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## **GUIDE TO SENIOR** **HEALTH AND WELLNESS**

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# Guide to Senior Health and Wellness

Health science has made it possible for people to live longer lives. In fact, worldwide, there are 880,000 people added to the 65+ age group monthly. Canada's senior population alone jumped 28% in the past 5 years. The US Census reports that in 2004 there were 36.3 million people age 65 and older living in the country, and it is projected that this population will balloon to 86.7 million by the year 2050. Unfortunately, this does not mean that everybody is living better. A new study by the University of Chicago suggests that seniors with few friends and limited or no social opportunities suffer both mentally and physically.

The National Institute on Aging also provides significant support that creating a positive health routine can help you and your loved ones feel less chronic pain, lower depression, sleep better, have a better memory and achieve greater mobility.

Of course, healthy living cannot be achieved by medication or diet alone. It is a lifestyle that requires dedicated action to overall mental and physical stimulation. Older people can live fulfilling lives as they age if they take initiative and are encouraged to live in a healthy way. There are 4 areas of focus that will help seniors achieve wellness.

- Nutrition
- Exercise
- Social Involvement
- Mental Health

Homewatch CareGivers is your resource to promote healthy, independent lifestyles for your senior loved ones.

## NUTRITION

### Senior Health

Staying healthy includes a focus on a healthy diet. Proper nutrition increases mental acuteness, boosts immune systems, helps people recover from injuries faster, and helps manage chronic health problems better.

As seniors age, they face health concerns that are specific to their changing bodies and needs. The Department of Health and Human Services reports that slower metabolism may mean consuming less calories but more specific nutrients. Higher risk for chronic disease means that seniors also need to focus on cutting back specific additives and be more aware of possible complications with medicines and supplements.

## Seniors and those caring for the elderly need to be aware of the following:

### *Seniors produce less saliva and lose the ability to make stomach acid.*

As we age, we lose the ability to produce specific enzymes. These enzymes help digest and break down foods. The loss of these means focusing on major diet changes to make sure that our body can process nutrients normally.

### *Seniors have more digestive issues.*

Lack of specific nutrients in one's diet means that the body cannot function properly. Often, seniors face chronic pain and digestive issues strictly because they are not maintaining the proper nutrients in their diet.

### *Aging affects the senses thus affecting the types of food seniors will/can eat.*

We lose senses as we age. That means that we are less likely to taste flavors like salt and sugar. Seniors often over-use these two items purely because they cannot taste a limited amount. Overuse of salt and sugar leads to serious health problems, such as type 2 diabetes and poor heart health. In addition, specific medications make food taste different. Seniors often are not aware of the medicinal effects on their food choices.

### *It is easier to lose control of body weight as one ages.*

Seniors face the struggle of balancing their caloric intake to include all the right nutrients while not over or under eating. According to the USDA, there are health risks to overeating, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and cancer. The risks to under eating are just as dangerous and include memory loss, decreased immunity, lowered body temperature, constipation and osteoporosis.

### *Seniors face depression about eating alone.*

Many seniors are in a transition from being around family and friends to being alone. They do not feel that it is worth it to cook for one, or they are feeling depressed about the loss of loved ones. Often seniors self-deprive because they feel isolated, or are facing undiagnosed health problems.

Information provided by data taken from the US Department of Agriculture, and the National Institute on Aging.

## Nutritional Guidelines

Eating right is a fundamental part of overall wellness. National guidelines recommend eating natural foods, focusing your diet on fruits and vegetables and whole grains. Both the USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) and Health Canada have been involved in creating guides to help seniors eat healthier. Both groups focus on eating a well-balanced diet that focuses on eating more natural food. In addition, seniors should consume less calories because of lower caloric output and slower metabolism, and more antioxidants to fight off age-related disease. According to both groups, a healthy diet should now include: protein, carbohydrates, fiber, fats and fluids.

### Protein:

Helps maintain and repair muscles, nails and skin. It is also an important nutrient in recovery from injuries. You can get protein from poultry, meat, fish, lentils, nuts, seeds, eggs and cheese. You can also get it from dark green vegetables.

### Carbohydrates:

Help internal organs function properly and help maintain energy levels. You can get carbohydrates from fruits, vegetables, low fat dairy products and whole grains.

### Fiber:

Helps maintain the dietary track, and is proven to lower blood pressure, cholesterol and maintain blood sugar. You can get fiber from whole grain products, fruits, vegetables and beans.

