

Tips for vulnerable older people to eat well while self-isolating

The importance of a good diet is vital to health for everyone but particularly for older people who rarely go outdoors and can easily find themselves losing interest in food.

Vulnerable older people are advised to self-isolate due to the Covid-19 pandemic and this will mean they need to pay extra attention to their dietary needs, ensuring they get all the protein, minerals and vitamins they require.

Key messages:

1. It's important to eat regularly – at least three times a day.
2. Smaller meals more frequently with nutritious snacks in between may be better tolerated – this would be 3 small meals and 3 small snacks a day.
3. It's important to drink plenty of liquids.

One of the basic principles of healthy eating is eating a variety of different foods to get a better balance of nutrients. Including a variety of food and drinks from the food groups listed below each day will provide everyone with a good balance of nutrients and help ensure their nutritional needs are met.

1. Fruit and Vegetables

– eat 5 portions a day.

What's included in this food group?

- All types of fresh, frozen and canned vegetables –broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, carrots, peas, peppers, swede and sweetcorn
- Beans and pulses, including baked beans, chickpeas and kidney beans
- All types of salad vegetables, including lettuce, cucumber, tomato, raw carrots, peppers and beetroot
- All types of fresh fruit – apples, bananas, kiwi fruit, oranges, pears, mango and plums
- All types of canned fruit in fruit juice – pineapple, peaches and mandarin oranges
- Stewed fruit
- Dried fruit
- Fruit juice (100% juice)

Top tip: It may be more appropriate for fruit and vegetables to be soft – stewed fruit, cooked vegetables, soups etc.

2. Bread, rice, potatoes, pasta:

The fibre from these helps to prevent constipation, a common problem for older people.

- All varieties of bread including wholemeal, granary and seeded breads, chapattis, bagels, roti, tortillas and pitta bread
- Potatoes, yam, cocoyam, dasheen, breadfruit and cassava
- Breakfast cereals
- Rice, couscous, bulgar wheat, maize (polenta) and cornmeal
- Noodles, spaghetti and other pastas

3. Meat, fish, eggs, beans:

These foods are rich in protein and are important for maintaining muscle strength and helping with wound healing. As we get older, we lose muscle mass and gain fat mass, but studies show that this can rapidly accelerate if we stay inactive.

- Meat includes all cuts of beef, pork, lamb, poultry, offal and meat products such as bacon, sausages, beef burgers, pies and cold meats
- Fish includes fresh, frozen and canned fish, such as tuna and sardines. Fish products such as fish cakes and fish fingers may have a low fish content
- Eggs: Boiled, poached or scrambled eggs, or omelettes
- Meat alternatives for vegetarians: Beans and pulses such as chickpeas, lentils, kidney beans, butter beans, textured vegetable protein, nuts, and soya products such as tofu and Quorn

4. Milk and dairy foods:

Milk and dairy foods are important to help maintain bone density and reduce the risk of fractures.

- Skimmed, semi-skimmed and whole milk
- Dried milk, goat's and sheep's milk
- All types of cheeses – for example, Cheddar cheese, cottage cheese, cheese spreads, brie, feta, Edam, goat's cheese, Stilton and Parmesan
- Yoghurt
- Fromage frais

Think about including muscle-building protein at breakfast, lunch and dinner. Also, you can add protein to snacks such as eggs, beans, peanut butter, cheese.

Top tips for muscle strength: The body requires activity to stimulate the conversion of protein to muscle. See point 9 under Top Tips to Keeping Well keeping fit ideas

Food and drinks high in fat and/or sugar:

These foods can be beneficial to increase the energy content of meals if weight gain is required.

- Butter, margarine, other spreading fats and low-fat spreads, cooking oils, oil-based salad dressings, mayonnaise, cream, chocolate, crisps, biscuits, pastries, cakes, puddings, ice cream, rich sauces, and gravies
- Foods and drinks containing sugar include: soft drinks, sweets, chocolate, jams, sugar, cakes, puddings, biscuits, pastries and ice cream

Fluid: It's very important to make sure Older People are drinking enough. About 1.5 to 2 litres a day will prevent dehydration, urinary tract infections and will help prevent constipation.

