



## Cut calories, but not the nutrients, as you age

Calorie needs can vary greatly from one adult to another based on differences in body size, physical activity level and age. Most people reach their peak of calorie burning during their late teens. After that, work and family obligations often make it difficult for many to maintain high levels of physical activity, and calorie needs gradually decrease. Even when people maintain an exercise program, aging eventually forces a gradual decline in exercise and calorie needs.

**Question:** Do nutrient needs of adults decline along with calorie needs?

**Answer:** No. In fact, some nutrient needs even increase with age despite lower calorie needs. The basic goal in good nutrition is to meet all essential nutrient needs within calorie needs. Therefore, as calorie requirements decrease, it is important to choose more nutritious foods.

**Q:** What nutrient needs increase with age?

**A:** Some research indicates that protein needs increase in older people. Some question this, but it seems clear that protein needs definitely do not decrease along with declining calorie needs. Also,

it is well known that protein needs can increase significantly when people are consuming low-calorie diets for weight loss at any age. Without adequate protein during dieting, less of the weight loss comes from fat, and more comes from muscle.

Current recommendations for vitamin D double at age 51 and triple for those over 70 in comparison with recommendations for young and middle-age adults. Recommendations for both calcium and vitamin B-6 also increase for these two age groups.

**Q:** Do any nutrient needs decrease with age?

**A:** Most nutrient needs stay the same throughout the adult years. However, iron needs decline for a woman after menopause and become comparable to a man's.

**Q:** How does all of this affect how an older adult should eat?

**A:** As the quantity of food goes down, the quality of the overall diet needs to go up. In other words, the diet must become richer in nutrients in comparison with its calories. To maintain protein intake, many people find that the easiest place to start cutting calories is by reducing their portion size of starchy foods. Also, substituting

some whole-grain products for the standard fare can help to maintain dietary fiber intake. Beans also can be a good way to get some starchy food along with more protein and fiber.

Perhaps even more important is cutting back on high-fat foods. In general it helps to select leaner meats and to not overdo nonessentials like salad dressings, butter, mayonnaise, etc.

One exception to the fat rule is fish. Selecting higher fat-content ocean fish like butterfish, kahala, salmon and sardines provides the omega-3 fatty acids that are proving to be so important for maintaining many body functions, including the function of the aging brain.

Eating a wide variety of colorful vegetables and fruits also provides many important nutrients and phytochemicals without too many calories. Since some fruits (such as dried fruits) and starchy vegetables can be fairly high in calories, variety is important.

Round this out with some lower-fat milk products or other high-calcium foods, and your bases will be covered.

---

Joannie Dobbs, PhD, CNS and Alan Titchenal, PhD, CNS  
are nutritionists in the Department of Human Nutrition, Food and Animal Sciences,  
College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, UH-Manoa.  
Dr. Dobbs also works with the University Health Service.

---