

WASHINGTON FOOD COALITION

Senior Nutrition Toolkit



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Dietary Guidelines for Seniors

Aging populations have unique nutritional needs shaped by a variety of factors. Meeting these needs is important for promoting healthy aging and maintaining overall health.

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA), updated approximately every five years, offers nutrition and physical activity recommendations for older adults and is a great tool to reference for general dietary information. These guidelines highlight the importance of a healthy dietary pattern, including balanced meals, nutrient-dense foods, and proper hydration to help manage common chronic conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, and heart disease.



Nutrition Guidance

- Eat adequate protein (beans, nuts, peas, lentils, seafood, lean meats, low-fat dairy and fortified soy alternatives) to maintain muscle mass and prevent muscle loss
- Drink plenty of water even when you are not thirsty (our sense of thirst weakens as we age)
- Choose foods that are low in salt, added sugars, and saturated fats
- Eat a variety of foods from each food group to maximize nutrition
- Pay attention to which foods contain nutrients, vitamins and minerals that are important for aging adults (Vitamin D, calcium, Vitamin B12, potassium and fiber)
- Maintain an active lifestyle

Links to Learn More

- *MyPlate for Older Adults*
- *Build a Healthy Eating Routine*
- *DGA for Older Adults (135)*



Key Nutrients for Seniors

There are a number of nutrients that are important to be aware of when providing food to seniors. The vitamins and minerals listed below are not a complete list, but rather nutrients that seniors may be more likely to have difficulty consuming enough of, for a variety of reasons. Older adults may also have lower calorie needs, while they also may require more of specific nutrients such as those listed here. As with other nutrition information provided in this guide, it is important to keep individual circumstances in mind and avoid generalizing to your population's needs.

Vitamin B12

Seniors have a particularly hard time absorbing Vitamin B12. Due to a decrease in stomach acid as we age, our bodies don't absorb this vitamin from food as well, and supplementation may be needed. Some medications can interfere with absorption of Vitamin B12.

As always, it is important to speak to a medical provider to determine if supplementation is needed. Vitamin B12 helps our bodies with a number of tasks such as nerve cell function; all cells in our bodies need Vitamin B12 in adequate amounts to function well.

Vitamin B12 is found in animal foods so vegans/vegetarians need to pay special attention to getting enough.

Foods with Vitamin B12:

- Eggs
- Fish and meat
- Dairy products
- Clams, oysters and liver
- Nutritional Yeast (fortified)
- Fortified foods like breakfast cereals

Vitamin D

This nutrient helps keep bones strong and our brain functioning well. While our bodies can produce Vitamin D naturally from the sun, in northern parts of the world including Washington State, it is often challenging to get enough sun to produce the amount of Vitamin D we need, especially for those with darker skin and for older adults. Most foods do not naturally have much Vitamin D, unless they are fortified with it, so it can be difficult to get it from food alone. Many people take supplements to ensure they are getting enough Vitamin D, and it is important to ask a medical provider if supplementation is needed.

Foods with Vitamin D:

- Fortified breakfast cereals
- Fortified milk & non-dairy milk
- Fatty fish such as salmon, mackerel, sardines, tuna and trout

Calcium

Calcium helps strengthen our bones and teeth, and is most easily absorbed with Vitamin D. Calcium is found in dairy products, as well as leafy green vegetables, so even people who do not

consume dairy can incorporate calcium in their diets from other foods. Although it is important for children, it is also important for older adults to consume foods that contain calcium.

Foods with Calcium:

- Dairy products
- Canned fish with bones
- Fortified milk alternatives (soy milk and tofu made with calcium sulfate)
- Leafy greens (spinach, mustard greens, kale, collard greens)

Potassium

Many older adults are not consuming enough potassium. Potassium helps to balance sodium in our bodies, it helps nerves and muscles work properly, and it helps kidneys function well.

However, potassium in high quantities can be dangerous for some people, including people with chronic kidney disease and people taking medications that interact with potassium. It is important to speak with a healthcare provider about potassium needs.

