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6 Nutrients to Prioritize as You Age

Your nutritional needs change as you age, which is why experts say it's important to make sure you're getting more of these key vitamins and minerals.

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You already know the importance of eating a healthy, nutrient-rich diet. It not only gives you the energy you need to carry on with your day, but also keeps your bones strong, supports your muscles, boosts your [immunity](#) and lowers your risk of a myriad of diseases, including diabetes, cardiovascular disease and even certain cancers, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“Nutrients are so vital because they are used in nearly every process inside our bodies, such as building cells, healing wounds and breathing,” explains [Nicole M. Avena](#), Ph.D., assistant professor of neuroscience at Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, visiting professor of health psychology at Princeton University and author of [What to Eat When You Want to Get Pregnant](#) (Citadel, 2021). “They also assist in the process of breaking down the foods we consume to provide the body with sufficient [energy](#).”

While we need nutrients to thrive our entire lives, the amount of each nutrient required by our body can shift as we age. This is because of the physiological changes that naturally occur through the decades, such as a slower metabolism, a decrease in muscle mass and bone density, and the thinning of organ tissue, according to Avena.

“For example, when our metabolism slows, our ability to absorb vitamin B12 decreases, so more of this nutrient is necessary to maintain a proper balance,” she says.

There’s also the whole idea of needing more nutrients to support our ever-changing hormones.

“One of the best examples of this is women who are entering into perimenopause and menopause,” explains functional nutritional therapy practitioner [Tansy Rodgers](#), FNT. “As progesterone, testosterone and estrogen (all of which are hormones) begin to shift, the body will require different nutrients to support those [hormonal changes](#) to bring balance back to the body.”

No matter your age, it's vital that you're getting the right amount of nutrients for your body. If you are not getting [balanced nutrition](#) filled with nutrient-dense foods, you become more prone to disease, developmental problems, inflammation, infection, poor performance and fatigue, Rodgers explains. "Aging folks, for example, run the risk of osteoporosis, as not getting the right level of nutrients can lead to bone loss and potential osteopenia or osteoporosis," she warns. "Having too much or too little of a nutrient can set you up for big health issues down the road."

Here's a look at the nutrients to prioritize as you age and how to make sure you're getting your fair share.

1. Potassium

While you might not need more of this nutrient, according to the Recommended Daily Allowance set by the [National Institutes of Health](#), potassium is an important nutrient to prioritize as you age because it helps keep your blood pressure in check, therefore reducing your risk of heart disease, according to the [CDC](#).

"With the slowed metabolism that aging can bring, it is important that older populations consume more potassium," Avena notes. "This is because adequate potassium levels can keep bones strong and ensure proper functioning of muscles and nerves that can become compromised with age." She recommends focusing on potassium-rich foods such as bananas, prunes, avocados, orange juice and potatoes.

2. Vitamin D

Also known as the sunshine vitamin, since our main source of it is exposure to the sun, vitamin D is vital for preserving bone health. What's more: Our nutritional needs go up significantly once we're older than 70 — from 15 to 20 micrograms, per the [NIH](#). "There is a decrease in the skin's ability and the

kidneys to make vitamin D as one ages, which results in a 50 percent decrease in the previtamin D3,” explains registered dietitian and yoga instructor **Laura Cipullo, RD**. Aging alone causes a decrease in vitamin D absorption. However, this is more likely to occur after age 65. It is recommended to check your blood values for vitamin D levels at your yearly physical. A vitamin D level lower than 20 nanograms per milliliter is associated with an increased rate of bone loss and thus increased fracture rate.

3. Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 is an essential water-soluble nutrient that plays an important role in the health of blood and nerve cells, per the [NIH](#). Unfortunately, as we age, we lose the ability to properly absorb vitamin B12 from the food we eat, **Cipullo** notes. Additionally, she points out that certain medications frequently taken by older adults, such as Zantac and Pepcid, may further complicate absorbing vitamin B12. “It’s vital to prioritize this nutrient as you age because a low level of vitamin B12 is linked to cardiovascular disease, cognitive dysfunction, osteoporosis and even dementia,” she says, pointing to research published in the journal [Annals of Clinical Biochemistry](#). Salmon, tuna, beef, chicken and all animal sources of protein contain vitamin B12, but scoring this nutrient can prove to be more challenging for vegans and vegetarians. **Cipullo** recommends that plant eaters seek out this nutrient through nutritional yeast and fortified cereals.

4. Omega-3 Fatty Acids

Omega-3 fatty acids help reduce inflammation in your body that could increase your risk for several diseases, including coronary heart disease, per the [CDC](#). Unfortunately, your risk for these diseases, and the inflammation that causes them, increase as you age.

“Omega-3 fatty acids can lower heart disease risk factors like high blood pressure and triglycerides and also increase HDL cholesterol, the [good cholesterol](#),” Rodgers explains. She recommends getting your share of omega-3s by eating foods like walnuts, wild-caught salmon, mackerel, cod liver oil, herring, avocados, flaxseeds and chia seeds or taking a fish-oil supplement.

5. Collagen

Collagen is a protein found in the connective tissues in your body, as well as your skin and bones. It plays a role in strengthening skin with benefits of elasticity and hydration, Rodgers explains. Unfortunately, as you age, your body produces less collagen, leading to dry skin and wrinkles.

“Adequate collagen has been linked to improving your skin health, relieving joint pain, preventing bone loss, boosting muscle mass, promoting heart health, [improving gut health](#), balancing out moods and supporting a [healthy metabolism](#),” she says. “You can get your fill of collagen in foods such as chicken skin, pork skin, beef and fish, and you can also find collagen in gelatin, such as bone broth, or you can add a collagen powder.”

6. Magnesium

This important mineral in the body helps your nerves and muscles function properly and helps you maintain blood sugar and blood pressure levels, per the [CDC](#).

“[Magnesium](#) helps with maintaining a healthy immune system, stabilizes nerve and muscle functioning, and helps keep your bones strong and your heart beating healthfully,” Rodgers says. “It is also a super aid to calming the nervous system and allowing you to relax and fall asleep at night.”

While your RDA doesn't change as you age, your ability to absorb magnesium can because of medication use and changes in your gut functioning, Rodgers warns.

"You can find magnesium in foods such as dark chocolate, pumpkin seeds, cashews, spinach, almonds, bananas, legumes, avocados and whole grains," she adds.