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Dietary Tips for Baby Boomers: Ageless Advice for an Aging Generation

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Research shows that certain nutrients—such as this article’s top 3—can aid in controlling weight, warding off disease, and promoting a state of healthy aging. Even our interviewed baby boomer RDs follow these tips. Do you?

“I hope I die before I get old”

— The Who

If you’re a baby boomer, born between 1946 and 1964, you probably know the words to the song “My Generation” written by Pete Townshend of The Who in 1965.¹ Perhaps you sang it with your friends, standing atop a table somewhere, blissfully unaware that someday you would actually be one of those older people you were singing about. Once you hit your 40s, the song takes on a new meaning. How old is “old”? What do I want my life to look like once I’m 50, 60, 70, or 80? Even more important: What can I do now to make those dreams a reality?

Join the Crowd

By 2030, the number of older Americans will have more than doubled to 70 million, or one of every five people.² Baby boomers born in the 1950s and 1960s could expect to live to the approximate age of 69 at birth; if you make it to 65, you can expect to add another 14 years to your life.³

In 2004, the top causes of death in the United States were heart disease, cancer, stroke, chronic lower respiratory disease, accidents, and diabetes.⁴ According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a lifestyle that includes a healthy diet, physical activity, avoiding tobacco, and using early detection practices such as screening for breast, cervical, and colorectal cancers, diabetes and its complications, and depression can help prevent many health problems.² In *Younger Next Year*, Chris Crowley and Henry Lodge, MD, state that 70% of premature death and aging is related to lifestyle.⁵

J. Walker Smith, PhD, and Ann S. Clurman write in *Generation Ageless* that healthcare “holds out the promise of making old age middle age-less.” Healthcare and healthy aging, not income security, are baby boomers’ biggest concerns.⁶ To stay healthy, 78% of aging baby boomers know they should eat a healthy diet, and 73% also list keeping weight under control.⁶

But just because they are aware that healthy eating is important doesn’t mean they follow their good intentions. In one study, only 47.4% of baby boomers rated their home diets as healthy, and only 17.4% rated their diets away from home as healthy.⁶

Basic Healthy Nutrition Practices

Bradley J. Willcox, MD, MSc, is lead investigator of the Hawaii Lifespan Study and the Okinawan Centenarian Study at the Pacific Health Research Institute in Honolulu, Hawaii. Willcox’s research doesn’t provide earth-shattering evidence for new or exotic nutrition recommendations. Instead, it confirms what we already know: People who keep their weight

at healthy levels throughout their lifespan and eat a primarily plant-based diet live longer, healthier lives.⁷

Caloric Restriction

Maintaining energy balance not only promotes a healthy weight but can also reduce the risk of developing several chronic diseases associated with obesity. As early as the 1930s, McCay et al reported that caloric restriction prolongs the lifespan and promotes healthier aging.⁸ Okinawan Japanese eat a lower calorie diet, enjoy a longer lifespan, and have lower incidence of chronic disease. They practice Hara hachi bu, which translates to “80% full.” According to Willcox, Hara hachi bu is an “insurance plan” against feeling deprived since it takes approximately 20 minutes for the body to signal the brain that there’s no need for more food. Hara hachi bu gives the brain a chance to catch up and is key to Okinawan weight control, he explains.

Mild caloric restriction combined with optimum nutrient intake, similar to the diets of Okinawans, can help reduce inflammation and other risk factors for chronic disease. Okinawans not only live roughly 20% longer than Americans, but they also enjoy nearly an additional decade of disability-free, healthy living.⁹ The American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR) asserts that maintaining a healthy weight (as lean as possible without being underweight) is the most important way to prevent cancer and many other chronic diseases. Fat cells produce estrogen, which promotes cell growth, including growth of cancer cells. Body fat also contributes to inflammation and insulin resistance, which promote cell growth and reproduction.¹⁰

Quit Eating Crap

Crowley and Lodge’s recommendations may come off as light-hearted, but they’re based on science. Lodge has seven recommendations for healthy, vigorous aging, including this one: “Quit eating crap.”⁵ Just what is crap? According to Jeffrey S. Novick, MS, RD, LD/N, who runs a coaching/consulting business, crap stands for “calorie-rich and processed foodlike products.” It’s nearly impossible to be a U.S. citizen and not understand that certain types of foods are bad for us, but many people don’t eat based on this knowledge.

