

# Advice for the Ages

Paula Maher is the founder of Care at Home and as Ireland comes to grips with an ageing population, she has some vital advice on diet and exercise

PHOTOGRAPH *Joe Dunne*

**A**ge is irrelevant. It makes no difference. Whether 6, 36 or 76 we all have one thing in common – the need for a balanced, healthy diet. Of course as we get older our appetites can get smaller; a sweet tooth may get sweeter and the body can even become less efficient at absorbing nutrients.

However, getting older isn't an excuse to abandon healthy eating and in fact, given that the risk of heart attack and stroke rises steadily with age, it's a crucial time to address the major contributory factors to these illnesses such as too much saturated fat, nutritional deficiencies, alcohol and inactivity.

The following is my advice for dealing with exercise and nutrition in advanced years:

## *It's all about balance*

We all need a balance of different foods to help fuel our bodies, although different age groups may need specific nutrients to assist with the changes we experience at different life stages.

As we get older, our bodies become less efficient at absorbing and using many vitamins and minerals, and the long-term use of prescription drugs can take its toll too. Our

appetites can diminish but our need for nourishment, vitamins and minerals doesn't, so it becomes even more important that the food we eat is both healthy and nutritious – most of the time.

## *Good habits – it's never too late to start*

If you are living alone, I know it can be challenging to feel motivated enough to make dinner for one every day and I often hear of people who resort to bread, butter and jam or ham for their daily meal. While an occasional dinner of bread and butter won't do you any harm, a nutritious, cooked meal is so much better for your body and once you get into the habit of making a meal, it becomes second nature.

Eggs are great staples and a boiled or scrambled egg is a great source of protein, vitamins and minerals. Frozen or tinned vegetables or fruit are a great alternative to fresh, if you feel that you are wasting a lot of fresh food every week. Try to eat fish a couple of times a week and if it's not something you like to cook from fresh, try some frozen varieties, which are easy to grill or bake.

I'm always being asked to sum up what a healthy diet involves and it really isn't rocket

Paula Maher has advice for those living on their own and those looking after them

science. It's one that is high in fruit and vegetables; it's a diet that has wholegrains, which can be found in wholewheat bread, brown rice and porridge; fibre features in a healthy diet and if you're eating veg, you're already halfway there. Fibre can also be found in some breakfast cereals, nuts and seeds.

Enjoy protein by eating meat, fish and eggs, and calcium – milk, cheese and yogurt – is essential for healthy bones.

Variety is a great way to keep you interested in food and plenty of colour on the plate from foods such as mixed peppers, corn, tomatoes and green vegetables can really help to stimulate

appetites. Processed foods should be kept to a minimum.

## *A little of what you fancy does you good*

Of course a little of what you fancy does you good and, unless you have a specific medical condition, there's no reason why you can't enjoy a slice of cake, a biscuit or a sweet from time to time.

Food is there to be enjoyed but we all need to be mindful of both our sugar and hydrogenated fat intake and foods that are considered treats are usually high in both. Older people can sometimes consume more sugary, high-fat snacks than is

necessary and if coupled with decreased levels of activity or exercise, you really do need to watch your sweet treat intake.

There are lots of things you can do to stave a craving or you might consider replacing that slice of cake with a piece of fruit, a rice cake with peanut butter, one square of dark chocolate with a high cocoa content (70% or more) or try some dried fruit – figs and dates are widely available, really tasty and naturally sweet.

## *Can't eat, won't eat*

Don't worry if you are struggling to eat as much as you used to or if you cannot finish your meals.

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This is quite normal and instead of trying to eat three meals a day, why not eat five and cut down on your portion size instead. Eating little and often is actually a very good way to approach nutrition and will help keep blood sugars stable.

If you can't manage porridge at breakfast, enjoy a slice of wholemeal toast. Mid-morning when you may be a little more peckish, try a banana or you might like a bowl of cereal at that stage. Grilled chicken or a poached egg are great protein-fuelled options at lunchtime and by leaving out potatoes, you won't feel too full.

Try to include vegetables with both your lunch and dinner, as they are full of nutrients. An afternoon snack of a milky drink or a treat such as a plain biscuit will sustain you until dinner or tea time. If in any doubt about what you should be eating, speak to your GP or home care assistant, who can help put together a meal plan for you. If you feel cooking has become too difficult, it might be worth considering a trained carer who can prepare nutritious meals for you.

