



What we eat shapes how we think, feel, and function - at every age

Nutrition in later life is not about dieting or deprivation. It is about giving the body and brain what they need to keep doing what you ask of them.

And yet, for many older adults, eating well quietly becomes harder - not through any lack of willpower, but because life changes in ways that affect how, when, and why we eat.

This factsheet looks at what those changes are, why they matter, and what genuinely helps.

How Nutrition Needs Change as We Age

Our bodies change in ways that directly affect nutrition, and understanding this removes a lot of unnecessary guilt and confusion.

We Need Fewer Calories - But More Nutrients

Metabolism slows and muscle mass declines, so energy requirements drop. But the need for vitamins, minerals, and protein stays the same, or increases.

This means the quality of what we eat matters more than ever. Every meal counts a little more.

Appetite Can Decrease

Reduced sense of smell and taste, medications, dental issues, and lower activity levels can all suppress appetite.

Eating less is common, but eating less of the right things can lead to deficiencies that affect energy, mood, and immunity.

Absorption Changes

The body becomes less efficient at absorbing certain nutrients - particularly vitamin B12, calcium, and vitamin D.

This is why older adults often need more of these nutrients, even if their diet seems adequate on paper.

Thirst Signals Weaken

The sensation of thirst diminishes significantly with age. Many older adults are mildly dehydrated without realising it.

Dehydration affects concentration, mood, kidney function, and can worsen constipation and urinary tract infections.



Key Nutrients for Later Life

Nutrient	Why It Matters in Later Life	Good Sources
Protein	Preserves muscle mass, which declines with age. Supports immunity and wound healing.	Eggs, fish, chicken, legumes, dairy, nuts
Calcium & Vitamin D	Bone strength and fracture prevention. Vitamin D also supports mood and immunity.	Dairy, leafy greens, oily fish, sunlight
Fibre	Gut health, bowel regularity, and reducing cholesterol and blood sugar.	Wholegrains, vegetables, fruit, legumes
Omega-3 fats	Brain health, reducing inflammation, and supporting heart and joint health.	Oily fish, walnuts, flaxseed, chia seeds
B Vitamins	Energy, nerve function, and reducing dementia risk (especially B12, folate).	Meat, eggs, dairy, fortified cereals, leafy greens
Water	Thirst sensation diminishes with age, dehydration is common and often unrecognised.	Water, herbal tea, soups, fruit and vegetables

What Gets in the Way of Eating Well

Poor nutrition in later life is rarely about not knowing what to eat. It is usually about circumstances.

- **Living alone** - cooking for one can feel pointless, and motivation to prepare a proper meal drops.
- **Bereavement** - losing a partner who did the cooking, or loss of appetite through grief.
- **Reduced mobility** - difficulty shopping, standing at a stove, or opening packaging.
- **Fixed income** - cost concerns leading to cheaper, less nutritious food choices.
- **Medications** - some affect appetite, taste, or nutrient absorption.
- **Social isolation** - eating alone is associated with poorer dietary quality and less enjoyment of food.
- **Dental issues** - pain or poorly fitting dentures making certain foods difficult or unpleasant.

If you recognise any of these, you are not alone - and they are all worth addressing.

The Gut-Brain Connection

One of the most exciting areas of recent nutrition science is the relationship between gut health and mental wellbeing.

Around 90% of the body's serotonin, the neurochemical most associated with mood stability and calm, is produced in the gut. A healthy, diverse gut microbiome supports better mood, lower anxiety, and improved cognitive function.

What you eat is not just about your body. It is directly shaping your mood, your energy, and your resilience.

The foods that most support gut health are simple and affordable:

- **Fermented foods** - yoghurt, kefir, sauerkraut
- **High-fibre foods** - vegetables, fruit, legumes, wholegrains
- **A variety of plant foods** - aim for as many different vegetables and fruits as possible across the week
- **Limit ultra-processed foods** - these disrupt the gut microbiome

Simple, Practical Steps

Making Eating Easier

- **Keep it simple.** Nutritious does not have to mean complicated. Eggs on toast, tinned fish, yoghurt and fruit — all excellent.
- **Batch cook.** Make larger amounts when energy is good and freeze portions for harder days.
- **Keep healthy staples on hand.** Tinned beans, frozen vegetables, eggs, oats, and nuts are affordable, nutritious, and easy.
- **Eat with others when you can.** Social eating improves appetite, enjoyment, and dietary quality.
- **Drink water regularly.** Set a reminder if needed. Aim for 6-8 glasses a day.

When to Get Extra Support

- **Unintentional weight loss** - speak to your GP. It is always worth investigating.
- **Persistent fatigue or low mood** - ask your doctor to check B12, iron, and vitamin D levels.
- **Difficulty shopping or cooking** - community services, meal delivery programs, and home help are available and worth using.
- **Loss of appetite lasting more than a few weeks** - this warrants a conversation with your GP or a dietitian.

A referral to an Accredited Practising Dietitian is available through your GP and is often Medicare-subsidised.

A Note for Lions Clubs

Clubs are in a unique position to support members' nutrition, simply by creating opportunities to eat together.

A shared meal before or after a meeting, a morning tea, a community BBQ — these are not just social events. For members who live alone or rarely cook properly for themselves, they can be genuinely nourishing in every sense.

The table is one of the oldest places of connection. It still is.



A Moment to Reflect

How would you honestly describe your eating at the moment?

Is there a barrier — practical, emotional, or social — that is getting in the way?

Is there one small change you could make this week — not a diet, just one thing?



Eating well is an act of looking after yourself. And you are worth looking after.

Thriving Members. Thriving Clubs.

An Australian Lions Wellbeing Foundation Initiative alwf.org.au/tmtc

Created in Partnership with Andrew Fuller - Clinical Psychologist, Family Therapist & Author andrewfuller.com.au

Wellbeing Series:

Social Connection | Anxiety | Tricky Conversations | Identity | Motivation | Sleep | Movement | Nutrition |

