Nutritional Advice for Later Life

Maintaining good nutrition in later life can be challenging because aging leads to loss of organ function and impaired internal balance – what we call "homeostasis." Some diseases and environmental factors also can increase nutritional risks for older adults.

While most general advice on diet and nutrition holds true as we age, specific recommendations geared to older adults’ particular needs become increasingly important. Advice on diet and nutrition must also take their personal preferences into account.

Aging is often accompanied by a decrease in physical activity and a loss of muscle mass, leading to a drop in calorie requirements. We need to eat less to maintain a healthy body weight. With the drop comes a reduction in micronutrients such as vitamins and minerals essential for maintaining good health. That’s why weight loss and certain vitamin and mineral deficiencies are common in the elderly.

Age-related changes in taste and smell can influence food choices as well. And, of course, ease of preparation affects what older people may choose to eat. Consequently, more attention to food choices is vitally important to ensure a healthy diet containing all of the necessary nutrients.

Dietary changes are critical to successfully manage many common medical conditions, such as obesity, hypertension, diabetes and heart disease. That’s true whether you are young or old. In the elderly, however, social isolation, alcoholism and dementia are common causes of malnutrition and require nutritional intervention as part of treatment.

I ask myself a number of questions about my patients, including:

- What is their ideal body weight and what steps will help achieve it?
- Are there medical conditions that could benefit from more attention to nutrition?
- Are medications, drug or alcohol use affecting nutrition?
- Would additional testing be useful to diagnose nutritional deficiencies?

I often refer my patients to a dietitian or nutritionist to get more detailed advice on their dietary needs. Basically, to help them develop a solid meal plan.

A good diet should be both healthy and enjoyable. Take some time in March, which is "National Nutrition Month," to review your dietary habits and food preferences. Seek some guidance from an expert, especially if you have any medical conditions that would benefit from a better diet. Bon appétit!

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