

The Healthcare Consortium

For Your Health

“National Nutrition Month: Eating Well as We Age”

March is National Nutrition Month, a helpful reminder that our bodies and our nutritional needs change as we age. What once felt routine around food may require a bit more attention over time, not just in what we eat, but in how we shop, prepare, and store it.

A recent report from the New York Health Foundation found that more than half of older adults in New York State have difficulty accessing affordable, quality food. For many, this is tied not only to cost, but to practical, everyday challenges, including walking to the store, carrying groceries, navigating stairs, or getting out in poor weather. These obstacles can make even a simple grocery trip feel overwhelming. Being aware of them can help you plan ahead—whether that means shopping at quieter times, breaking trips into smaller visits, using delivery services, or keeping a short list of staple items on hand so you don’t run out unexpectedly.

As we age, the body also becomes more sensitive to foodborne illness, making food safety especially important. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Food and Drug Administration, this increased risk is due to natural changes in the body. The immune system becomes less responsive, making it harder to fight off infections. The digestive system slows down, which can allow bacteria more time to grow. The stomach may produce less acid, reducing its ability to kill germs, and the liver and kidneys may not remove toxins as efficiently as they once did. Underlying health conditions, such as diabetes or cancer, can further increase susceptibility.

Because of this, even a mild case of food poisoning can become more serious for older adults. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 48 million persons — or 1 of every 6 people get foodborne infections each year, and older adults are more likely to be hospitalized as a result. The good news is that a few consistent precautions can significantly reduce risk. If you are 65 or older, or prepare food for someone who is, always follow the four steps:

- **Clean:** Wash hands, utensils and surfaces often. Germs can spread and survive in many places.
- **Separate:** Raw meat, poultry, seafood, and eggs can spread germs to ready-to-eat foods, so keep them separate
- **Cook:** Food is safely cooked only when the internal temperature is high enough to kill germs that can make you sick.
- **Chill:** Refrigerate perishable food within 2 hours. If the food is exposed to temperatures above 90°F (32°C) (like a hot car or picnic), refrigerate it within 1 hour.

Nutrition itself also plays a central role in maintaining health as we age. While calorie needs may decrease, the need for certain nutrients increases. Many older adults benefit from paying closer attention to fiber, vitamin D, calcium, and potassium, which support digestion, bone health, and overall function. At the same time, it is helpful to limit saturated fat, sodium, and added sugars.

The Nutrition Facts label can be a useful tool in making these choices. According to the FDA, starting with the serving size is key, since many packaged foods contain more than one serving. From there, the percent Daily Value can help compare options and guide decisions toward more nutrient-dense foods. It's also important to remember that general guidelines, like a 2,000-calorie diet, may not reflect your individual needs, which can vary based on age, activity level, and health. A healthcare provider can help you better understand what is right for you.

Nutrition in later life doesn't have to be complicated, but it does benefit from a bit more awareness. Small, consistent habits can go a long way in helping you stay healthy and maintain a nutritious diet.

The Healthcare Consortium is a non-profit organization with a mission of improving access to healthcare and supporting the health and well-being of the residents in our rural community. The agency is located at 325 Columbia St. in Hudson. For more information: visit www.columbiahealthnet.org or call 518-822-8820.