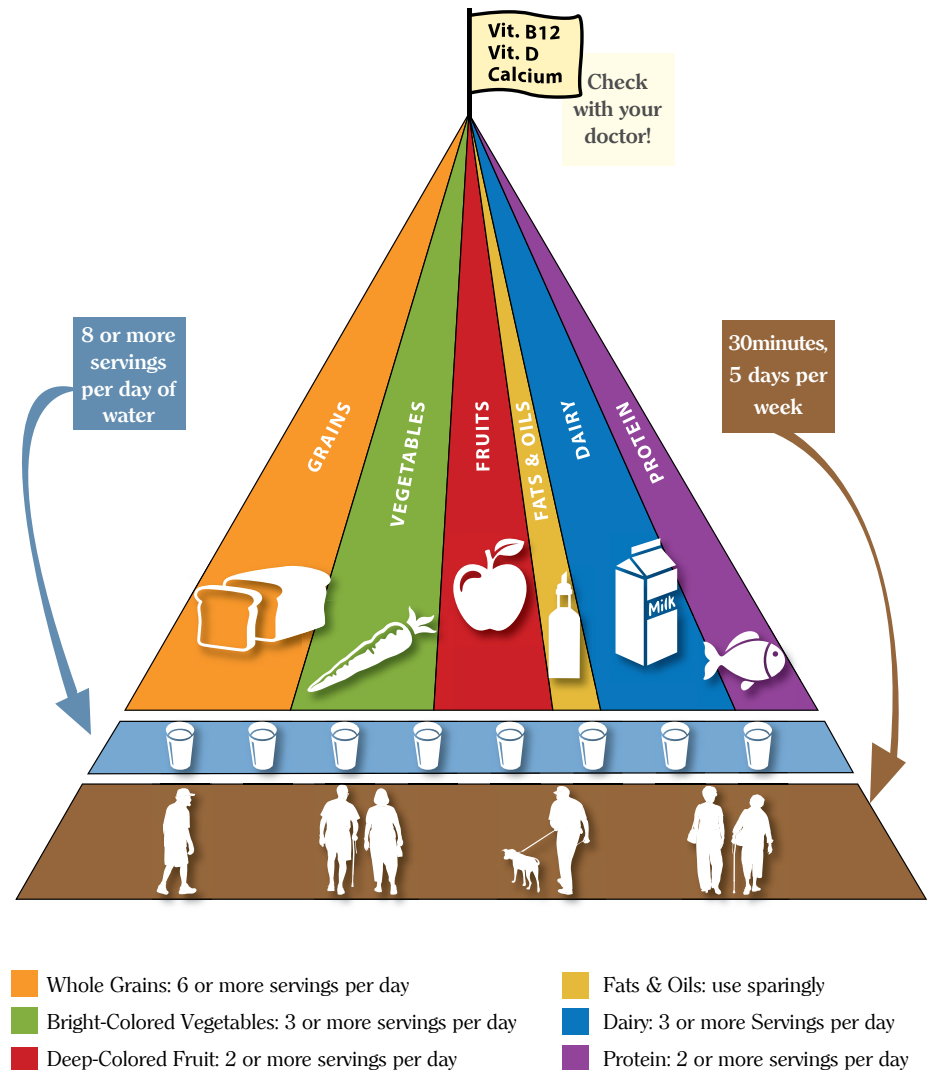
### Healthy Fats:

Healthy fats help maintain energy levels and protect cells. Healthy fats can be found in some fish, oils, nuts, and food fortified with omega-3 fatty acids.

### Fluids:

Staying hydrated is the only way the rest of the nutrients can do their jobs. Fluids also help maintain a proper body temperature. Water is the best fluid for your body, but you can also get nutrients and antioxidants from green tea and fruit/vegetable juices.

## FOOD GUIDE PYRAMID FOR OLDER ADULTS



Food Guide Pyramid for Older Adults was researched by the Health and Research Center of TUFTS University and is endorsed by AARP. The original guide can be found at <http://nutrition.tufts.edu>

## USDA and Health Canada Eating Tips:

**Fruits and Vegetables** - There are the usual staples of oranges and apples, but also mix in exotic foods like pomegranates, kiwis and melons to enjoy a variety of flavors.

**Milk or milk alternatives** - Drinking milk has always been a dietary staple. Now it's important to focus on low-fat milk for adults and 2% for children. Fortified soy beverages work as alternatives.

