

# Chapter 6

## NO BODY'S PERFECT

What should I eat if I am ...

Overweight, underweight, constipated, depressed, anemic, or allergic to certain foods.





## CHAPTER 6 NO BODY'S PERFECT

Your body changes as you age. These changes can affect your mental and physical health, as well as your weight, in ways you never expected.

Canada's Food Guide (Appendix B) is a solid basis for eating well as you age. It is also the foundation for preventing or dealing with some of the problems associated with age, such as putting on weight, losing weight and dealing with constipation, depression and anemia.

This chapter provides general guidelines only. For more detailed information, talk to your doctor and a dietitian. (Try Dial-A-Dietitian. See the back cover for contact information.)

### What should I eat if I am overweight?

A healthy weight is key to healthy aging. Yet research shows that seniors are more likely to be overweight or obese than younger adults, for a variety of reasons.

You might put on weight because:

- You consume too many calories. You may be eating out a lot, eating servings that are too large, snacking too often on high-fat foods or consuming drinks that contain a lot of sugar.
- You are not active enough and inactive people are more likely to carry more body fat. You may be inactive because you have a chronic illness or because your medications make you feel tired, or because you simply feel that now is your time to relax.
- You are losing muscle and gaining fat as your metabolism slows down. As you move toward 60, the amount of muscle in your body will naturally drop. By age 70, a typical woman has lost about 11 pounds of muscle and a typical man has lost about 26 pounds. Because muscle helps burn calories, you will find that it's harder to burn off what you eat. At the same

time, your body needs fewer calories the older you get, even if you are active. (Strength training is key to preventing further muscle loss.)

- You eat to help cope with your emotions or problems in your day-to-day life, or because you're sad or lonely, angry or bored. As a senior, you may have lost some of the people you love and, if you have a medical problem as well, life can get very difficult. As a result, you may turn to your comfort foods, which tend to be higher in fat and sugar, instead of talking to a friend or going for a walk.

See Appendix C for two easy methods to tell if your weight is healthy: the body mass index and the waist circumference test.

If these tests indicate that you are overweight, talk to your doctor and a dietitian. Your doctor can help assess whether your weight gain is due to factors other than eating too much, such as your medications or fluid retention. A dietitian can help you develop a plan for eating that is tailored to you – to what you like to eat, your age and activity level. (Try Dial-A-Dietitian. See the back cover for contact information.)

If you decide you need to change your weight, keep the following in mind:

Be realistic

Losing weight is not easy and it takes time, so don't expect miracles. A crash diet may work for the short term, but the weight will come back almost immediately. A weight loss of about half-a-pound a week or two pounds a month is healthy and realistic.

Remember: your goal is not to be thin. It is to be healthy and fit.

A realistic goal for you may be to simply hold the line and maintain your weight where it is now, rather than to lose weight.

Try to make just one simple but healthy change at a time, like switching to one percent milk or walking to the corner store instead of driving.



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### Variety is key

If you eat a variety of different foods, you won't feel bored or deprived and you are more likely to get all the nutrients you need.

Try to include at least three of the four food groups in Canada's Food Guide (vegetables and fruit, grains, milk and milk alternatives, meat and meat alternatives) at every meal. Your snacks should be healthy, too.

### Eat breakfast

Eating breakfast is one of the most important things you can do to lose weight.

During the night, your metabolism slows down. Eating a balanced breakfast – such as high-fibre cereal, fruit and milk – helps to kick-start your body in the morning and it will burn fuel more efficiently throughout the day.

### Plan your meals around high-fibre foods

You will feel less hungry if you eat more vegetables, fruit, legumes (such as beans, lentils and chickpeas), and whole grains. Always eat three meals a day. When you skip meals, you tend to eat more at the next meal or snack too often.

### Watch your fats

Because you need some fat to stay healthy, make sure you choose healthy fats instead of unhealthy fats.