What to Eat

In her book *What to Eat*, Marion Nestle, PhD, MPH, suggests that consumers “eat less, move more, eat plenty of fruits and vegetables, and don’t eat too much junk food.” Author Michael Pollan, both in his new book, *In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto*, and in a recent *New York Times Magazine* article, says, “Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.” The AICR recommends that people eat mostly plant-based foods, reduce food portion sizes, limit red meat, avoid processed meat, limit foods and beverages high in sugar, limit alcohol, and maintain a lean body weight. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005 recommend that we limit foods high in saturated and trans fats, cholesterol, added sugars, and salt.

What does this advice mean in terms of the foods we purchase, prepare, and eat? The following are three recommendations concerning what to eat for healthy aging, aimed to make 70 the new 40, including suggestions from RDs who are part of the baby boomer generation.

1. Omega-3 Fatty Acids

The current American diet contains 20 times more omega-6 than omega-3 fatty acids, a ratio that experts say should be lowered to four to one or even two to one. There is encouraging research demonstrating that eating more omega-3 fatty acids and fewer omega-6 fatty acids

may help reduce stress and inflammation in the body, which are associated with numerous chronic diseases that become more common as we age.¹¹

The American Heart Association (AHA) recommends eating fatty fish such as mackerel, lake trout, herring, sardines, albacore tuna, and salmon, which are high in both eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA). These omega-3 fatty acids help decrease the risk of arrhythmia, which can lead to sudden cardiac death, decreased triglyceride levels, and decreased growth of atherosclerotic plaque. Regular fatty fish consumption has been shown to reduce the risk of ischemic stroke by 27% in people aged 65 to 85.¹² The AHA also recommends including tofu and other forms of soybeans, walnuts, flaxseeds, and nut and canola oils as a way to increase amounts of alpha-linolenic acid, which produces omega-3 fatty acids in our bodies.¹³

Omega-3 fatty acids may also help reduce the risk of memory loss, dementia, and Alzheimer's disease by stimulating the growth of neuron connections, which improves the brain's ability to process and retrieve information.¹⁴ Approximately 40% of fatty acid phospholipids in the brain are DHA, and people with dementia have lower plasma phospholipid DHA levels in the brain compared with controls. Some research shows that 2.7 or more servings of fish per week or 180 milligrams or more of DHA per day is associated with 50% decreased risk of dementia.^{12,15}

What the RDs do: Janice Baker, MBA, RD, CDE, chooses fish along with fiber and vegetables to reduce her risk of heart disease and diabetes, noting that eating well is an investment in the quality and quantity of life. Many dietitians, including Carol Banister, RD/LD, MS, CDE, take fish oil supplements to make sure they get optimum amounts of omega-3 fatty acids. Banister sees good nutrition as a protective insurance factor for aging but not a guarantee.

2. Antioxidants

Antioxidants from fruits, vegetables, and grains help prevent the free radical destruction of cells that leads to aging. Although most people haven't jumped on the "eat more fruits and vegetables" bandwagon, Americans spent \$2.3 billion on antioxidant supplements in 2000.¹⁶

While epidemiological studies show that high antioxidant intake from foods results in reduced rates of cancer, cardiovascular disease, and macular degeneration often associated with aging, a meta-analysis of 68 studies found that supplements may actually have a negative effect on health. Supplemental beta-carotene, vitamin A, and vitamin E may increase mortality, while the potential roles of vitamin C and selenium on mortality need further study.¹⁷ Antioxidants in foods are also present along with numerous other compounds, including phytochemicals, that together may provide enhanced health benefits not found when they're separated.

Oxygen radical absorbance capacity (ORAC) is the accepted measurement to evaluate antioxidant capacities of foods. The Agricultural Research Service maintains a database of ORAC-measured antioxidant content of more than 200 different foods.¹⁸ However, just because a food has a high measured antioxidant content doesn't mean eating that food will raise your own antioxidant levels.

Researchers at the Arkansas Children's Nutrition Center investigated how the consumption of different fruits affected volunteers' antioxidant status. For example, they found that despite their high antioxidant content, plums did not raise blood antioxidant levels, probably because one of the major phytochemicals in plums, chlorogenic acid, is not readily absorbed by humans. Consuming some antioxidants is better than none because researchers noted that

blood levels of antioxidants decreased after drinking a shake that contained protein and carbohydrate but not antioxidants.¹⁹

Willcox reminds us that the Okinawan Japanese and Nordic cultures have low mortality rates, most likely due, at least in part, to the antioxidants found in alcohol. Red wine is a potent source of isoflavone phytoestrogens, a type of flavonoid that has both weak estrogenic effects and powerful antioxidant ability and may help protect against heart disease and osteoporosis, according to Willcox.