Foods with Potassium:

- Milk, yogurt
- Beans, nuts and lentils
- Meat, poultry and fish
- Oranges, bananas, raisins, potatoes, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, yams, melons, squash, and dark leafy green vegetables

- ***Dietary Supplement Facts***
- ***Select Nutrients Sources***

Food Suggestions for Seniors

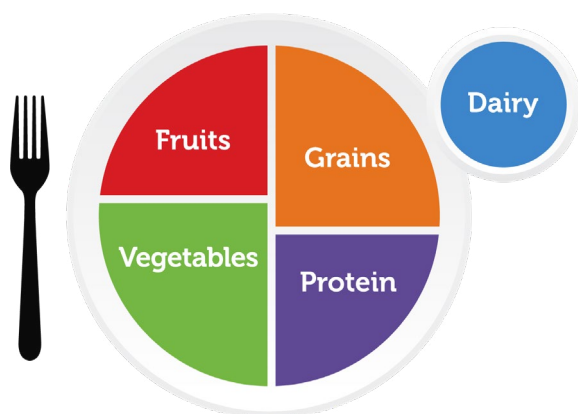
In general, there are no right, wrong, good or bad foods. It is important to keep in mind that different cultures and ethnic groups have different food preferences; knowing the community you serve and learning about their food needs is critically important to ensuring you are providing foods they will enjoy. However, there are certain foods that are recommended for older populations because this group often experiences more health problems. They also often have nutritional risks that impact their ability to eat a variety of nutrient rich foods. This means that it is important to offer foods that can help support good health and wellbeing.

Meal Planning

The MyPlate method of meal planning may provide helpful guidance around portion sizes and food groups for seniors. There are several more culturally appropriate heritage diet food pyramids for different cultural groups. These tools can help determine how much of each food group to include at a meal or throughout the day.

Balance and Variety

It is important for everyone, including seniors, to eat a variety of different foods. Fruits, vegetables, whole grains, animal proteins like seafood and chicken as well as plant proteins like beans, lentils, tofu and peanut butter can all be a part of a balanced diet. Low or nonfat dairy foods can be included for some populations as well as non-dairy foods and calcium fortified foods. The following examples are foods that may be helpful for the senior population you serve.



Links to Learn More

- [*Explore Heritage Diets*](#)
- [*Eat Healthy with MyPlate*](#)
- [*Meal Planning Tips*](#)

FOOD TYPE	EXAMPLES
Protein Rich	• Lean animal meats, seafood and eggs • Plant Proteins: beans, lentils, nuts and seeds • Dairy: milk, cottage cheese & protein-rich yogurt
No Sodium or Low Sodium	• Whole vegetables or canned/frozen/packaged vegetables without added salt • Foods labeled “reduced sodium” or “low sodium” TIP: Rinsing canned vegetables and beans can help reduce salt content.
High-Fiber	• Whole Grains: oats, brown rice, corn tortillas, bulgur, quinoa (<i>plus foods with “whole wheat” or “whole grain” listed at the top of ingredients</i>) • Beans, lentils, nuts, seeds, fruits, & vegetables TIP: Fiber-rich foods support digestion and prevent constipation. Drink plenty of water with high fiber foods.
Calcium and Vitamin D-rich	• Canned salmon and sardines • Fortified cereals, dairy products and fortified dairy alternatives like soy milk • Dark leafy greens: collard greens, mustard greens, spinach or bok choy
No or Low Added Sugar	• Whole fruit • Canned/frozen/packaged fruit without added sweeteners, packed in water, or 100% fruit juice • Unsweetened drinks (water or 100% fruit juice)

Eating Together

[Link to Learn More
MyPlate for Older Adults](#)



The seniors you serve may be experiencing social isolation, loneliness or sadness. They may not want to talk about these feelings due to stigma, lack of awareness, or personal privacy. Social isolation can worsen existing health conditions and lead to other risk factors (such as depression) which can contribute to malnutrition. Eating meals with others

can help decrease these feelings while improving overall health. Sharing meals with others can increase social connectedness, happiness, enjoyment of food and is one way to help seniors thrive. To find out about congregating dining opportunities near you, go to the *Senior Congregate Dining* section of this guide.

Nutrition Risk Factors for Seniors

There are a host of nutritional risk factors for seniors, all of which are important to be aware of when providing food for this population. Risk factors can lead to malnutrition, worsening of medical conditions, increased risk of falling or development of new medical problems and other poor health outcomes that can reduce lifespan.

Screening for these and other nutritional risks should be performed by a registered dietitian nutritionist or other trained medical professional. Nonetheless, increasing your awareness of the numerous challenging risk factors that exist is important.

Links to Learn More

- *Healthy Aging Food Choices*

Risk Factors

- Cancer
- Diabetes
- Decreased appetite
- Sarcopenia (muscle loss)
- Oral health problems
- Heart Disease
- Social isolation
- Food insecurity
- Cognitive impairment
- Mental health problems
- Food/medication interactions
- Decreased physical activity
- Osteoporosis/osteopenia

Blood Pressure & Nutritional Needs for Seniors

Overview

High blood pressure (hypertension) is a very common condition among seniors. It can increase the risk of heart disease and stroke, and it is often undiagnosed. A proper diet can help manage blood pressure effectively.