Unhealthy fats are saturated and

### Just a few calories less a day ...

To maintain your weight, you need to burn up as many calories as you take in. Just a few extra calories a day can tip the balance.

For example, an extra 100 calories a day adds up to 10 pounds of extra weight by the end of a year. That's a slice of bread and margarine, one scoop of ice cream or one can of pop a day.

But if you can cut out those extra calories, or do more to burn them up, there's no reason you can't maintain your weight or even lose a few pounds.

trans fats. Healthy fats include monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats. They can actually reduce your cholesterol levels and your risk for heart disease and stroke. Healthy fats are found in vegetable oils, fish, nuts and seeds; however, because nuts and seeds are also high in calories, eat them in small amounts.

(See Chapter 3 for more about healthy and unhealthy fats and tips on reducing fat.)

Clear out your cupboards

Make the healthy choice the easy choice.

Make sure you only have healthy food choices in your cupboards and your fridge. If it's not there, you won't eat it.

Fresh fruit, hard-boiled eggs, cut-up veggies and canned tuna are all great foods to keep around. So are dried fruits, such as raisins or cranberries, but eat them in small amounts.

Also see our list of essentials for your shelves in Chapter 7. With these supplies, you'll be able to eat well and make all the low-fat, great taste recipes we've included in Chapter 11.

Control your servings

Most people underestimate how much they eat in a day by as much as one-third. Canada's Food Guide provides clear information about how much food equals one Food Guide Serving for each of the four major food groups.

For example, one serving of fresh vegetables equals a half a cup (125 mL) of broccoli, one serving of grains equals a half a cup (125 mL) of brown rice or pasta, one serving of meat is two-and-a-half ounces (75 g) of lean beef, and so on.

Choose your fluids wisely

What you drink can be just as important as what you eat. Just one soft drink a day can add up to 10 pounds a year.

Regular soft drinks, fruit juice and alcohol are all high in calories (soft drinks, especially, can also contribute to tooth decay). Even coffee and tea can be full of calories if you add sugar, cream or whole milk. And fancy coffees, such as flavoured lattes and cappuccinos, can be as calorie-rich as a slice of cake.

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### All of a sudden



A couple of years ago, Beth Descoteux of Penticton, B.C., was working 60 to 80 hours a week, with no time to cook or eat properly – until she got one of the biggest shocks of her life.

“All of a sudden, you’re 270 pounds,” she says, “and you don’t even know how it happened.”

Now 59, Beth realized that something had to change. She cut back on her hours – she works only 40 hours a week today – and she completely changed her lifestyle. “I had to learn to make the time to eat properly and to exercise, and it’s the best thing I’ve ever done,” says Beth.

Now 220 pounds, Beth “does nothing to excess. I wanted a way of eating that I could follow for years, not a fad diet,” she says. “No quick meals unless it’s veggies, less meat, lots of fruit, small portions. The result is that I’ve lost weight without being conscious I’m dieting – and it’s made a tremendous difference. I feel better all the time. Even my fibromyalgia is better.”

### Watch out!

If you have lost a significant amount of weight in the last three to six months, see your doctor right away.

Remember: experts now recommend that women drink about nine 8-ounce glasses (2.2 litres) of fluids and men about 12 8-ounce glasses (three litres) of fluid a day. (See Chapter 3 for more about fluids and their role in your good health.)

### Move your body

Eating is pleasurable, but other things can be just as fun, like walking around the neighbourhood after dinner or playing a game with your grandchildren.

If you plan to change your weight, how you do it is important. You do not want to lose muscle or bone mass, because these are vital for all your daily activities – like carrying in the groceries or picking up a grandchild.

Follow a weight-loss program that includes activities designed to preserve muscle mass as well as strength and flexibility. Remember that physical activity does not have to be hard or exhausting. Gardening, dancing, walking, lawn bowling, household chores and even grocery shopping can give you the activity you need. (See Chapter 3, *Where does exercise fit?*, for more information.)

