



NEWS RELEASE

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Health Concerns of the Aged

Some readers might be surprised to learn that there are categories for aging. Aging is defined as either “success” or “usual”. There are many elderly individuals that have a decline in organ function and in metabolic activities, and a number of them show no decline in functional status with age. The difference between the two is more often associated with a lifetime of poor health habits, including poor dietary patterns, smoking, drinking, limited exercise, and other stress related factors rather than aging alone.

As we age, our body becomes less forgiving, and we'll have to make more of an effort to eat well and stay fit. Ideally, we should practice healthy eating habits throughout your life. But most of us don't live in an ideal world, and often we don't pay attention to our health until we reach middle age and beyond. But middle age is still a good time to start thinking about how to stay healthy in later years. Nutritional needs are pretty much the same at 40, 50, 60 and beyond as they were when you were younger--with some minor variations.

We need fewer calories as we age, but exactly how much you should eat still depends on how active you are. Since you're eating less food to maintain a healthy weight, you have to be more careful about choosing low-fat and nutrient-rich foods. As the years pass and you lose lean body mass (muscle), your metabolic rate slows down and you burn calories more slowly. Exercise is the best way to maintain lean body mass and speed up your metabolic rate.

There are some warning signs or risk factors regarding nutritional problems. They include weight loss, lightheadedness, disorientation, loss of appetite, and lethargy. Sometimes these are often diagnosed as illness when they may actually indicate poor nutrition.

Some seniors may find themselves cutting down on fruits and vegetables, or meats because of difficulties chewing or swallowing. They may experience increased constipation. They may fall into a food rut because shopping, cooking, and eating becomes more of a chore. Adult children may notice their parents are eating fewer than two meals a day. They also may not have an appetite and are eating alone most of the time. Finally, there should be concern if there is an unintended weight loss or gain of 10 pounds or more in six months.

Successful aging includes obtaining dental care because lack of teeth and dental decay make chewing difficult, contribute to poor nutrition and also give food an abnormal taste. Bone loss makes dentures hard to fit so they aren't worn because of the discomfort. If chewing is a problem, try softer foods that have been chopped or pureed. Four or five smaller meals might be easier for an older person to handle than three larger ones. Add a little more spice or sugar to foods to enhance their flavor. If certain foods are disliked, try substitutes within the same food group. For instance, if milk is unacceptable, try yogurt, cheese, or even low-fat ice cream. Listen to your body and become informed to prepare yourself and your loved ones for successful aging.

Source: <http://www.discovery.com> (The Aging Adult, June 04, 1999).