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Eat Right for Life



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Eating the same way in your 40s as you did in your 20s? Ignoring your nutritional needs when you're 60? Not you! Build and maintain your healthiest body by adjusting your eating habits to address the specific needs of each decade.

20s: Bone Building

In your 20s, you're still building up bone density, so this is the decade to help your bones grow strong and healthy. The more you start off with, the better, as your bones will lose density over the years.

Enter calcium, which not only builds strong bones but is also important for healthy muscles, nerves and heart. You need 1,000 milligrams per day, so enjoy dairy products, opt for calcium-fortified soy milk, orange juice and cereals, and load up on beans, leafy greens, almonds and canned salmon with bones.

30s: Baby on Board

These days, women are having babies well into their 30s, which makes folic acid an important nutrient during this decade. Folic acid helps prevent neural tube birth defects such as spina bifida. Unfortunately, many women don't get enough.

For women who plan on becoming pregnant, the 2015-2020 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* recommend consuming 400 micrograms per day of folic acid from fortified foods and/or supplements, in addition to foods high in folate. Many breads, cereals and grain products are fortified with folic acid; fruits and vegetables are good sources of folate. If you're trying to get pregnant, your doctor may recommend a folic acid supplement.

This also is a time to start thinking about how to prevent chronic diseases that become more prevalent as we age. Eating a diet based mostly on whole plant foods including whole grains, legumes, fruits, vegetables, nuts and seeds helps prevent chronic diseases such as Type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease and certain types of cancer.

Avoid dieting, which can lead to weight cycling. A history of dieting and weight cycling (when your weight goes up and down repeatedly) has been linked with increased risk of cardiovascular issues and osteoporosis.

40s: Keeping Score

If you haven't been treating your body right, the 40s is where this will start showing up.

The 40s are a good time to be vigilant about eating plenty of fruits and vegetables, which contain health-promoting vitamins, minerals and antioxidants. Adults need at least 2 cups of fruit and 2½ cups of vegetables a day. Explore new tastes by trying a new fruit or vegetable a couple of times a month.

Try snacking on fruit including apples, bananas and clementines, opt for vegetable-packed, broth-based soups, salads piled with greens and smoothies with berries. If you don't like the taste of vegetables raw, try roasting them which makes them sweeter.

Another important nutrient for the 40-and-over set is fiber, which can help protect against heart disease and some types of cancer. Women under 50 need 25 grams per day, but most adults get only about half that amount. Luckily, the fruits and veggies you're eating for the vitamins and minerals are also rich in fiber, and whole grains and beans are other good sources.

50s: Mindful Eating

The 50s are a time of big changes thanks to perimenopause and menopause. Hormone fluctuations during this time of life cause changes in metabolism and body weight. Rather than dieting to maintain your premenopausal shape, work on accepting your changing body and focusing on mindful eating and regular physical activity.

Also essential: Vitamin D. It's essential for bone health and researchers believe it may reduce the risk of some cancers, heart disease and infectious diseases. Vitamin D is difficult to get from food — the best sources are fortified milk, orange juice and cereals, as well as fish such as salmon and tuna.

The recommended daily amount of vitamin D is 600 IU per day for women ages 19 to 70, but the majority of adults don't get enough. Consult your doctor or registered dietitian nutritionist about your need for a supplement.

60s and Beyond: Protein Power

Protein, along with regular strength building exercise, is essential for maintaining muscle, which we tend to lose as we age. Consuming enough protein also may be linked with bone health.

The average woman needs about 5 to 6 ounces of protein foods each day. Good sources include meat such as beef, chicken, fish, pork and lamb. Not a meat eater? You'll also find protein in eggs, beans, tofu and nuts, as well as low-fat or fat-free milk, yogurt and cheese.

Vitamin B12 — which helps your body make red blood cells and keep the brain and nervous system healthy — is another vital nutrient for women over 60. You can get B12 through any food that comes from an animal: meat, fish, dairy products and eggs. However, as people get older they can develop a reduced ability to absorb vitamin B12. Talk to your doctor to see if you need a supplement.

Each decade brings with it specific health concerns and different nutrition needs. Eat right for your age and you'll sail through the decades feeling great.