

Healthy eating for older adults

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Chicken fried steak might be what you grew up on, but it shouldn't be what you grow old on, two local nutrition experts say.

Katherine Chauncey, a registered dietitian and professor at Texas Tech's Health Sciences Center, said while metabolism slows down in those older than 50 years old, nutritional needs remain the same or even increase.

"By the age of 50 there is typically a 4 to 6 percent decline in our basal metabolic rate, or the calories we expend without doing anything," she said.

Lean (muscle) mass, on the other hand, starts to decrease after age 45 "by about 1 percent per year," she said.

Loss of muscle mass - known medically as sarcopenia - is suffered by 30 percent of those older than 60, Chauncey said, and causes weakness and frailty that can result in a loss of independence, falls or bone fractures.

To compensate, Chauncey recommended foods that are lower in calories and rich in body-building nutrients.

"The quality of food becomes very important," she said.

Staples of a quality diet, Chauncey said, include plenty of fruits and vegetables, and lean meat sources such as fish, poultry and low fat cuts of beef. Those should be supplemented with dairy products, including yogurt and cottage cheese, whole grains, and fats from plant sources, rather than animals.

"There is so much science about the benefits of a diet rich in fruits and vegetables and lean proteins," Chauncey said. "That in itself reduces the risk for obesity, diabetes, heart disease and cancer."

The 411 on healthy foods, however, does not automatically make it easy to eat well here, said Ann Mesaros, regional nutritionist for the Texas Department of State Health Services

"There are a lot of fast food restaurants in Lubbock," said Mesaros. "Sometimes, especially if their kids are leaving home, people might think it is easier and cheaper to eat at a restaurant."

Chances of finding restaurant meals that are 500 calories or less - the intake she recommends for an average meal - are pretty slim, she said.

"Portion sizes have doubled in the last 20 years," Mesaros said of dinner plates that have swelled from 9 inches two decades ago to a hefty 13 inches in many restaurants.

"The brain doesn't always think about being full. We just eat what our eyes see," she said.

When faced with heaping portions, Mesaros recommends sharing with a friend, or asking for a box and dividing a meal into a take-home portion right away.

Eating well at home, Mesaros said, can also be made more cost-effective if people take time out to plan nutritious meals in advance.

"If you don't make plans, it won't show up on your doorstep," said Mesaros, who recommended twice weekly trips to a local farmer's market.

Microwavable bags of veggies - found the supermarket's produce department - are another way people can meet their veggie quota, she said, and some microwave dinners fit the bill for a quick and healthful meal.

"Look for convenience foods with 700 milligrams of sodium, less than 3 grams of fat and more than 3 grams of fiber," Mesaros said.

As well as cutting back on fatty foods, Mesaros and Chauncey said several other nutrients have been implicated in helping keep older adults healthy.

While vitamins and minerals are best obtained from food - where they are absorbed better and found with disease fighting plant phytochemicals - Chauncey said there some exceptions.

Vitamin B-12, vitamin D and calcium, she said, are difficult to obtain in high enough quantities from food, and should be taken in a tablet form.

"An older adult would need to drink more than a quart and a half of milk to get the calcium and vitamin D they need," Chauncey said.

Foods rich in omega-3 fatty acid, such as salmon, walnuts and eggs, should be eaten to ward off inflammation and arthritis, Mesaros said.

The two experts both recommended all adults drink at least eight glasses of fluids - including milk and fruit juice - a day, and keep up with regular physical activities.

"There's no magic bullet," said Chauncey, adding, "people of any age can make great improvements by changing their diet and by exercising."

"I see people every day who have made the change. They tell me they feel better now than they did in their younger years," she said.