

You Age How You Eat

by Elizabeth Braun, MS, RD



As baby boomers approach their golden years, the pursuit of the ever elusive fountain of youth has intensified. “Age-defying”, “mature”, “senior moment”, and “anti-aging” have become part of the everyday lexicon. Since modern medicine has yet to remedy the propensity to shrink, wrinkle and lose the car keys, using food as the conduit to a more youthful existence seems promising. Who doesn’t want to dodge the age-related diseases that weaken bones, clog arteries, wither the brain and diminish quality of life? While there are no nutritional miracle cures for turning back the clock, healthier eating can contribute to aging gracefully and a maybe even a little slower.

Potent Produce

ANTIOXIDANTS: Tired of this word? Don’t be. Thousands have yet to be identified. The evidence that antioxidants gobble up free radicals blamed for aging the skin, the brain, blood vessels and organs continues to stack up. These naturally occurring nutrients are found primarily in vegetables and fruits but also make an appearance in boomer favorites like green tea and cocoa. Before opting for the chocolate and tea diet, fill up on a rainbow of produce - the best remedy for diminishing the appetite and hence the waistline which tends to expand with age. Antioxidant vitamin C promotes immunity and skin elasticity while beta carotene guards against damaging UV rays. Lutein in green and yellow produce protects aging eyes and lycopene found in red fruits and vegetables prevents some types of cancer. As plentiful sources of nutrients like potassium, folate and vitamin K, fruits and vegetables have the added potential to reduce blood pressure and stroke risk extending healthy later years. Berries, beans and greens are just a few of the antioxidant rich options packing a powerful punch with less than 100 calories per cup. If the standard salads and vegetable sides are not inspiring, why not try a blenderized drink? A cup of spinach, a chopped green apple, frozen green grapes and a little apple juice make a tasty new way to enjoy these potent nutrients. Although antioxidant supplements are available, there isn’t a lot of scientific data supporting their use as an equal substitute for the real thing: food!

Go Fish

OMEGA 3-FATTY ACIDS: In short, fish is brain food. One form of omega 3-fatty acids known as DHA makes up a large portion of brain’s grey matter. The body can’t make DHA so it is an essential part of a longevity enhancing diet. Salmon, tuna and sardines are omega 3 superstars, but shrimp and shellfish contribute as well. Experts say the magic number to boost memory, reduce dementia risk and minimize mood disorders associated with aging seems to be two servings weekly. Omega 3-fatty acids have also been credited with lowering cholesterol and triglycerides for optimum heart health in later years by decreasing inflammation. Additionally, these healthy fats contribute to skin and eye health by keeping the cells protected from damaging environmental toxins. Aging muscles tend to atrophy without adequate dietary protein. Fish provides the protein without the artery-clogging saturated fat present in meat. Be careful not to negate the benefits of fish by cooking it in unhealthy ways. Bake, grill or broil fish rather than deep frying or adding fatty sauces. If fish isn’t a favorite, try walnuts or flax seeds. Just a snack-size handful on cereal or salads provides nearly 100% of the omega 3-fatty acids recommended per day for under 200 calories. Another reason to eat more fish is for the vitamin D needed for calcium absorption to keep bones and teeth strong. This elusive nutrient is only found in fortified foods and some fish like mackerel, tuna and sardines. While exposure to sunlight allows the body to make vitamin D, later in life this mechanism is diminished. Using sunscreen also interferes with D production making the dietary options even more important while avoiding skin cancer.



Cut the Calories

CALORIES: Consuming fewer calories promotes a longer and more productive life. Sounds simple, but the tendency to overeat is fueled by the demand for plus-sized portions. To stay motivated and steer clear of all-you-can-eat menus, consider the benefits of moderation. Research has shown that eating less appears to trigger the production of nerve growth factors responsible for brain function possibly preventing Alzheimer's and dementia. In addition to enhancing brain health, scientists agree that a lower calorie diet aids in preventing obesity which is a major risk factor for developing heart disease and diabetes. Some evidence has even shown that reducing calorie intake in later years actually slows or prevents the proliferation of cancer cells. Minimizing the diseases of age makes it possible to enjoy a higher quality of life. As people age, their muscle mass deteriorates resulting in a lower metabolism and an increase in fat weight. Up to a 25% calorie reduction seems necessary to prevent weight gain and accommodate the decrease in metabolism associated with diminished muscle mass. But don't be fooled if weight stays the same over time. Failing to drop the necessary calories or to amp up exercise results in age-related changes



in body composition that don't always show up on the scale: the added fat weight simply replaces the lost muscle weight resulting in a stable weight but an unhealthy percentage of fat in relation to muscle. Luckily, maximizing vegetable and fruit options is a simple strategy to keep the calorie levels in check and prevent middle-aged battle of the bulge.

