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A publication of

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Nutrition Notes: Supporting Digestive Health as We Age

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A well-functioning digestive system is key to our overall well-being, affecting everything from energy levels to mental health and immune defenses. While digestive issues are common across all age groups, older adults may

experience more issues due to physical changes related to aging, impacts of chronic disease, and side effects from medications. Paying attention to digestion and resolving issues can improve quality of life and support healthy aging.

The digestive system is most known for turning the food you eat into energy and building blocks. It begins in your mouth and extends through your esophagus, stomach, small intestine, and large intestine. Along the way, your liver, pancreas, and gallbladder add digestive juices that break down the foods into nutrients. The small intestine is where most nutrient absorption happens. Its walls are lined with tiny, finger-like projections called villi that increase the surface area for absorbing vitamins, minerals, proteins, fats, and carbohydrates. Without proper digestion and absorption, even the most nutritious diet falls short of its potential. Your body simply can't benefit from calcium for your bones, B vitamins for energy, or protein for muscle maintenance if they're not properly absorbed.

The digestive system does more than break down food and absorb nutrients. For instance, your intestines produce hormones that regulate appetite and mood, and serotonin, the "happy hormone," is primarily produced there. Your digestive tract also houses about 70% of your immune system, with trillions of beneficial bacteria fighting off harmful pathogens, producing vitamins like vitamin K and some B vitamins, and communicating with your brain through the gut-brain axis. A well-functioning digestive system helps fight infections, maintain energy, and support mental clarity.

However, natural aging, lifestyle changes, illness, and medication can disrupt the digestive system. Some older adults notice less saliva in their mouths, making it harder to chew and swallow comfortably. Many have low stomach acid, making it harder to break down food and absorb certain nutrients. Heartburn and acid reflux may occur more frequently as the valve between the esophagus and stomach weakens. Constipation, nausea, bloating, and gas are also common.

Fortunately, you can support your digestive health through diet and lifestyle choices.

Pay attention to your body's digestive symptoms and triggers. Keeping a food diary, writing down when and what you eat, along with symptoms and bowel habits can help you explore how your body responds to certain foods. Paying attention to your bowel movements, including how often you poop and what it looks like, can help you detect problems. The Bristol Stool Chart, a reference guide that classifies poop into seven types based on shape and consistency, can come in handy to help determine if you might be dehydrated or constipated. Writing down notes about your diet, symptoms, and bowels can not only help you monitor your digestion but can help when talking with your doctor, so they can better understand your issues and help you resolve them.

Once you discover problematic foods that trigger discomfort, try to limit them. For example, common culprits for acid reflux include fried foods, caffeine, alcohol, carbonated beverages, and spicy dishes. You don't necessarily need to eliminate them entirely, but moderation may help.

Embrace fiber (unless you have an infection or flare-up). Soluble fiber dissolves in water and helps soften stools, while insoluble fiber adds bulk and promotes regular bowel movements. Both types feed beneficial gut bacteria. Try to include a variety of plant foods, including whole grains like oats and brown rice, fruits, vegetables, beans, lentils, nuts, and seeds. If your body isn't used to having fiber, increase fiber gradually; adding too much too quickly can cause bloating. Also make sure to drink plenty of water. Talk to a healthcare provider before taking fiber supplements, or if you have a medical condition that requires a low-fiber diet.

Stay hydrated. Water keeps things moving smoothly through your digestive tract and helps fiber do its job. It also helps in producing saliva and digestive juices. Most people need at least 8 glasses daily, more if you're active or it's hot outside. Herbal teas,

broths, and water-rich foods like cucumbers, watermelon, and celery also count. If plain water feels boring, try adding lemon slices, cucumber, or fresh mint.

Choose probiotic-rich foods like yogurt with live active cultures, kefir, sauerkraut, kimchi, kombucha, and miso. These foods help maintain a healthy balance of gut bacteria, which can improve digestion and boost immunity.

Eat mindfully. Slow down at mealtimes. Chew thoroughly and aim for 20-30 chews per bite. This not only helps by breaking down food and mixing it with saliva but also helps you enjoy your food more and recognize fullness cues. Eating in a relaxed environment, rather than rushing or eating while stressed, supports better digestion since stress can slow digestive processes.

Move your body. Regular physical activity stimulates intestinal contractions, preventing constipation. Even a short 10-minute walk, stretching, or chair exercises can make a difference. Movement also helps reduce bloating and gas.

Stress triggers and worsens digestive symptoms like cramping, diarrhea, or constipation. Find practices that help manage stress, whether that's deep breathing exercises, meditation, time in nature, listening to music, or connecting with friends and family.

Consider meal timing and portion size. Avoid large meals late at night, which can interfere with sleep and digestion. Consider eating smaller, more frequent meals if large portions feel uncomfortable.

Address specific digestive issues and seek help when needed. Digestive issues are complex and should be addressed individually. While some changes are normal with aging, others require medical attention. Consult your doctor if you experience regular abdominal pain, nausea and vomiting, unexplained weight loss, blood in your stool, black or tarry stools, severe constipation or diarrhea lasting more than a few days, difficulty swallowing, or other digestive issues that affect your daily life.

Prioritizing your digestive health is crucial for healthy aging. Pay attention to your digestion, nourish your gut with fiber-rich foods, stay hydrated, move regularly, manage stress, and be mindful of your eating habits. Small, consistent changes can meaningfully improve your daily well-being.

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