

Eating well key to aging well

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RENEE ITTNER MCMANUS / KRT

blueberries

When Peter Pritchard, 72, noticed he was getting a little excess baggage around his waistline, he decided to do something about it.

“There’s enough information out there that I could read and learn that being fat isn’t healthy,” says the Fort Lauderdale resident.

He enrolled in a six-week nutrition course that’s popular with seniors at the Zachariah Family Wellness Pavilion at Fort Lauderdale’s Holy Cross Hospital. Here he learned from registered dietitian Leslie Burman that “weight is the number one indicator of disease.”

By the end of the course, he had lost 10 pounds and 2 inches.

“I could tell my efforts were paying off by the way my clothes fit,” he says.

Seniors, like Pritchard, have special dietary needs and concerns such as weight gain that, if addressed now, can improve their health and quality of life, says Linette de Armas, a registered dietitian for Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami.

After all, health issues such as cardiovascular disease, some forms of cancer, osteoporosis, type 2 diabetes, obesity, hypertension and even loss of muscle mass are prevalent in senior populations and can be related to diet.

“If we could substitute good nutrition for physicians, we’d be a much healthier nation,” says

Dr. Joseph

Gutman, an endocrinologist who is an expert in diabetes and obesity at Mount Sinai Medical Center in Miami Beach

But what makes up a good diet for seniors?

Most would benefit from eating plenty of lean protein necessary for building muscle and keeping blood sugars in check. Lean meats, chicken, fish and eggs — all excellent protein sources — also help supply vitamin B12, which the body has a harder time absorbing with age.

Vitamin B12 can “make you feel more energetic so you can socialize and be physically fit while maintaining your appetite. As a result it helps prevent depression, diabetes and heart disease,” says de Armas.

Seniors also need plenty of colorful veggies that provide vitamins and minerals as well as antioxidants that can help prevent some cancers. These nutrients are also found in fruits, but you shouldn't overdo the natural sweets because they can affect blood sugars.

A healthful diet also includes a limited amount of carbohydrate, which can cause blood sugar spikes, but plenty of fiber. Fiber helps the body absorb nutrients, prevents constipation, decreases cholesterol and adds to your feelings of satiety after a meal.

“It helps you get more of the nutrients from what you eat,” Burman says.

De Armas explains that soluble and insoluble fibers “act like a sponge” in your gut absorbing and helping to eliminate cholesterol. Nutritionists recommend 20 to 35 grams a fiber a day. Good sources of fiber include whole grain breads, beans, oatmeal, whole-grain cereals, broccoli, carrots, asparagus, citrus fruits and apples and pears.

Low-fat dairy products also are important to a senior diet because they supply calcium for bone health as well as vitamin D, which helps boost the body's calcium absorption. Calcium, which also can be found in dark leafy green vegetables such as kale and collards, sardines and canned salmon with bones, is essential for maintaining strong bones and teeth. It's also been found to reduce the risk of heart disease, strokes, colon cancer and kidney stones.

But the ability to absorb vitamin D from dairy products and other foods decreases with age. To make matters worse, seniors tend to wear sunscreen or stay indoors when it's hot and sunny outdoors so their bodies don't manufacture enough of this vitamin. Sunlight is a major source of Vitamin D.

“A vitamin D deficiency opens the door to a plethora of other problems,” Burman says.

Gutman recommends testing for vitamins D and B12 as well as taking a multivitamin

formulated for

seniors to assure they get enough of these vitamins. He also advises seniors to drink about 12 cups of water a day to keep their digestive tracks moving. Caffeinated teas, coffee and sodas don't count toward this requirement as they cause you to excrete liquid and strip your body of calcium.

Getting the recommended amount of water may sound difficult. But it's necessary to prevent dehydration. "When you feel thirsty, you are already dehydrated," Burman says.

The symptoms of dehydration include confusion, dizziness, lightheadedness and tiredness.

"These can really affect a senior's ability to be social, to feel confident and have self esteem." de Armas says.

Besides getting enough of the right nutrients, seniors face other age-related problems that can affect their nutrition. Loose-fitting dentures and drugs with side effects that curb the appetite or change the way you taste food can lead to nutritional deficiencies. It's difficult to eat a steak with all its B12 and protein when your teeth don't fit or the meat just doesn't taste good.

Drug interactions are another consideration for seniors who are often taking numerous pills. You need to monitor vitamin and mineral intakes in relation to these medications, Burman says.

"All medications have side effects," she says.

For example, vitamin K interferes with the blood thinning properties of Coumadin. Check with your doctor, dietitian or pharmacist for interactions between drugs and the foods you eat.

Those who are concerned about their budgets or can't get to the store regularly may not be able to afford fresh fruits and veggies. They substitute processed and preserved foods. But these are often high in sodium that can affect blood pressure and cause you to retain fluids if you have heart disease.

"Processed foods have become a way of life and are unhealthy. There's no question about it," Gutman says.

Also, as the elderly lose their sense of taste and smell, they tend to use more salt or sodium to compensate. And this can lead to hypertension and swelling.

Home-bound seniors who don't have anyone looking in on them may suffer weight problems that can have devastating effects.

"They eat the wrong foods or can't get out to move around so they become depressed and then eat

more,” de Armas says. They become overweight if they can’t exercise and malnourished if they eat the wrong things.

For them, Meals on Wheels or other community feeding programs may be a solution.

Even healthy, mobile seniors can have problems getting a good diet if they eat most of their meals in restaurants. “It’s easier to go out and eat \$1.99 bagel and cream cheese but it’s not necessarily good for you,” Burman says.

Many seniors gather with friends for a restaurant meal. “I’ve had clients who say that once they moved south of the border [the Florida border that is], they turned off their ovens and haven’t cooked in 30 years,” Burman says. “Their social life is all about eating out.”

Instead of cooking at home, they eat in their community clubs where mayo and creamed sauces may be the norm. Or they opt for all-you-can-eat buffets where fat and sodium are on the menu.

Before Pritchard took the nutrition seminar, he, like many seniors, was eating 70 percent of his meals in restaurants and fast food spots. At home, he was snacking on potato chips, fried chicken, peanuts and pizza.

His exercise amounted to walking around the block once or twice a month, he says. But Pritchard was motivated to change. He will soon be visiting two of his children who recently completed Ironman competitions. He doesn’t want to look out of shape in comparison.

So now he cooks beans and rice for himself, uses salsa and vinegar “to spice things up,” and avoids greasy foods. He also regularly visits a gym where he’s a winner on the rowing machines.

While his healthy regimen has resulted in weight loss, it’s not a panacea.

“You have to know your own history and monitor your own gene pool to know what you need to eat,” Burman says.

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