

## Taking Care in the Golden Years: Nutrition for the Elderly and Convalescent

As we grow older, our bodies and lives change. Of course, with these changes, our nutritional needs will also change. What a young person may need to stay healthy may be completely different to what an elderly person may need. Ageing, that totally inevitable process we're often scared of, is measured by chronological age. Conventionally, "elderly" is defined as a chronological age of 65 years old or older.<sup>1,2</sup>

### What Happens as You Get Older?

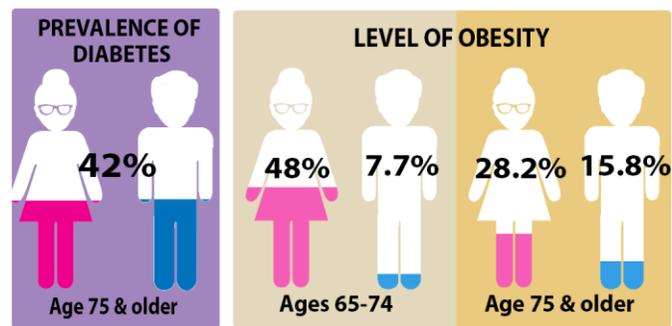
Apart from the usual wrinkles and grey hairs we are often scared of, the body undergoes a lot of changes, including<sup>3,4</sup>:

- the loss of a number of functions
- appetite loss
- loss of muscle mass and endurance
- shrinking bones
- more constipation
- bladder weakening
- a relative increase in fat mass over time, and
- increased risk of disease

### Elderly and Non-Communicable Diseases

While people of all ages are affected by non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and serious infections, these conditions are often associated with older age groups. Evidence shows that more than 15 million of all NCD-related deaths globally, occur between the ages of 30 and 69 years.<sup>5</sup> In Jamaica, diabetes is most prevalent amongst persons 75 years and older (42%). Around 7.7% of Jamaican men aged 65-74 years are obese with females of the same age range being 48%.<sup>6</sup> Estimates also show that 15.8% of Jamaican men 75 years and older are obese with the females coming in at 28.2%. What is even worse is that 1 in 4 Jamaicans do not know that they have either hypertension or diabetes.<sup>6</sup>

High blood pressure, or hypertension, is also a major health problem that is common in older adults.<sup>7,8</sup> An estimated 1.28 billion adults aged 30-79 years worldwide have hypertension.<sup>8</sup> More and more Jamaicans aged 15 to 74 years old are



developing hypertension as 31.5% of this age group are hypertensive.<sup>6</sup>

### Convalescence and Ageing

Just like the elderly, the convalescent is usually characterized by reduced or impaired physical activity, therefore causing them to spend less energy. **Convalescents** are those persons who are recovering from an illness.<sup>9</sup> Elderly persons can also be convalescent as they are prone to a number of illnesses and infections, which may cause them to be bed-ridden. Though a person who is convalescent may not necessarily be elderly, they experience similar changes:

- change in appetite/appetite loss
- weight loss
- breakdown of body tissues
- weakened body functions
- lack of certain nutrients

## Healthy Eating for Older Generations

The general principles of healthy eating apply at any age. However, growing older, paired with different conditions means that our bodies will have different needs, and certain nutrients become especially important for maintaining good health. Eating healthfully and having an active lifestyle can support healthy ageing and speed up the recovery process. Here are some tips toward building a healthier eating pattern when caring for our elderly and convalescent<sup>7,10</sup>:

- ▶ Make food appetising and serve it as attractively as possible.
- ▶ Add flavour to foods with spices and herbs instead of salt and look for low-sodium or no salt added packaged foods.
- ▶ Add sliced fruits and vegetables to meals and snacks. Look for pre-sliced fruits and vegetables on sale if slicing and chopping is a challenge.
- ▶ Ask your/your loved one's doctor to suggest other options if prescribed medication affects your/their appetite or changes their desire to eat. Ensure that meals are not skipped; eat regular meals.
- ▶ Drink water, fat-free or low-fat milk or unsweetened blended fruit juices instead of sugary drinks.
- ▶ Consume foods fortified with vitamin B12, such as fortified cereals and foods with omega-3 fatty acids, such as salmon, mackerel, sardines, tuna, flaxseeds, soybeans, walnuts and cod liver oil.



- ▶ Drink plenty of water throughout the day to help stay hydrated and aid in the digestion of food and absorption of nutrients.
- ▶ Get the most of these nutrients: protein, calcium, vitamin D, vitamin B12 iron, potassium and fibre for the repair of bodily tissues, healthy bones and red blood cells and to support immune and digestive functions.
- ▶ Being physically active can help you stay strong and independent as you age.
- ▶ Prepare meals with the most easily digested methods such as stewing or steaming and select foods that are easily digested. Avoid fried foods, oily or greasy foods as they are difficult to digest.
- ▶ Maintain regular visits to your doctor/physician and take your medication as prescribed.
- ▶ Get regular screening to know your health numbers (blood sugar, blood pressure, body mass index and total cholesterol) as they play a critical role in managing your health

It is also important to practice reading food labels to know how much fats, added sugar and sodium is contained in a product. An easier way for our elderly to understand this information is for the government to implement the High In black octagon warning label so that at a glance, they will know if this product is right for them. After all, *there is nothing sweeter than a healthy lifestyle!*



## References

- <sup>1</sup> Orimo, H., Ito, H., Suzuki, T., Araki, A., Hosoi, T., & Sawabe, M. (2006). Reviewing the definition of "elderly." *Geriatrics and Gerontology International*, 6(3), 149–158. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1447-0594.2006.00341.x>
- <sup>2</sup> Singh, S., & Bajorek, B. (2014). Defining "elderly" in clinical practice guidelines for pharmacotherapy. *Pharmacy Practice (Internet)*, 12(4). <https://doi.org/10.4321/s1886-36552014000400007>
- <sup>3</sup> Amarya, S., Singh, K., & Sabharwal, M. (2018). Ageing Process and Physiological Changes. *Gerontology*. <https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.76249>
- <sup>4</sup> Mackenzie, P. (2012). Normal Changes of Ageing. *InnovAIT: Education and Inspiration for General Practice*, 5(10), 605–613. <https://doi.org/10.1093/innovait/ins099>
- <sup>5</sup> World Health Organization. (2021b, April 13). *Noncommunicable Diseases*. World Health Organization; World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/noncommunicable-diseases>
- <sup>6</sup> Ministry of Health & Wellness, Jamaica. (2018). *Jamaica Health & Lifestyle Survey 2016-2017 (JHLSIII)*. MOHW.
- <sup>7</sup> National Institutes of Health. (2021, October 27). High blood pressure and older adults. National Institute on Aging. Retrieved July 19, 2022, from <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/high-blood-pressure-and-older-adults>
- <sup>8</sup> World Health Organization. (2021). Hypertension: Key Facts. WHO. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/hypertension>

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