DIET & WEIGHT

# How to Eat Well as You Get Older

A useful plate after 70 is varied, fibre-rich and lower in sodium-not ruled by supplements, restrictions or nutritional perfection.

## Your old rules may need editing

The foods that have carried you this far may still be doing a good job. But eating well in your seventies and beyond is not about defending an old routine or chasing a completely new one. It is about noticing what fills your plate now: enough variety, plenty of less-processed food and fewer prepared foods that quietly bring large amounts of sodium.

Start with addition, not punishment. Fruits, vegetables, pulses, whole grains and nuts appear repeatedly in the evidence on balanced, more plant-based diets. They also offer fibre, which matters if constipation has become a regular interruption rather than an occasional nuisance. You do not need to turn every meal into a nutritional project. You need dependable foods you will actually eat.

A more plant-based diet does not have to mean a meat-free one. A 2022 systematic review of 141 studies compared vegan and vegetarian patterns with meat-eating diets. Plant-based eaters generally consumed more fibre, folate, vitamins C and E, magnesium and polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFAs). Their protein intake was lower than that of meat-eaters but remained within recommended levels.

The same review found shortcomings in every group. Meat-eaters were at risk of inadequate fibre and several vitamins and minerals. Vegetarian and vegan patterns were generally lower in vitamin B12, vitamin D, iron, zinc, iodine and calcium. The sensible lesson is not that one camp has solved eating. It is that variety matters whichever pattern you follow.

## Less processed makes more room

Prepared food can make eating easier, but it can also crowd out the foods that supply fibre, protein, vitamins and minerals. A 2021 meta-analysis of nationally representative surveys found an inverse relationship between ultra-processed foods (UPFs) and less-processed foods: as one occupied more of the diet, the other occupied less.

Higher UPF consumption was associated with more free sugars, total fat and saturated fat. It was also associated with less fibre, protein, potassium, zinc and magnesium, along with lower

amounts of vitamins A, C, D, E and B12 and niacin. That does not turn every packaged food into an enemy. It makes the overall balance of your shopping more important.

The useful question is not whether a food comes in a packet. It is what the packet is replacing. If confectionery and sweetened drinks repeatedly displace fruits, vegetables, grains, pulses or nuts, nutritional quality narrows. If prepared food helps you assemble a more varied meal, the decision is different. The evidence describes dietary patterns, not a moral test for individual foods.

This is why eating well can be simpler than eating perfectly. Build meals around recognisable plant foods more often, while leaving room for the dairy, eggs, poultry, fish or meat that belong in your usual pattern. A balanced diet is not proved by one virtuous dinner. It emerges from what keeps turning up.

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## Salt hides in plain sight

Sodium is necessary for nerve and muscle function and helps maintain the body's fluid balance. Your kidneys control how much remains in your body. When there is more sodium than they can remove, it can build up in the blood and contribute to high blood pressure, which can lead to other health problems.

Most people in the United States consume more sodium than they need. People over 50 are among those who may be more sensitive to salt's effects; people with high blood pressure, diabetes or kidney problems may also need less. That makes sodium especially relevant later in life, but it does not mean trying to eliminate it completely.

The salt shaker is only the visible part of the story. Food labels show how much sodium is in prepared foods, allowing you to compare two foods that otherwise look much the same. A lower-sodium choice can be a quiet improvement: no dramatic diet, just a different version of something already on your list.

Do not let a lower-sodium label distract from the rest of the food. The wider goal remains a varied pattern with more fruits, vegetables, pulses, grains and nuts and less reliance on ultra-processed choices. Sodium is one useful signal, not a complete verdict on dinner.

## Your gut gets a vote

Constipation means having fewer than three bowel movements in a week; stools may also be hard, dry or painful to pass. It is common and often short-lived. You do not need to have a

bowel movement every day, so frequency alone is not a reason to force your body into somebody else's routine.

Food can help. Fruits, vegetables and grains provide fibre, while water and other liquids also matter. Exercise and taking time to use the toilet when you feel the need are part of the picture too. The food lesson is pleasantly ordinary: the same plant foods that broaden your diet can support more comfortable bowel habits.

Laxatives are not simply another item to add to a food routine. They should be used only if your healthcare provider says you should. If constipation persists, ask whether any medicines you take could be contributing. That conversation matters because another dietary restriction will not necessarily address a medicine-related problem.

A change in your usual bowel habits is the point at which this stops being only a lifestyle question. Check with your healthcare provider rather than repeatedly adjusting your food on your own. Your normal pattern matters more than trying to meet an imagined universal standard.

## On Monday, read three labels

Nutrition can become especially persuasive when it promises to protect your memory. Magnesium is a good example. A 2024 systematic review examined three randomised controlled trials and 12 cohort studies. The trials provided too little evidence to conclude that magnesium supplements improve cognitive health, while the observational findings on dietary magnesium were inconsistent.

That uncertainty is not an invitation to ignore magnesium. It is a reason not to make a supplement the centre of your plan. The review found that both lower and higher blood magnesium levels were associated with cognitive problems in cohort data, but it called for more trials and better repeated measurements. More is not automatically better.

On Monday, take three prepared-food packages you use often and turn them over. You need the packages and their food labels. Compare their sodium, then notice whether these foods are repeatedly taking the place of fruits, vegetables, pulses, whole grains or nuts. Choose one lower-sodium alternative, or replace one prepared item with a less-processed food you already enjoy.

Keep that one change for the coming week. Let it be modest enough to survive an ordinary Tuesday: one more fruit, vegetable, grain or pulse, and one prepared food chosen with its sodium label in view. The aim is not a flawless new diet. It is a plate that becomes a little more varied each time you shop.

## Where this comes from

- Sodium

  MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine · https://medlineplus.gov/sodium.html
- Constipation

  MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine · https://medlineplus.gov/constipation.html
- Build a Healthy Eating Routine as You Get Older

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- Nutrient Intake and Status in Adults Consuming Plant-Based Diets Compared to Meat-Eaters: A Systematic Review.

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  Advances in nutrition (Bethesda, Md.), 2024 · https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/39009081/
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