**Meat or meat alternatives** - Eat lean meats, and add alternatives like beans, lentils and tofu to one's diet.

**Healthy Fats and Oils** - A small amount of unsaturated fat and limited amounts of saturated and trans-fat is all you need from this category. Healthy fats are monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats.

**Whole Grain** - Focus on eating unrefined flours and whole-wheat bread with high fiber content. If you can, stay away from white bread and rice and eat the whole wheat versions.



Eating well should not be complicated or expensive. In fact, buying fresh produce is often cheaper than buying pre-packaged meals. If your senior loved-one cannot prepare his/her own meals, there are options for getting assistance.

- Meals on Wheels
- Grocery/meal delivery
- Caregiver services/meal preparation
- Caregiver transportation

There should also be a focus on the need for community meals. When the elderly have someone to eat with, they are more likely to eat well. Some of the possibilities to help seniors socialize are:

- Group meals at community centers
- Getting groups together to eat
- Setting a 'family meal' time, at least once a week with friends or family

## EXERCISE

Seniors who exercise live better lives. That's because wellness is not just a state of mind, it is a lifestyle. Physical activity reduces the risks many chronic conditions, prevents falls and decreases depression in older adults. The National Institute of Health also reports that daily exercise increases the capabilities to perform activities of daily living, elevates mental health and improves the chances of living longer.



The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality says that the older you are, the more you have to gain from exercise. In fact, all it takes is 30 minutes a day, 5 days a week.

### Best Type of Exercises for Seniors:

Seniors should focus on exercises that compliment and strengthen their capabilities. This means choosing activities that are not only fun, but functional for daily living. The National Institute on Aging reports that exercise and physical activity can help older people maintain or partly restore strength, balance, flexibility, and endurance. Exercise will improve the quality of life and possibility of prolonged independence for those wishing to age in their homes.

### A complete exercise program for seniors should include:

#### Strength Training

Using weights and resistance can increase muscle mass as well as improve physical endurance. For seniors, this means using light weights and resistance bands to strengthen the body to avoid muscle failure and loss of mobility. This strength helps seniors maintain their activities of daily living.

- *Example:* Light lifting with 8lbs or less. Push-ups using the knees as support. Outdoors, you can do light gardening, such as shoveling.

#### Balance

According to the National Institute of Health, people who practice balancing exercises in conjunction with muscle-strengthening activities greatly reduce their chances for falling. For the elderly, this means light yoga, tai-chi and practicing standing and sitting with assistance.

- *Example:* Outdoors or at home, practice standing and sitting from stable furniture or from the kneeling or squatting position.

#### Flexibility

Stretching done in conjunction with other exercises can help keep your body limber and maintain your mobility and balance. It can also help you recover from injuries faster.

- *Example:* Outdoors, at home or in the gym, create a stretching routine. This can be as easy as slowly turning your head from side-to-side. For others, a light yoga routine can help increase flexibility.

## Endurance

Conditioning for endurance means doing exercises that elevate your heart rate and breathing. These exercises can begin at a moderate pace and build-up as you get in better shape.

- *Example:* To start, build endurance by walking on a flat surface, swimming, cycling on a stationary bike and gardening. Eventually with better endurance, you can build up your walking to a rapid pace, cycle up hills and do more rigorous outdoor activities.

Physical activity does not have to be conventional exercise in a gym. Start slow and work up to your specific capabilities. Think outside of the box to completely enjoy exercising.

- Senior Sports Leagues
- Dancing
- Gardening
- Water Exercise
- Tai Chi
- Yoga
- Seated Chair Exercise Classes
- Creative Expression
- Pet Therapy
- Walking Groups
- Hiking and nature walks
- Boating: canoeing, kayaking, paddle boating, rowboating
- Swimming
- Biking

## SOCIAL PARTICIPATION

A new report from the Journal of Health and Social Behavior reports that social disconnectedness is associated with worse physical health in seniors. It says that older adults who feel isolated show a deteriorating level of mental health, and that it reduces people's willingness to exercise and increases chances of alcohol and tobacco use.

A common misconception is that seniors living independently choose isolation. In reality, they do not have a network of people to help them find the resources they need to be active and social. Older people living with chronic conditions feel even more isolated from their community. These seniors often do not have the resources to reach out or do not know they exist.