### Be of good cheer

Losing just a little weight can make a huge difference. For example, just losing five to 10 percent of your body weight – that's just 10 to 20 pounds if you weigh 200 pounds – can significantly reduce your risk of diabetes, heart disease and high blood pressure. Weight loss can also help you manage these diseases better and make you feel more energetic.

### What should I eat if I am underweight?

Being underweight can be just as dangerous as being overweight. Being underweight can cause:

- poor memory and confusion
- a decrease in the body's ability to resist food-borne illnesses (see Chapter 9), colds, the flu and pneumonia
- osteoporosis (bone loss)
- decreased muscle strength and the ability to do simple things like walk or sit up straight, and
- hypothermia (low body temperature)



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You, like many people, may lose weight as you age. This happens for a variety of reasons. You may simply not want to cook any more, or you may feel too tired to shop or prepare food, or you may be on a restricted income that does not allow for enough healthy food. You may also be depressed or lonely, which can lead to poor appetite, or you may be finding it difficult to chew or swallow. Some medications, too, can lead to weight loss, as can too much alcohol. Or food may simply not taste as good to you as it used to.

But not eating enough can be the beginning of a vicious cycle. You don't feel particularly well, so you don't eat. You don't eat, so you feel worse.

To help you determine whether you weigh less than you should, see Appendix C for the body mass index chart. If you are underweight, talk to your doctor and dietitian about healthy ways to gain weight. (Try Dial-A-Dietitian. See the back cover for contact information.)

To gain weight, try also to:

Consume more calories

You need to eat more, but make sure the extra calories you add come from healthy foods.

Add high-calorie snacks between meals. For example, spread peanut butter on whole wheat toast or crackers or on sliced apple or banana. Try mixing milk, low-fat milk powder, frozen yogurt and bananas or strawberries in a blender for a high-protein, high-carbohydrate drink. Or have a bowl of cereal with milk and raisins.

You might also want to try a liquid nutritional supplement, also called a "meal replacement drink" by some manufacturers. These are milkshake-like drinks that you can buy in grocery or drug stores. While they can help supply your body with missing nutrients, they do not provide enough energy and protein to

actually replace a meal – they are for snacks only!

To add calories to meals, sprinkle nuts or wheatgerm on yogurt, fruit or cereal; add extra egg whites to scrambled eggs and omelettes; and melt cheese on toast or add it to sandwiches, vegetables, soups, brown rice and whole grain pasta.

Pack in the protein

Protein is crucial for your body to retain lean muscle and keep your heart and other muscles working efficiently.

Eat as much meat, fish, chicken, turkey, milk and milk alternatives, nuts and nut butters, legumes (such as beans and lentils) and soy foods (such as tofu) as you can.

Spice up your food

Nothing can kill an appetite like bland food. Try using lemon juice, herbs and spices, such as black pepper, garlic powder, curry powder, cumin, dill seeds, basil, ginger, coriander and onion, to make your food more interesting.

Drink fluids between meals, rather than with them

Fluids such as water, tea, coffee or juice can make you feel full faster if you drink them with your meals. Try to drink between meals so you have more room for food.

Make meals social events

Invite a friend over or set a regular “eat out” date and always ask to take home any extra food.

Get out and move

Physical activity stimulates the appetite, lessens depression and strengthens bones and muscles.

Check into Meals on Wheels

Most communities have a Meals on Wheels or other meal delivery service. If you just cannot prepare healthy meals for yourself any more, call them. Your doctor will have the number, or look in your local telephone book for the number of your local health authority. They can tell you about local services.

There are also a number of healthy frozen meals available at your local grocery store. (See Chapter 7 for information on convenience foods and reading labels to make sure you make healthy choices.)



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### What should I eat if I am constipated?

Your mother may have told you that you have to have a bowel movement every day. It's not true. For some people, it's normal to have three bowel movements a day, while for others it's normal to have three bowel movements a week. Changes in your normal pattern may mean you are constipated.