Key Recommendations

- Offer low-sodium foods (fruits, vegetables, and whole grains)
- Provide potassium-rich foods (bananas, oranges, spinach, or potatoes) to balance out sodium levels

Foods to Reduce

- Sugary drinks and desserts
- High saturated fats like meat and full-fat dairy
- High sodium canned or instant soups, canned or frozen meals, deli meats, and salty snacks

Tools for Food Pantries

- Offer low-sodium foods like canned vegetables labeled “no salt added” or “low sodium” - otherwise, encourage clients to rinse them to reduce salt intake
- Offer fresh produce and whole grains that reflect the cultural diversity of those you serve
- Educate seniors on using the **Nutrition Facts Label** to monitor sodium intake

Links to Learn More

- *Hypertension*
- *DASH Diet Information*
- *High Blood Pressure Foods*
- *Preventing Hypertension*

Diabetes & Nutritional Needs for Seniors

Overview

Diabetes is a chronic condition that interferes with how the body processes carbohydrates. The nutritional needs for seniors living with diabetes vary from person to person and many people living with diabetes are still able to eat most of the foods they love, while managing their diabetes quite well.

However, it is important that blood sugar is in a healthy range, which is different for each person, and should be managed by a medical provider. Managing diabetes requires balanced meals to stabilize blood sugar levels and prevent complications.



Key Recommendations

- High-fiber foods (whole grains, vegetables, fruits and legumes)
- Lean proteins (chicken, fish, beans) to build muscle without spiking blood sugar

Foods to Reduce

- High-sodium foods
- Sugary snacks and refined or simple carbohydrates

Tools for Food Pantries

- Provide diabetic-friendly food options (whole grains, lean proteins, vegetables, and low-sugar snacks)
- Share portion control guides and meal planning handouts for your senior population

Links to Learn More

- *Meal Planning*
- *Diabetes Food Hub*
- *Food and Blood Glucose*
- *CDC Diabetes Index*

Prediabetes & Nutritional Needs for Seniors

Overview

Prediabetes often goes undetected. Being screened early and often is critical because, if prediabetes is detected, it can be reversed. A healthy diet and regular physical activity can prevent or delay the onset of diabetes in seniors with prediabetes. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has a National Diabetes Prevention Program that is evidence based and proven to help delay the development of diabetes through lifestyle modifications.



Key Recommendations

- High-fiber foods like whole grains, vegetables, and legumes
- Lean proteins
- Healthy fats

Foods to Reduce

- Foods high in saturated fats
- Added sugars, refined carbohydrates, and sugary drinks

Tools for Food Pantries

- Offer foods like whole grains, vegetables, fruits and lean proteins
- Educate seniors on portion size recommendations

Links to Learn More

- [*FDA Guide for Prediabetes*](#)
- [*Learn About Diabetes Prevention*](#)

Soft Chew Foods for Seniors with Oral Health Challenges

Overview

Seniors often experience difficulty chewing food because of tooth or denture problems. Additionally, some seniors have difficulty swallowing (this is called dysphagia).

These challenges can impact their ability to get adequate nutrition through the food they eat. It can be helpful to offer food choices that are easy to chew and swallow.

It is also important to encourage seniors to talk to their medical provider about these problems and, if they do wear dentures, to see their dentist to make sure their dentures fit correctly.



Key Recommendations

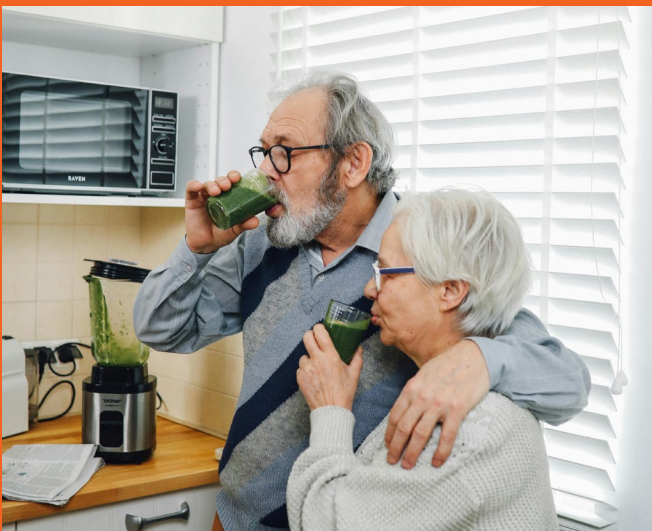
- Soft/easy to chew vegetables, pureed soups, yogurt, eggs
- Foods used in smoothies
- Dysphagia diets with nutrient-dense, texture-modified meals

