

Nutrition in the Over-50s

NUTRITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

The over-50 age group can broadly be split into three categories: the over-50s; the young elderly (65 to 74); and the older elderly (75 and over).

NUTRITIONAL REQUIREMENTS

Energy requirements decline with age, particularly if physical activity is restricted. However, requirements for protein, vitamins and minerals remain the same, so it's imperative that food choices are nutritionally dense, supplying a rich supply of nutrients in a small volume.

- **Fat**-Advice to restrict fat intakes, particularly saturated fat (animal fats) for cardiovascular health, remains true for elderly people who are fit and well. Above the age of 75, fat restrictions are less likely to be beneficial. Fat restriction is definitely not appropriate for those who are frail, have suffered weight loss, or have a very small appetite. In these situations additional fat may be used to increase the calories in meals and snacks to aid weight gain.

- **Fibre**-Many elderly people suffer from constipation and bowel problems mainly due to a reduced gut motility and inactivity. To help this, the consumption of cereal foods, fruit and vegetables should be encouraged. Raw bran and excessive amounts of very high-fibre foods are not the answer as they are too bulky and may interfere with the absorption of certain nutrients. To help the gut work properly it's also important to drink plenty of fluid, approximately eight glasses a day.

- **Sugar**-Many elderly people have high sugar intakes; whether this is an issue rather depends on the quality of the rest of the diet. If the rest of the diet contains lots of foods from the main food groups, there's no reason to limit these foods. If weight loss has occurred, these foods may be recommended to meet energy requirements and to aid weight gain.

- **Iron**-Anaemia is common in this age group. Poor absorption, the use of certain drugs and blood loss together with a poor dietary intake may be causal factors. Make sure that iron intakes are met by having red meat and non-meat sources (fortified cereals, dried fruit, pulses and green leafy vegetables) every day. Absorption is maximised by consuming vitamin C-rich foods at the same time.

- **Zinc**-Zinc is needed for a healthy immune system and to help with wound healing, such as pressure ulcers. Rich sources include meat, pulses, wholemeal bread and shellfish.

- **Calcium**-Adequate intakes of calcium help to slow the rate of calcium loss from bones, which starts at the age of 30 and accelerates considerably in later years. Calcium-rich foods (milk and dairy foods) should be eaten every day.

- **Vitamin D**-Vitamin D is needed for calcium metabolism and its deficiency in elderly people can lead to bone softening and distortion. Many elderly people also have limited exposure to sunlight (this vitamin can be made through the action of sunlight on the skin). As a sensible precaution during the winter months, or if housebound, take a vitamin D supplement (*10mcg* a day).

- **B vitamins**- Intake of B vitamins may be low in this age group if appetite is poor and the diet isn't rich in vitamins and minerals. To help prevent this, foods such as such as potatoes, bananas, lentils, chile peppers, liver oil, liver, turkey, brewer's yeast and molasses are high in B vitamins. B vitamins are important for releasing energy and for the central nervous system. Whelehans Traditional Tonic is also high in all the B vitamins making it an excellent source of energy.