Constipation takes different forms with different people. You may experience it as having no bowel movement for several days, or having stools that are hard to pass, or not feeling like you are able to empty your bowels completely.

Constipation can be caused by not consuming enough fibre or fluids, too little physical activity, depression or overuse of laxatives. It can also be caused by side effects from certain medications, such as iron or calcium supplements, antacids, antihistamines, tranquilizers and some heart medications. Or it can be a sign of an undetected medical condition, such as diabetes or hemorrhoids.

### If you have diverticulosis

Sometimes, especially in seniors, constipation can lead to diverticulosis. This is where diverticula (small pouches) form on the wall of the colon. When diverticulosis flares up, it's called diverticulitis, which can cause diarrhea, pain, fever, cramping, bleeding or bloating.

If you have diverticulosis:

- eat lots of vegetables and fruit
- drink plenty of fluids, and
- enjoy nuts or seeds as part of a healthy diet according to Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide.

Also talk to your doctor or a dietitian. (Try Dial-A-Dietitian. See the back cover for contact information.) Diverticulosis can become diverticulitis, and you may need a special diet.

If you are constipated:

- Eat more fibre. Eat at least six (for women) or seven (for men) servings of whole grain breads, cereals and other grain products a day. Vegetables, fruit, beans, lentils and chickpeas are also great sources of fibre. Just remember to add fibre slowly, to avoid any problems with gas or cramps. (See Chapter 3 for more fibre tips.)
- Drink more fluids. If you are a woman, try to drink about nine 8-ounce glasses (2.2 litres) of fluids each day; if you are a man, aim for about 12 8-ounce glasses (3 litres) of fluids a day. Sources include water, vegetable and fruit juices, milk, yogurt drinks, soups and coffee and tea (a maximum of three 8-ounce cups of caffeinated coffee a day).
- If eating more fibre and drinking more fluids does not help, add some prunes (a natural laxative) to your morning cereal, drink some prune juice with lunch or try our Fruit Lax recipe in Chapter 11.
- Do not use a fibre supplement or store-bought laxative right away. First, try changing your diet. If that does not work, talk to your doctor about whether a laxative would be a good idea and which laxative is best for you (always choose a bulk-forming laxative containing psyllium).

### Watch out!

See your doctor if you:

- experience a sudden change in your normal bowel habits, or
- have been constipated for some time and changing your eating habits has not made any difference.

## What should I eat if I am depressed?

Depression is a serious illness that affects as many as 15 of every 100 adults over age 65. It can be triggered by a number of factors, including having an illness such as heart disease, cancer, stroke or arthritis, or grief at the loss of a spouse or a friend. The most important thing to remember, though, is that depression is treatable.

The symptoms of depression in seniors vary widely. They may include feeling sad for more than two weeks, feeling slowed down and/or withdrawing from regular social activities. They may also include loss of appetite and weight loss.



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If you are feeling depressed, or you think someone else is, get yourself or your friend to a doctor as soon as possible.

Your doctor may prescribe treatment with drugs or therapy. If your depression is causing you to lose weight, your doctor might also suggest you work with a dietitian to find ways to modify what you eat or to help with any underlying condition, such as heart disease, that may be contributing to your depression. (Try Dial-A-Dietitian. See the back cover for contact information.)

### What should I eat if I am anemic?

Anemia is a blood condition caused by not having enough red blood cells. Red blood cells carry oxygen in the blood to the body's tissues. People who are anemic do not get enough oxygen delivered to their body tissues and they tend to feel tired, dizzy or short of breath.

Anemia is caused most often by a shortage of certain nutrients, including iron, vitamin B12 and folate. Chronic illnesses, such as cancer, kidney disease and diabetes, may also lead to anemia. If you are taking medications for these conditions, talk to your doctor about how these drugs may be affecting the way your body absorbs key nutrients.