Tools for Food Pantries

- Provide soft food or foods that can be cooked & mashed (potatoes or beans, pureed soups, and yogurt)
- Offer soft pre-cooked or ready-to-eat options for convenience

Links to Learn More

- *Soft Foods for Older Adults*



Physical Activity/Mobility

Physical activity is important throughout our lives, but often needs modification as we age, to accommodate medical conditions, mobility changes and environmental factors. Decreased mobility among seniors can seriously impact their nutrition needs and requirements. Less activity can lead to decreases in appetite, digestive difficulties, social isolation, increased fall risks, and more. Restricted mobility can also impede food pantry access.

It is important to make your pantry accessible by having support railings throughout your space, offering assistance to those with limited mobility, and giving seniors the space and time they need to shop or access food. Maintaining physical activity contributes to better overall independence and a healthy lifestyle.



The National Institute on Aging has some instructional suggestions for how to incorporate endurance exercises, flexibility, strength, and balance into daily routines in safe and practical ways.

These recommendations enable older adults to lead active lifestyles that enhance their mobility, reduce their risk of falling, and enable them to continue to participate in social activities.

Links to Learn More

- *Exercise & Physical Activity*
- *Physical Activity Guidelines*
- *Strength Training, Balance & Flexibility Exercises*

Conditions Affecting Caloric Needs

Neurological disorders and conditions like Parkinson's disease can increase caloric needs because they can cause an increase in muscle movement. It is especially important that seniors living with these diseases consume nutrient dense foods that provide enough energy without adding extra sodium, sugars, or unhealthy fats. A sample menu for these conditions would likely include lean protein sources, whole grains, and plenty of fruits and vegetables to help maintain overall health, brain function and energy levels. Customized meal plans developed by registered dietitian nutritionists can also be very helpful because they will account for challenges such as fatigue, drug interactions and meal preparation/feeding difficulty.

Many other medical conditions including stroke, arthritis, cancer, COPD, congestive heart failure and thyroid conditions can impact calorie and nutrient needs in elderly populations. It can mean seniors have more difficulty opening jars or other

containers, cutting large/hard pieces of fruit or vegetables, or self-feeding using standard utensils.

It is important to offer a variety of nutrient rich foods to meet the diverse food needs of those living with these conditions. However, the average food pantry does not have the capacity to complete a nutrition assessment and offer a tailored food intervention; these need to be conducted by trained health professionals. Registered dietitian nutritionists are trained to conduct nutrition assessments, diagnose nutrient risks or deficits, and offer individualized medical nutrition therapy.

For more information about these and other resources for your senior guests, go to *Services and Nutrition Support Available for Seniors in Washington State*. Many of these programs offer medical screenings and and referrals to nutrition experts.

Links to Learn More

- ***Diet for COPD***
- ***Diet for Parkinson's***



Culturally Specific Food Services & Resources

To effectively address nutritional needs for older adults, services and provisions must be culturally appropriate, offered in the primary languages spoken by customers, and acknowledge and respect their traditional dietary habits and food preferences. Implementing best practices will increase your program's ability to serve people from diverse cultural backgrounds and improve their overall health and wellbeing.

One of the most important practices for food pantries is to administer a customer survey on at least an annual basis. Surveys should be conducted in customer's preferred language and gather information about their cultural food needs. Consider offering some kind of compensation to those who complete surveys such as a gift card or cash incentive.

Tips for Serving Culturally Diverse Customers

- Offer Fresh Produce - which is often preferred to canned, frozen or packaged produce
- Herbs & Spices - Home cooking may be preferred by the those you serve, so including herbs and spices used in traditional recipes is important

Several useful resources have been developed to help pantries implement best practices including **Cultural Relevance Toolkit for Food Pantries** developed by Virginia Mason Franciscan Health. This toolkit includes recommendations for adapting your program to welcome diverse cultures.

The Food Bank of the Rockies has a **Culturally Responsive Food Initiative** that includes consolidated lists of food preferences from hundreds of individuals representing over a dozen cultural groups.

El Centro de la Raza in Seattle serves community meals that integrate Latinx culinary traditions with educational workshops on healthy eating.

The Latino Community Fund of Washington invests in programs that improve the quality of life in Latinx communities through health education and resources for aging.

Mi Centro in Tacoma uses education, crisis intervention, and cultural advocacy to serve the needs of Latino and Indigenous Native families. Seniors using their services can enjoy traditional foods that meet dietary guidelines and use traditional ingredients.

