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# Aging and Nutrition Problems

Poor nutrition means not getting enough nutrients from food to keep you healthy. This can cause many kinds of health problems. Poor nutrition can make you lose muscle. It can make you feel tired and weak. And it can make it harder for your body to fight infection and heal wounds. You may have trouble with daily tasks. You may even lose mobility. Work with your healthcare provider to make sure you get enough nutrients to be healthy and maintain a good quality of life.



## What can cause poor nutrition?

Older adults may have nutrition problems for several reasons. They may eat less, not eat a variety of foods, or not absorb nutrients. These problems may be caused by:

- Not being hungry very often
- Feeling full too quickly
- Feeling full for a long time
- Changes in hormones that control or affect hunger
- Less ability to smell and taste
- Lack of physical activity
- Slowed digestion
- Stress
- Conditions, such as depression, dementia, alcohol use disorder, Parkinson disease, acid reflux, or cancer
- Medicine side effects
- Teeth or denture problems that make biting and chewing difficult
- Trouble swallowing (dysphagia)

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- Trouble using your arms, hands, or fingers because of pain, stiffness, or tremor
  - Being less able to shop, cook, or prepare food
  - Lack of interest in cooking
  - Living alone and eating most meals alone
  - Being in a housing facility where you don't like the food
  - Trouble paying for food
  - Diarrhea, constipation, nausea, vomiting, or gastritis

## **Problems from poor nutrition**

Older adults who don't have good nutrition may have problems, such as:

- Unplanned weight loss
- Loss of muscle
- Less strength
- Feeling tired and weak
- Trouble with balance and walking
- Trouble thinking and remembering
- Trouble with bathing, dressing, and other daily tasks
- Weakened bones
- Wounds that are slow to heal
- Gum problems and tooth loss
- Falls that can cause injury
- Slow recovery from surgery
- Conditions such as COPD or heart disease that get worse
- More infections
- Loss of mobility and independence
- Earlier death

## **Making changes to eat better**

Talk with your healthcare provider about the reasons you may be eating less food, or less variety of foods. They can help you make changes to get better nutrition. These may include:

- Working with a nutritionist or dietitian

- Finding foods that are easier to eat if you have trouble chewing or swallowing
- Medicines to help with digestive problems
- Having protein, vitamin, mineral, or other nutritional supplements
- Counseling or medicine for depression
- Dental care to fix pain and other problems
- Talking with your housing facility about other food choices
- Local services to help with shopping for and preparing food
- Local services that provide cooked meals to seniors
- Eating your meals in social settings
- Financial help

## What nutrients do you need?

These are the nutrients you need from food to keep you healthy:

- **Protein.** Protein can help build muscle and prevent infections. Eat foods high in protein, such as meats, fish, eggs, cheese, milk, nuts, yogurt, seeds, lentils, soy products, and beans. This is the most common nutrient that older adults don't get enough of.
- **Carbohydrates.** These help give you energy. They have fiber to help with digestion. Fiber may also lower your risk for heart disease and type 2 diabetes. Carbohydrates are found in grains, fruits, beans, and other legumes. Eat a variety of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, such as brown rice, whole-grain bread, and oatmeal.
- **Fats.** Healthy fats help your organs, skin, hair, and brain. They also help your body absorb certain vitamins. Eat foods like nuts, salmon, tuna, seeds, and olive oil contain healthy fats. Limit foods that contain unhealthy fats, such as butter, shortening, and fried foods.
- **Vitamins.** These include vitamins C, D, B-6, B-12, folate, and others. These help your body repair tissues, use energy, and do many other processes. You get vitamins by eating a variety of foods, including fruits, vegetables, grains, and protein foods. Add colorful fruits and vegetables to your diet.
- **Minerals.** These include iron, magnesium, calcium, zinc, and others. These help with many things. They make sure your cells have enough oxygen, your nervous system works well, and your bones stay strong. You get minerals by eating a variety of foods, including fruits, vegetables, grains, and protein foods. Milk, soy milk, yogurt, leafy greens, tofu, and calcium-fortified juices are all good sources of calcium.

## Getting enough protein

Older adults are at most risk of not getting enough protein in their diets. This is known as protein-energy malnutrition (PEM). Protein is one of the most important nutrients for staying healthy. Talk with your healthcare provider about the best ways to get enough protein every day. This may include:

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- **Adding protein to every meal.** This includes turkey, chicken, beef, pork, lamb, fish, shellfish, eggs, and cheese. Protein is also found in foods, such as nuts, nut butters, beans and other legumes, seeds, and tofu. You can also get protein from animal milks and soy milk.
  - **Having protein supplements between meals.** There are many kinds of protein drinks and other protein supplements. These have protein from whey, soy, and other sources. If you have trouble digesting lactose or soy, ask your healthcare provider which type of protein supplement may be best for you.