The good news is that there are many seniors who are extremely active in their community. Reports show that seniors are one of the highest groups to give both time and money to nonprofit volunteer efforts. It also takes almost two Baby Boomers to provide as many volunteer hours as one volunteer age 65 or older. In addition to volunteerism, seniors need to stay connected with their peers.

## Safety Tips for Exercise:

It is recommended that anyone starting a new physical fitness program should first consult their doctor. It is especially important for those with chronic conditions such as heart disease and diabetes to talk to their doctor about the best way to start a new program. You should also consult your doctor if you have any prolonged pain or discomfort due to exercise. Also consider these safety issues:



### **Check the safety of your exercise equipment.**

If it's something you haven't used in a while, make sure that it is working properly. Have someone who knows how to use the equipment show you how to use it, check the functionality of it, and make sure it's safe for you to use.

**Make sure there is assistance for ambulation.** It is best to use furniture that is not likely to fall under your weight, like a couch, dining room table or park bench. If you are not physically able to do any exercise without assistance, make sure that you are using a stable surface to balance.

**Focus on fall prevention.** Your indoor exercise area should be clear of clutter. Make sure there are no cords, loose rugs or pets in the area to prevent a fall.

**Wear proper exercise attire.** Wear comfortable, loose fitting clothing. Shoes should have traction on the bottom and inserts to promote balance and help avoid falls.

**Drink water.** Increased physical exertion means that your body needs to replenish more frequently. Carry water with you to the gym and during outdoor activities, and make sure to take frequent water breaks during any workout.

Social participation can happen on various levels. Depending on the individual, this can mean being able to access transportation to an activity group. For others, it can mean having a companion with whom to take a walk with. Being involved and social often is limiting only because of time.

Because of their growing population, there are many types of social groups that seniors can meet people and maintain relationships.

## Social Groups

### Educational

Check the local colleges or trade schools for Senior Audit Class Listings. Often, seniors are allowed to take any classes, from languages to technology, for a discounted rate.

### Exercise

This can be as easy as organizing an afternoon walk club, or spending time in the park with the grandkids. Senior fitness and community centers have classes that can fit almost any senior's needs and abilities.

### Craft

Knitting, quilting, and scrapbooking are three very popular social groups for seniors. In addition, local community centers often have craft classes that will give senior discounts.

### Religious

Churches are usually a huge component of a senior's social life. Religious organizations often organize social outings, group meals and community events for the elderly. If they are not interested in organized religion, there are also non-affiliated spiritual groups that can be found online.

### Political

As their population increases, seniors will continue to play a vital role in the political landscape of the world. All political factions make room for senior volunteers.

### Volunteer

The internet has made it extremely easy for people of any age to volunteer. Help your senior loved-one find their area of interest, and search online for an opportunity. They can also contact their local church and school who are always in dire need of volunteers.

### Online

The internet is not longer for the young and tech-savvy. There is a social group for people of all interests online, and seniors are meeting people from all over the world to connect with.

### Smaller Social Activities

- Book clubs
- Personal companionship
- Museum tours
- Art walks
- Writing groups
- One-on-one learning
- Theater/movies

If you are a caregiver of a senior, it is important to get connected with local senior services, community centers and the area art projects so that you can help engage your loved-one in an activity they would like.

## MENTAL HEALTH

Seniors who have emotional support and a healthy routine can not only live longer, but better.

The MacArthur Foundation Study of Successful Aging, an in-depth investigation of the aging process, revealed that many of the complaints people attribute to "old age" actually result from the lifestyle they've chosen, like not enough exercise, poor nutrition, or limited socializing. Evidence indicates the way people age depends primarily on personal decisions, choices and actions, all products of conscious, self-directed mental activity. According to the study, a mere choice to age well has positive effects of overall wellness and lifestyle.



Programs dedicated to senior wellness are successful when they address: a commitment to healthy aging, a comfortable environment for seniors, peer support, an active role for the senior, family/caregiver involvement and access to professional educational materials. Mental health awareness includes providing opportunities for seniors to seek fellowship with other seniors and community members, either individually or as a group.

Homewatch CareGivers is committed to promoting overall health and wellness in seniors. We are a community resource to help seniors live their best lives, well aging in a healthy and positive way.

**Your local Homewatch CareGivers can lead you to a local list of preferred providers for:**

- Senior Nutritionists
- Meal Delivery Services
- Nutrition Seminars
- Senior Centers
- Community Groups
- Exercise Classes
- Educational Classes
- Memory Care