Top tips for keeping well

1. Stimulating appetite:

We know that loneliness and isolation can have a huge impact on appetite and many people say they don't feel hungry if they eat alone. Sometimes older people experience taste changes and may benefit from experimenting with a range of tasty ingredients such as spices and sauces in order to stimulate appetite. Also try to get outside for some fresh air. Just sitting or strolling in the garden, or on the balcony, or opening a window can help stimulate appetite. Trying new meals including a range of ready meals can provide something to look forward to trying and will provide a full range of nutrients if the meals contain a range of foods from the list above. Always think it is better to eat something than nothing!

2. Vitamin D:

Ensuring everyone gets a daily dosage of Vitamin D is important and vital for healthy bones and teeth. As we age, our skin becomes less effective at making vitamin D in the presence of sunlight. People who rarely go out in the sun need extra vitamin D, which is vital for healthy bones and teeth. Current guidelines advise those over the age of 65 to take 10 micrograms of Vitamin D each day as a supplement. Vitamin D is found in many different foods, but often in low quantities which aren't sufficient for older people. You can buy vitamin D supplements from most pharmacies.

3. Fortifying milk:

For those with a low body weight or suddenly lose lots of weight in an unplanned way, calorie intake and nutritional intake can be increased by adding extra ingredients to fresh whole milk. Add four tablespoons of dried skimmed milk powder to a pint of milk, it will add extra calories and a range of vital vitamins and minerals.

4. Fruit and vegetables:

These are a great source of nutrients including vitamin C which is essential for a healthy immune system. Buy frozen fruit and vegetables in bulk according to freezer space and a range of tinned versions. Frozen berries can be added to porridge, cereals and milk puddings and can make an excellent base to crumbles and served with fortified milk or a full-fat Greek yoghurt. They can also be added to smoothies along with full fat Greek yoghurt. Frozen vegetables including peas and beans are also packed with nutrients as they are frozen as soon as they are picked

5. Drink plenty of fluids:

Keeping hydrated by drinking plenty of fluids each day is essential to stay healthy. All adults are advised to drink 1.5–2 litres of fluid each day but older people tend to drink far less than this, particularly those who are inactive. Drinks can include regular cups of tea, coffee as well as sips of water and other drinks throughout the day.

6. Include fibre:

Eating a fibre rich diet as well as drinking plenty of fluids is important for gut and bowel health. Easy chew options include any dried fruits that can be softened in fruit juice and added to milk puddings and whole grain easy to chew cereals such as porridge or bran flakes that can be softened with fortified milk. Other rich sources of fibre are whole grain cereals so try to buy wholemeal bread. Nuts are a great source of fibre and protein but may be too difficult to chew so nut butters such as peanut butter are useful.

7. Boost vitamin B:

Many older people do not have enough vitamin B vitamins in their diet. Low levels of vitamin B12 have been linked to a higher risk of stroke and dementia. Make sure you eat enough leafy, green vegetables such as spinach and broccoli, which are an excellent source, frozen varieties are just as good.

8. Good hygiene and safety:

It's important to emphasise the importance of hand washing, cleaning any work surfaces, utensils and chopping boards. Food safety information regarding follow the storage instructions on the label and always using food by its 'use by' date needs are all an important part of staying healthy

9. Keeping fit without leaving the house:

Simple exercises for older adults from Age UK: <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice/health-wellbeing/exercise/simple-exercises-inactive-adults/>

Age UK Oxfordshire has a free exercise video appropriate for all older people who want to work-out at home. It can be downloaded from <https://www.generationgames.org.uk/>

10. Food Connections

Staying connected with family, friends, carers or neighbours over the phone or online is so important at this time. It's a great way to share favourite food memories, stories and recipes that not only can help boost mood but can stimulate positive food choices and a desire to eat.