It is easy to forgo good eating habits in our fast-paced lifestyle. We prioritize other responsibilities above making time to maintain and improve our own health. Yet eating for your health is one of the most important things you can do to help yourself age optimally.
Nutrition’s Role in Healthy Aging

While opinions on what to eat seem to be continually changing, research has been consistent in key aspects of a healthy diet that can help you look and feel your best. Eating a wide range of fruits and vegetables and consuming foods that are low in saturated animal fats can help reduce your risk for many diseases, including heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke and some cancers. It may even promote younger looking skin.

Limiting your intake of caffeinated products, acidic foods, alcohol and carbonated beverages can limit potential harmful effects. To prevent constipation, make sure your diet includes high-fiber foods. To sleep better, avoid fatty foods and eating late in the day. Good nutrition plays an important role in preventing and slowing the progression of age-related macular degeneration.

The loss of taste and smell naturally occurs with aging. This can lead to poor nutrition if you use excess salt or sugar to enhance the taste of your food. While it may taste better, the trade off in impacting your health can be significant.

Eat Whole Foods

Trying to implement healthier eating habits can be overwhelming. The onslaught of commercials promoting supplements and attempting to read food labels can be confusing. What should you do?

Eat whole foods and be mindful of portion sizes. These foods are as close to their natural form as possible. They contain the micronutrients your body needs for good health. Whole foods, such as whole grains, fruits, vegetables and legumes, provide dietary fiber which can help prevent health issues such as Type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

Getting the vitamins and minerals your body needs is best if it comes through the foods you eat. If you are looking to incorporate a specific vitamin or nutrient into your diet, why not first look for a good food choice?

Food Benefits Your Cognitive Health

Eating foods that offer heart-healthy benefits may also protect your brain. Choosing good food can reduce memory problems or reduce your risk of mild cognitive impairment. It can even help you preserve brain function. It really is food for thought!

Research has repeatedly shown the cardiovascular health benefits of the Mediterranean style diet. This diet is rich in fruits, vegetables, olive oil, legumes, whole grains and fish. The Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) diet was designed to treat high blood pressure (hypertension). The DASH diet is similar to the Mediterranean style diet but reduces your sodium intake. This can help lower blood pressure and offer numerous other health benefits.

Research shows a hybrid diet that combines aspects of both of these diets known as the Mediterranean-DASH Intervention for Neurodegenerative Delay (MIND) diet could further reduce your risk of Alzheimer’s disease. Even making small changes to adopt the MIND diet approach, such as eating two servings of vegetables per day, two berry servings per week and one fish meal per week, may lower your risk of developing Alzheimer’s disease.

What you drink counts, too. Not enough water or too much alcohol can lead to confusion and memory loss. Be sure to drink plenty of water and other fluids.

Final Thoughts

Eating a variety of healthy foods, practicing portion control and including physical activity in your daily routine can go a long way toward promoting healthy aging. Healthy eating habits are a smart investment that can pay amazing dividends on your health over time. Better yet, it’s never too late to make healthier lifestyle choices. Start today. Remember, you are what you eat.
As you grow older, your risk increases for diabetes, high blood pressure and other diseases. While it can be a struggle to change, making better lifestyle choices can provide protection from the complications of these diseases. Being mindful about what you eat is one of the most beneficial lifestyle choices you can make as you live with a chronic condition. Focus on making a few changes to the amount, type and frequency of the food you eat. Make subtle changes one at a time, even if it is just to cut your dessert in half or to opt for a healthier alternative. Each month incorporate another change. The key is to start somewhere rather than setting an unrealistic goal or trying to do too many things at once. It does not matter where you start. Then practice it until it becomes a habit. Focus on having a mindset that this is what I am doing for my health. Then do it.

**Take Action Now**

- **Snack Smart.** Keep vegetables washed and cut in your refrigerator for quick snacks. Keep fruit in a bowl in your kitchen so that you’ll remember to eat it.

- **Choose vegetables.** Focus on recipes that have vegetables or fruits as the main ingredients, such as vegetable stir-fry or fresh fruit mixed into salads.

- **Explore seasonings.** Salt isn’t your only option. Brighten flavors with freshly squeezed lemon or lime juice. Use balsamic or wine vinegars. Add some heat with fresh hot peppers or red pepper flakes.

- **Plan Your Plate.** Pick up a free copy of the Mayo Clinic Patient Education pamphlet *Eat Well: Use The Plate Method* from the Patient Education Center, Siebens building, subway level.

- **Use Local Resources.** Seek out a dietician at the Dan Abraham Healthy Living Center, Charter House, or even at your local grocery store for hands on classes and recommendations.

- **Commit to Healthy Eating.** Pick up a copy of the *Mayo Clinic Diet Book* to use clinically tested techniques to incorporate simple and pleasurable changes you can maintain for the rest of your life.

**GOAL:** Every time you eat, include a fruit or vegetable, or one of each.

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**Expert Insight**

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"As you grow older, your risk increases for diabetes, high blood pressure and other diseases. While it can be a struggle to change, making better lifestyle choices can provide protection from the complications of these diseases. Being mindful about what you eat is one of the most beneficial lifestyle choices you can make as you live with a chronic condition. Focus on making a few changes to the amount, type and frequency of the food you eat. Make subtle changes one at a time, even if it is just to cut your dessert in half or to opt for a healthier alternative. Each month incorporate another change. The key is to start somewhere rather than setting an unrealistic goal or trying to do too many things at once. It does not matter where you start. Then practice it until it becomes a habit. Focus on having a mindset that this is what I am doing for my health. Then do it."
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