Protein Power

AMINO ACIDS: While reducing calories is helpful in healthy aging, the types of calories consumed play a role as well. Amino acids are the building blocks of protein and present in every cell in the body. Some are made by the body but the rest must be obtained from food. Amino acids are involved in maintaining healthy tissue and promote muscle building so important in later years. Since the average adult loses up to 1% of muscle mass per year after age 50, a diet including high quality protein choices is essential. While meat is the most familiar, other lower fat options are equally nutritious: fish, chicken, eggs, low fat dairy foods as well as vegetarian sources like beans, soy, nuts and seeds which also offer a healthy dose of fiber. Eating a source of protein at frequent intervals throughout the day balances blood sugar levels and quells the appetite until the next meal. This multi-tasking nutrient has been shown to aid in weight loss by slowing down the digestion of carbohydrates and offering a feeling of

fullness with fewer calories. This results in elevated energy levels and prevents cravings between meals. All these actions benefit age-related weight control efforts that become more challenging over time. Be aware, a little goes a long way. Two servings the size of a deck of cards daily along with two ounce-size snacks and a few cups of milk or yogurt are more than enough for most adults. Generally, half the body weight in pounds is a reasonable amount of protein grams per day - grains contribute small amounts of protein as well. A final bonus nutrient present in only animal sources of protein is vitamin B12. Cobalamin or vitamin B12 is one nutrient that is poorly absorbed later in life and is unavailable to those following a purely vegan diet. This essential nutrient is key to brain and nervous system health in later years and is also involved in preventing a type of anemia. This is one vitamin that if necessary, is successfully utilized when taken as a supplement. Check with a medical provider to be sure if it is needed.

Hydration Station

WATER: Water constitutes nearly 60% of an adult's weight. Drinking adequate amounts of fluids promotes natural cleansing by carrying nutrients throughout the body and eliminates toxins by transporting waste products away. Plenty of water aids in healthy digestion, plumps up dry skin, maintains kidney function promotes electrolyte balance helping with the goal to achieve a more youthful existence. Since the brain is nearly 80% water, even mild dehydration can release stress hormones that lead to fatigue, slow thinking and may result in feelings of intense hunger. Don't use thirst as a guide for hydrating. The thirst mechanism often diminishes over the years meaning waiting until thirst is triggered is probably past the point of becoming dehydrated. In order to estimate adequate fluid needs, a simple rule of thumb is to shoot for the number of ounces equal to one half the body weight in pounds. For example: 150 pounds X 1/2 = 75 ounces daily. One of the most beneficial attributes of water is that drinking a lot of it probably means not drinking other sugary beverages like high calorie pop and juices that might de-rail efforts to be healthy or lose weight. Don't forget options such as green tea, low fat milk or coffee in moderation can count toward the daily fluid intake goal along with the majority as water. If plain water is not so appealing, jazz it up with sliced fresh fruit or cucumber or try a sparkling version. Just be sure not to choose those with added sugar. A final word of caution: more is not always better: over hydration although rare, is possible and can result in a life-threatening electrolyte imbalance when plain water intake exceeds what is required - usually in excess of a 100 ounces in a day or large quantities in a short period of time.

While there is no substitute for a healthy lifestyle and good genes in promoting a longer, higher quality of life, there are some characteristics of healthy eating that seem equally promising. Tried and true nutrition strategies like eating more fruits and vegetables, choosing seafood, consuming fewer calories, getting adequate protein and sufficient hydration all appear to have the potential to enhance well being and possibly contribute to longevity. At the very least, making healthier choices and feeling better is a worthwhile outcome, even if it takes a lifetime.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Elizabeth Braun, MS, RD is a registered dietitian counseling patients at Grand Rapids Women's Health on a variety of women's health nutrition issues including gestational diabetes, interstitial cystitis, high cholesterol, diabetes and more. She enjoys taking extra time with patients coordinating multiple diets.

