nutrients. Hurton said some seniors on fixed incomes are forced to choose between paying bills, filling prescriptions and buying healthy food.

Hurton recommends seniors look into meal offerings at senior centers or

programs like Meals On Wheels. She added that often, fresh food prices are comparable to the less healthy options. Hurton gave an example of a bag of apples and a bag of chips; both are convenient and similarly priced.

To save money on fruits and veggies, Wagner suggests checking out area farmers markets. She said many farmers markets offer special programs for seniors and accept food stamps.

Wagner recommended going to the discounted produce section of the grocery store for fruits and vegetables. She said these fruits and veggies are great for making a meal one or two days after purchasing them. They are too ripe to buy in bulk, but seniors on a budget can make good use of them.

Wagner points to the grocery store salad bar as an option for seniors looking for small amounts of fresh produce. Salad bars can be a simple solution when a person wants just enough sliced carrots for a salad or peppers for a casserole.

When going on home visits for Alliance Community Hospital, Wagner sees many seniors who say they can't afford fresh or nutrient-rich foods, yet they spend a lot of money on vitamins and supplements. "A lot of times they don't even tell their doctor they're taking them," she said. "You can spend that money on the food that's going to give you those nutrients."

"If you eat some of each of the food groups, you're getting some of the vitamins you need," she said.

Hurton said supplements can be helpful, but added that speaking with a doctor is always important first.

Supplements and medications can interact differently with the foods seniors eat. Hurton said some foods may increase or hinder the absorption of drugs, so it is important to ask the pharmacist questions and read all package inserts.

Cooking at Home

Wagner said food temperatures are important before and after cooking. She said it is crucial that all foods are

cooked completely and groceries are refrigerated.

She said seniors can modify their favorite foods to make healthier versions that taste the same. When making an omelette or French toast, she said to open three eggs and throw two yolks away. That cuts down on the cholesterol without sacrificing the taste.

Switching cereals, breads and pastas for their whole grain counterparts is another simple way to boost a meal's health quotient. These substitutes have more fiber, which aids in digestion, decreases risk for heart disease and incidents of colon cancer.

Fiber intake should be increased slowly, over a period of time. "As we age, we're not able to digest as we did in our younger years," Hurton said.

Seniors often cook for only one or two people at a time. When making a recipe meant to feed a family, Wagner suggests freezing the leftovers in meal-sized portions so they are ready to eat later in the week or month.

Hurton said cooking at home is important, but it is also beneficial for seniors to continue eating socially. "A lot of events are planned around food -- food brings people together," Hurton said.

That is one reason why she suggests moderation rather than elimination. Choosing baked and broiled lean meats and avoiding fried foods are two easy ways to make healthy choices at restaurants or dinners. She also recommends asking for to-go containers at the beginning of the meal and boxing up half of the plate right away.

mevans@the-review.com / [@MEvans_AR](https://twitter.com/MEvans_AR) on Twitter