

The Outpost *Exchange*
Senior nutrition
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The leading edge of the Baby Boom generation came of age in the 1960's and during that decade, and every one since, this sector of our population has dramatically influenced American society, demanding, by their sheer volume, the attention and dollars of whatever issues, goods and services matched their needs at the time.

As the Boomers are nearing "seniorhood"—the first will turn 65 in 2011—their ability to set trends hasn't dwindled. Thanks to an expanding life expectancy (the median is nearing 84 years of age), the Boomers will once again create a unique societal demographic heretofore not experienced in our country—it is estimated that by 2020, 20% of the population will be 65 and older.

In anticipation of this much-hyped "agequake," senior issues are now all the rage, especially in the health care industry. Numerous books recently have been written to address Boomers' concerns about aging, including 60's icon Ram Dass's *Still Here: Embracing Aging, Changing and Dying* (2000 The Berkley Publishing Group).

Even if you're not a senior today, it's still important to understand how our bodies change as we age and how that affects our nutritional needs because, as the adage goes, prevention is the best medicine.

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Our Changing Body

Have you ever wondered why you can't eat like you did when you were 25? It's because at a certain age we stop growing and therefore our nutritional needs change. "The body is not growing after age 30 and therefore we don't need as much protein as we think we need," said Dr. Emma Voloshin, M.D., director of the Comprehensive Health Center in Milwaukee. The body slows down, people become less active, various organ functions become somewhat diminished. Protein becomes harder to digest and fiber becomes extremely important. "As we age, the bowels become sluggish....constipation becomes a problem," Voloshin said. Gail Van Treek, N.D. of Natural Health Services in Milwaukee, agrees. "As we age, muscles become weakened. The colon is a muscle. Most [aging] problems have to do with the digestive system. We can't digest as well as we did when we were younger." In addition, the incidence of diabetes, hypertension, arthritis and other such diseases grows.

If this is somewhat discouraging, the good news is that much of these aging issues can be modified through exercise and proper nutrition. "Many degenerative diseases could be prevented if, at a younger age, we changed our eating habits. It's important to start early to change habits; it takes years to develop disease," Voloshin said. Voloshin concedes, however, that this simple advice is often not easy to follow. "One of the hardest things we face as human beings is to change ourselves. It's a battle that everybody goes through. We can conquer so many other things, but change remains difficult."

But declining health often can be a motivating factor for change. Following is a summary of what Voloshin, Van Treek and experts from around the country agree are the most important issues to address in regards to aging and changing nutritional needs. It is important to note, however, that individual needs vary and that factors such as allergies can impact these recommendations. A customized program can reap the best results.

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- Food--As we age, we need less of it, but the quality becomes increasingly important.
 - Fiber, fiber and more fiber is the chorus heard from the experts. The USDA's Nutrition Research Center on Aging recommends a total of 20-30 grams of fiber/day. Fiber is best obtained from fresh vegetables and fruits, whole grains and legumes. "The body needs a lot of fiber because it's linked to prevention of disease, including heart disease," Van Treck said. The highest fiber foods include apples, apricots, bananas, grapes, peaches, plums, pears, papaya, broccoli, carrots, romaine lettuce, spinach, raw pumpkin and sunflower seeds, to name a few. Canned foods (especially soups) are not recommended, as they contain more salt and other additives. Be aware of juices as well, as they have much more sugar than people tend to realize. In addition, Van Treck points out that "enriched" is not as beneficial as whole grain.
 - Protein remains important, the body just doesn't need as much of it. Lighter proteins, such as poultry, fish, soy and nuts rank high.
 - Good fats are necessary. Fats such as flax and olive oil keep the blood vessels clean and can aid in constipation relief. Voloshin recommends a tablespoon of flax seed oil a day. Cold water fish, such as salmon, albacore tuna, mackerel and sardines are also sources of good fat.
 - Older adults have a reduced sense of thirst, but fluid intake remains important, as dehydration can worsen kidney function and constipation. Water and herbal teas are the best sources.
- Exercise—As we age, we lose muscle mass and range of motion. Exercise can combat this situation. As an added benefit, it is also proven to fight depression. Voloshin highly recommends swimming and walking. "Walking outside is the best exercise for any age, especially older people. Find a place where you like to walk—it's good for the mind to breathe

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fresh air. Mall walking is OK, but it's not outside—no air, sky, wind," she said. She also points out that exercise is the only proven route to *increase good* cholesterol; medication can only *decrease bad* cholesterol.

- Supplements—Dr. Voloshin advocates for keeping things simple: a silver multivitamin, flax oil, exercise and a good diet for a senior without major health issues. She suggests adding in garlic (not in pill form) and lemon to detoxify the blood, which is good for people with high blood pressure in particular.

Although there are lots of anti-aging products on the market, many experts agree that a few simple supplements are all most healthy seniors need for better nutrition. These include:

- Vitamin D—the human body normally uses sunlight, absorbed by the skin, to synthesize an inactive form of vitamin D, which is then converted by the kidneys into an active or hormonal form that the body can use. Studies have shown the skin of elderly people is only 40% as efficient as a child's skin in synthesizing vitamin D. In addition, our kidneys become less efficient at their conversion job. The recommended daily intake of vitamin D in a person aged 70 or older is approximately 600 IU per day, which can be obtained from drinking several glasses of milk. But as most adults don't do this and, in addition, many people have or develop dairy allergies, supplementing may be necessary.
- Calcium—the recommended intake is approximately 1200 mg/day, which can be reached by consuming three 8-oz. glasses of calcium-fortified orange juice or calcium-rich dairy products. But, again, most adults don't or can't do this, so a supplement may be needed.
- Vitamin B12—This vitamin is normally obtained from protein during the digestion process; however, many older people are unable to separate and absorb the vitamin properly. For this reason, people may need to supplement their B12 intake, either in the form of vitamins or fortified cereal.
- Folate—Low folate intake can cause elevations of homocysteine levels, which can increase the risk of cardiovascular disease. The RDA for all ages is 400 ug/day.

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There are health needs beyond diet and exercise, however. “We need the spiritual aspect, otherwise is all makes no sense,” Voloshin points out. “Serving people, going to a house of prayer, these things are very therapeutic. Don’t forget about it. As people get older, they get entrapped in their diseases. But life isn’t only about the body, it’s also about the soul.”

Given their track record, the Boomers will make the senior years appear to be the best, most important time of one’s life, perhaps easing some of the anxiety and stigma our culture currently holds about aging and paving the way for Americans to grow old gracefully.

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