## *Replacing salt*

Did you know that your sense of smell and taste can become less acute as you get older and that the tendency can be to add more sugar or salt to food to make it taste better? Try to avoid both and opt for healthier additions instead such as ➤



◀ lemon juice, balsamic vinegar, garlic or herbs and spices if you can tolerate them – they really can add some zing to a meal.

## Get moving

The power of exercise and physical activity cannot be underestimated. Not only is activity good for the body, it's good for the mind and being active helps you to stay healthy longer into your later years of life. Exercise lowers your risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and many other illnesses. Even if you are confined to the house, there are plenty of ways to stay active at home. It goes without saying that everyone's mobility levels are different but, as long as you are well and have the OK from your doctor, there's no reason not to find some form of activity to suit you.

## Weight-lifting?

Weight-lifting is a great way to help maintain muscle and flexibility and before you think, I could never lift weights, think again. Standing or sitting, you can use 500ml bottles of water or tins of beans and do some bicep curls or raise the bottles over your head repeatedly. Before you know it, you'll see an improvement in your muscle tone and flexibility.

## Dance your way to better health

Dancing is a marvellous way to get fit and stay fit and you can do it in the comfort and privacy of your own home or take part in a local dance class, of which there are many around the country. It's also a great way to meet new people and dancing can really give you an adrenaline buzz – and that's something we all need, at every age.

If you are less mobile, why not get more active while watching TV? Try raising your legs off the ground and cross them over and back repeatedly. Raise your hands over your head, stretch out your fingers and move your arms from side to side. Small steps can make a big difference to your flexibility and overall wellbeing.

Think about what's right for you: walking, gardening, swimming, Pilates or bowls, the options are endless. If you are nervous starting off, enlist the help of family or your care assistant. They can accompany you on walks, they can supervise the aforementioned weight-lifting or they can stroll with you in the garden.

## What advice would you give to others?

If you have children or grandchildren, what advice do you give to them when it comes to healthy



eating and being active? Do you love seeing them tuck into a bowl of salad, eating fruit, having a nutritious dinner and being involved in sports? How do you feel when you see them eating pizza and chips all of the time while glued to their computers or mobile phones?

It's unlikely that you are encouraging them to be couch potatoes, so think about the advice you would offer others and then apply that same advice to yourself because, what's good for the goose is good for the gander.

## Invincible or simply human? Advice for family members

When we are young, we all think that our parents are invincible so it can be difficult watching a loved one slowing down as they get older; perhaps unable to do all of the things they used to. But getting older doesn't mean that one has to stop enjoying life and all of the great things that go with it. And while your folks might not think they need help, there are some – subtle – things you can do to make life that little bit easier for them:

- Make sure food items are within easy reach and not tucked away at the back of cupboards or too high to be accessed safely.
- If you can, dine with your elderly parent or relative regularly. That way you'll be able to ensure they are getting a balanced meal and can check on food supplies for the rest of the week. If

they live alone, it will be so much nicer for them to have some company over a meal.

- Throw out out-of-date food or food that has turned mouldy to avoid stomach upset.
- Help make the healthy option the easier option. Prepare little bowls of chopped fruit for snacking, or freeze batches of homemade stews packed with vegetables that are simple to heat up.
- Staying hydrated is really important. Dehydration can cause dizziness, tiredness and even constipation. Stock small bottles of water and if water is unpalatable, add a drop of low-sugar cordial or replace with milk.
- Be mindful of weight loss, it's an obvious sign that they are not eating enough and are therefore, lacking in nutrients. Equally, weight loss could mean they are unwell. Agree with your parent or relative that they will be weighed every fortnight and let it become part of their routine.
- No one prepares you for looking out for or looking after your parents, but a good dollop of common sense goes a long way. ■

■ For more information on looking after loved ones at home, visit [careathome.ie](http://careathome.ie). Note: This article offers general advice on healthy eating and exercise for older people. It is not intended for those who have specific medical or dietary needs. Always consult your GP if increasing or taking up activity for the first time or if making major changes to your diet.