It is also important to talk to your doctor if you think you are anemic. Your doctor will be able to determine why you are anemic and the best way to treat your particular type of anemia.

If, after a blood test, your doctor says you are anemic, what you eat can make a big difference. Try to:

### Add more B vitamins if you are low in folate or vitamin B12

Eat lots of foods fortified with vitamin B12, such as some veggie

meats or fortified soy beverages, or take a multivitamin/mineral for age 50 plus that includes B12.

Also increase the amount of folate (another type of B vitamin) in your diet by eating more beans, lentils, dark green leafy vegetables, fruit and fruit juices, nuts and seeds. And take a multivitamin/mineral with folic acid.

Take an iron supplement

Take an iron supplement if your doctor recommends it, but otherwise concentrate on healthy eating. (See Chapter 4 for more on iron.)

## What should I eat if I am allergic to certain foods?

Most bad reactions to food are due to food intolerance (see next page), rather than true food allergies. Only about two percent of adults have true food allergies.

An allergy is a hypersensitive reaction to something in the environment.

People with food allergies develop a chain reaction of chemical changes that cause swelling and irritation in certain parts of the body and can even be fatal.

True food allergies are very serious; most are to nuts, fish, shellfish, eggs, soy, wheat or milk.

If you are truly allergic to food, you've probably known about it since you were a child. That's when you discovered you couldn't eat certain foods and most likely you have been avoiding these foods all of your life. You will usually not become allergic to foods later in life. However, if you do develop what you think is an allergy to food later in life, talk to your doctor. Your doctor may refer you to a dietitian. It is important to find out what foods, if any, are causing your problems and how to avoid them if necessary.

### Watch out!

Call 911 immediately if, after eating:

- you feel light-headed (like you might faint)
- you feel confused
- your lips, tongue or face are swollen
- you are wheezing or finding it difficult to breathe.



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### Food intolerance

Many people have lactose intolerance, which causes gas, bloating, cramps and diarrhea after drinking milk or eating milk products. People who have lactose intolerance produce too little lactase (the enzyme that digests lactose, the sugar in milk).

Other people cannot tolerate wheat protein, caffeine or hot sauce, while some break out in hives after eating certain fruits, such as strawberries. Still others are allergic to pollens and find that their symptoms, such as itchy mouth, burning lips, watery eyes, runny nose and sneezing, get worse after eating certain foods.

There are no simple tests to determine most food intolerances. If you suspect that you have a food intolerance, consult with your doctor or a dietitian before you stop eating certain foods for good. (Try Dial-A-Dietitian. See the back cover for contact information.)

If it turns out that you do have a food intolerance, you may not have to stop eating the foods that bother you entirely. You may just have to change or cut down on how much of them you eat. For example, if you have a mild lactose intolerance:

- eat small amounts of milk products, or try them with snacks or meals
- eat yogurts made with active cultures (enzymes that digest the lactose in milk)
- drink milk with reduced lactose, or
- try enzyme tablets (such as Lactaid®) that will digest the lactose for you.

If you have a severe lactose intolerance, read food labels carefully and look for non-dairy sources of calcium. You may also need to talk to your doctor or a dietitian about calcium and vitamin D supplements. (See Chapter 4 for more information on supplements.)

# Healthy Eating

## QUIZ # 5

### True or False?

1. I'm too old to lose weight.  
False. You are never too old to lose weight through healthy eating and regular physical activity.
2. It's okay to skip breakfast if I'm trying to lose weight.  
False. Eating breakfast is one of the most important things you can do to lose weight. Eating a healthy, balanced breakfast helps your body burn fuel more efficiently throughout the day.
3. Skipping lunch or dinner will help me lose weight.  
False. When you skip meals, you tend to eat more at the next meal or snack too often.
4. Being underweight is healthier than being overweight.  
False. Being underweight can cause a variety of health problems, including confusion, low resistance to colds and influenzas, and osteoporosis (bone loss).