The Washington State Commission on Hispanic Affairs provides relevant information supporting caregivers and food pantries that meet the cultural competencies in nutrition for the Latinx senior population.

Alimentando al Pueblo offers culturally relevant food and resources to support Latinx communities in south King County.

EthnoMed is a database that provides cultural and medical education and resources to providers/caregivers as well as patients to enhance cross-cultural communications.

The National Asian Pacific Center on Aging is a non-profit organization dedicated to improving the standard of living of Asian American and Pacific Islander seniors.

Services & Nutrition Support Available for Washington State Seniors

Meals on Wheels Overview

Meals on Wheels delivers nutritious meals to homebound seniors who are unable to prepare food due to physical or health limitations.

The program fosters independence and provides regular wellness checks during delivery visits.



Key Benefits

- Provides meals that are balanced and ready-to-eat
- Offers social interaction through delivery personnel
- Supports senior's independence at home

Eligibility Criteria

- Age 60 or older
- Homebound or facing meal prep challenges

How to Connect

Find local programs at [**Meals on Wheels America**](#)

King County residents can contact Sound Generations
Phone: 302-656-3257

[**Website: Sound Generations**](#)

Senior Nutrition Program



Overview

The Senior Nutrition Program supports meal services for adults aged 60+ in both community meal settings, such as senior centers, as well as through home-delivery.

Funded through the Aging and Long-Term Support Administration (AL TSA) and grants under the Older Americans Act, this program offers vital nutrition services to older adults that aim to reduce food insecurity and malnutrition, promote social interaction, and support overall wellbeing by improving access to other home and community-based services.

Key Benefits

- Encourages socialization among seniors
- Offers balanced meals that adhere to dietary guidelines
- Provides nutrition education and wellness activities

Eligibility Criteria

- Age 60 or older.

Links to Learn More

- *WA Association of Area Agencies on Aging*
- *Local Nutrition Services*
- *OAA Nutrition Services Basics*

Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP)

Overview:

SFMNP provides low-income seniors with coupons to purchase fresh fruits, vegetables, honey, and herbs from authorized farmers' markets and roadside stands, enhancing access to nutritious foods, and supporting local agriculture.

Key Benefits

- Supports local farmers and markets
- Encourages consumption of fresh, locally grown produce
- Promotes healthy eating habits and reduces food insecurity among older populations

Eligibility Criteria

- 60 years or older

Residency Criteria

- Must be a Washington State resident.

Links to Learn More

- *Find the Washington State Program*
- *SFMNP Benefits & Eligibility and Authorized Farmers' Markets*



Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP)

Overview:

The Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) aims to improve the health of low-income seniors by supplementing their diets with nutritious foods. Participants receive a monthly food package containing a variety of items, including fruits, vegetables, dairy, and grains.

Key Benefits

- Provides a consistent source of nutritious food
- Helps prevent nutrient deficiencies among seniors
- Offers nutrition education materials to promote healthy eating habits

Eligibility Criteria

- 60 years or older
- Self-declare income of 185% or less of the Federal Poverty Level
- Must verify identity and address

Links to Learn More

- *[National CSFP Website](#)*
- *[Find a CSFP Lead Agency Near You](#)*
- *[Commodity Supplemental Food Program \(CSFP\)](#)*
- *[WA Department of Agriculture's Food Assistance Program](#)*

Home & Community Services (HCS)

Overview

HCS provides Medicaid-funded services to help seniors with daily living activities. These services can include meal preparation, assistance with eating, grocery shopping support, and ensuring seniors maintain proper nutrition while living independently.

Key Benefits

- Supports seniors in maintaining independence at home
- Offers help with meal planning, cooking, and grocery shopping

Eligibility Criteria

- Must be a Washington State resident
- Must qualify for Medicaid

How to Connect

Washington State Department
of Social and Health Services (DSHS)
Phone: 1-800-422-3263

Website: Home & Community Services



Basic Food (SNAP) in WA

Overview

Known as Basic Food in Washington, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) helps low-income individuals and families buy the food they need to prevent hunger and promote healthy nutrition by providing monthly benefits to buy groceries at certified retailers.



Key Benefits

- Assists in purchasing a variety of food items
- Provides financial relief for grocery expenses
- Offers nutrition education resources through SNAP Ed

Eligibility Criteria

- Gross Income of 200% the federal poverty level OR Net Income of 100% or below the federal poverty level
- Food benefits are based on household size and net income
- Must be a Washington State resident

Link to Learn More

- *Apply Online*

