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Senior Health Line

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The Importance of Making Healthy Food Choices



Healthy food choices are important throughout a lifetime and become more important as we age. Making good choices in what you eat can make a significant difference in your health, how you feel, and even how you look. Eating well can reduce the

incidence and severity of many health problems including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, kidney disease, bone loss, dental problems, and certain types of cancer. Making wise food choices can also reduce health care costs.

Eating well provides you with the nutrients your body needs to keep your muscles, bones, heart, kidneys and digestive system working properly. It gives you what you need to heal and replace blood cells and tissues as well as maintain a healthy weight. These nutrients include macronutrients, carbohydrates, proteins, fats, micronutrients, which are vitamins, and minerals, and water for adequate hydration.

What you need to eat and how much of each nutrient is dependent on a number of different factors. As we age, our metabolism slows down and our need for calories is reduced. If we do not cut down on the calories we consume and our need for energy or calories is less, we gain

weight. Other factors that influence our need for calories include sex, height, weight, level of physical activity, and general overall health. Although you do not want to eat too much, you need to be sure you eat enough calories to give your body the energy it needs to run adequately. Part of determining energy or calorie needs is dependent on physical activity. Even as we age, we need to be physically active. For more information on calorie needs, there is a tool called SuperTracker that the United States Department of Agriculture has developed. You can access this tool at www.SuperTracker.usda.gov.

Good food choices can help keep our bones and teeth strong and healthy. Dairy such as milk, cheese, and yogurt are good choices for bone health; choose low fat varieties of these foods. These nutrient dense foods are also important in muscle health as calcium is necessary for the contraction and expansion of muscles, including the heart muscle which pumps blood to all parts of the body.

Each time we sit down to eat, whether it be for a meal or a snack, at least one half of our plate should be covered with fruits and vegetables in a variety of colors. There is such a wide variety of produce available year round that this need never be boring. Fresh, canned, frozen, or dried, varieties are available. If you choose canned, frozen, or dried, be sure to choose no added salt and sugar varieties.

To be able to make good food choices, you must know what is in the foods you choose to eat. The best way to do this is to read food labels. Food

labels tell you what a serving size is and how many calories there are in a single serving. If there are four servings in the container and you eat half of the contents, you must double all of the values listed on the food label to get an accurate idea of calories and nutrient values of what you are eating. The food label also lists all ingredients in descending order of weight of the package. In most cases, the less ingredients listed, the better and the less ingredients that you can't pronounce, the better. Part of the SuperTracker referenced above, has a resource called Food-A-Pedia that makes it easy to compare nutritional information for many foods. Making the choice of how you are going to cook your food is also important. Healthier ways to prepare foods include baking, grilling, cooking in the microwave, and steaming. Avoid adding fats, salts and sugar while cooking. Avoid solid fats called partially hydrogenated fats. Cooking at home gives you more control of how your food is prepared. If you choose to eat out or pick up prepared foods ask how they were prepared and make good choices whenever possible.

Aging increases the chance of contracting a food borne illness. Immune systems weaken with age and our digestive tract produces less acid that can destroy harmful bacteria that can make you sick. Be sure food is kept safe. All fresh produce needs to be washed with fresh running water before consumed. Be sure to keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold. Refrigerate leftovers promptly and dispose of old foods. Keep raw and ready to eat foods separate. Foods such as eggs, fish, meat and poultry can be dangerous if not cooked thoroughly. Remember, when in doubt, throw it out.

It is important to stay hydrated and drink enough water daily. As you age, the sense of thirst may be reduced. We get water from many sources, including those fruits and vegetables that should be at least 50% of our plate each and every time we eat. Other sources of hydration include beverages and soups. Drink fluids regularly throughout the day. Keep fluids with

sugar and salt to a minimum unless directed by your health care provider.

Making good food choices is important in staying healthy. Your food choices can affect the way you feel and prevent a number of health issues and complications. By controlling what we eat and reducing health related diseases such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, weight gain and osteoporosis, we cannot only feel better, but have a better quality of life and reduce our health care costs.

Spinach Salad with Beet Dressing

3 small roasted or boiled beets, diced and divided

½ teaspoon Dijon mustard

½ teaspoon apple cider vinegar

3 Tablespoons reduced sodium, fat free vegetable broth

1 Tablespoon olive oil

Salt and pepper to taste

½ ounce fresh green beans blanched for 2 minutes, cooled and drained well

3 cups fresh spinach

2 Tablespoons thinly cut red onion

Make dressing by placing 2 of the beets, Dijon mustard, vinegar and the vegetable broth in a blender. Blend until smooth. Add the olive oil and salt and pepper to taste. Combine spinach, onions and green beans in a bowl. Drizzle with the dressing and serve immediately. Makes 2 servings.

Nutritional value per serving:

Calories 86, Total fat 4 grams

Carbohydrates 11 grams

Protein 3 grams, Sodium 11 milligrams
(approximately, depending on salt used)

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