

BRONX VOICE

Food For Thought: As We Age, Rethinking the Way We Eat



By Phyllis Russell, Dietician, VNS Health, Dec 02, 2024

HEALTH - Most of us of a certain age yearn for those days when it seemed possible to eat anything (and everything) you wanted without negative consequences for your health. But as we know, aging comes with many changes, from increased risk for chronic illnesses, to changing the way we budget, to dealing with decreased physical mobility.

One big challenge many older adults face is a need to improve their nutrition, which often includes grappling with habits and root causes limiting their intake of healthy foods.

As a dietician working primarily with older adults in their homes, I regularly observe the truth of the old saying "[food is medicine.](#)" Eating healthier doesn't have to involve overwhelming change—even a few adjustments can help get someone on the right track by encouraging them to adopt healthy habits that impact both their physical and mental health.

Talking to a nutritionist or registered dietician is the best place to start in getting personalized diet guidance. To locate one, you can ask your doctor for a referral, and often health plans and community health providers can assist as well. In the meantime, here are a few healthy eating tips that I hope will inspire!

Little steps, big change

The idea of making dietary changes can elicit a groan or even genuine anxiety, especially when a health care professional says it's important for your physical well-being. But rethinking how you eat doesn't have to be a drag. Begin with some small, manageable changes—switching out your favorite spice mix for a lower-sodium version, for example. Or you might consider eating smaller portions of less-healthy dishes. One effective approach is to have just “a taste” of a favorite less-than-healthy food. You might also think about cutting down on processed meats and sugar-sweetened beverages, [which recent research](#) has shown to be especially harmful to your long-range health. Setting reachable goals is a key to making successful lifestyle changes. If you do this, you'll be surprised how much easier it becomes over time to incorporate positive changes to your diet!

Beyond the “apple a day”

Adding fresh fruits and vegetables to your diet is a terrific way to start down a healthier path. Purple eggplant, orange carrots, leafy greens, blueberries, and [many other veggies/fruit](#) can help prevent diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure and more. I encourage people to think of every plate as a “rainbow.” [MyPlate.gov](#) provides helpful guidance on this. Make sure that you're not just eating more of one vegetable, and try to add a wide variety. One of the easiest ways to introduce more vegetables into your meals is to incorporate healthy soups or try salads with multiple ingredients.

Rethink food prep

As our bodies change over time, it's important to consider ways to make meal prep and cooking easier. For example, if cutting and chopping food becomes difficult, choosing pre-cut frozen food saves you the effort and has the benefit of lasting longer. As physical mobility declines, it can also become harder to make regular grocery trips or cooking meals may no longer be doable. Difficulty chewing, a frequent side effect of chronic illnesses, may also require rethinking the types of food you're eating. Again, a nutritionist or registered dietitian can provide guidance and inspiration in meeting these different challenges. In addition, many community programs [provide free meal delivery for those 60+](#), and local senior centers often offer free or low-cost meals designed for older adults' changing nutritional needs.

Navigating your options

Finding fresh vegetables is often easier said than done. Many people live in “food deserts,” neighborhoods with limited access to well-stocked fresh food, and cost can also be a barrier. But there are ways to get help. The New York State Office of Aging can link you to [resources](#) like lists of food



pantries across the state to coupons for food stands/farmer markets. Many health plans also offer benefits like food allowances, and there are also community centers that can help you apply for benefits like [the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program \(SNAP\)](#).

Change can be difficult—but you're not alone. With help and support, we can all start the journey to healthier eating habits!

Phyllis Russell is a dietitian at the nonprofit home- and community-based health care organization [VNS Health](#). For more information on healthy eating and nutrition, reach out to your physician, health plan, a licensed dietitian, or call 311.

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