However, aging increases the body's sensitivity to alcohol and decreases the ability to deal with alcohol. Moderate alcohol use has a protective effect for cardiovascular health, as well as cognition. Men and women who enjoy one or two alcoholic drinks per day have higher levels of cognition and lower levels of depression compared with people who abstain from alcohol.²⁰

What the RDs do: Jill Weisenberger, MS, RD, CDE, makes an effort to eat "a ton of vegetables" for three reasons: low energy density, to aid in weight control, and disease-fighting nutrients. She expects that her healthy eating habits will help delay and prevent age-related disease. Colleen Gill, MS, RD, from the University of Colorado Cancer Center, believes that the AICR plate method is one of the easiest ways to assemble the right mix of foods shown to decrease inflammation, limit chronic disease, and slow the aging process. RDs looking for a treat often choose dark chocolate to satisfy their sweet cravings and red wine, both enjoyed on a moderate basis.

3. Plant-Based Proteins

According to Willcox, the more we learn about food and health, the clearer it becomes that we should try to eat as low on the food chain as possible. Contrary to popular images of "man the hunter," our ancestors did not gorge on huge quantities of meat. Rather, the archeological record shows that throughout most of human evolutionary history, the major part of the diet came in the form of wild plants, he explains.

The AICR recommends eating more plant-based foods and limiting the intake of red and processed meat, which is the only type of meat they recommend eliminating. Consuming more than 18 ounces of beef, pork, and lamb each week increases the risk of developing colorectal cancer. Processed meats or red meat preserved by smoking, curing, salting, or adding chemical preservatives are even worse. For each 1.5 ounces of processed meat eaten per day, risk of colorectal cancer increases by 21%.¹⁰

The AHA recommends limiting red meat to one 3-ounce portion per day and relying more on chicken, fish, and legumes for protein.²¹ Andrew Weil, MD, in his anti-inflammatory diet basics and tips recommends reducing animal protein except for fish and reduced-fat dairy products. The Harvard School of Public Health's Healthy Eating Pyramid puts red meat on the very top of their foods to use sparingly, right along with butter, soda, and sweets. They encourage protein from sources such as whole grains, nuts, and legumes and sparingly from fish, chicken, and eggs.

What the RDs do: Amy Shapiro, RD, CDN, chooses white meat poultry and fish to meet her primary protein needs, generally avoiding beef and pork. Her food choices are typical of the dietitians interviewed who also collectively shrink their portions of animal protein to make more room for fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Most also include legumes in their weekly diet routine for plant-based protein and fiber.

Baby Boomers Fuel the Supplement Industry

Antiaging supplements are big business and appeal to our desire to look, act, and feel younger. Sixty-two percent of baby boomers take supplements to stay healthy.^{6,22} Nutraceuticals, foods that promise a medical benefit, are big business. One estimate indicates that by 2010, the U.S. supplement market will equal \$34 billion, or 5.5% of total food sales.⁶

All the baby boomer generation dietitians I informally surveyed from the Nutrition Entrepreneurs listserv use supplements themselves and recommend them to their clients, using omega-3 fatty acids, calcium, vitamin D, or a multivitamin on a regular basis. Martha Rosenau, RD, a private practitioner in Colorado who grew up in the 1960s counterculture in Berkeley, Calif., and worked for 13 years in the natural foods industry, believes that it's important to get nutrients from foods rather than supplements as much as possible.

Angela B. Moore, MS, RD, LD/N, CLT, often recommends a multivitamin/mineral supplement for her clients who don't consume a balanced diet, calcium supplements for women, and fish oil supplements for people with heart disease. She, like many dietitians, is also becoming concerned about vitamin D intake. While supplements may be helpful, Moore notes that we need to be careful because of poor regulation policies. Every dietitian I interviewed spoke about their efforts to eat a plant-based diet high in whole grains and lean proteins, yet each also routinely uses supplements.

Smith and Clurman note in *Generation Ageless* that the future of supplements and fortified foods will be determined by baby boomers who want to counter the declines of aging. They give dark chocolate as an example, with sales that jumped 29% from 2003 to 2005 based on research showing high antioxidant content.⁶

Boomers Lead the Way

The baby boomer RDs I spoke with all told me how wonderful they feel because of their healthy eating and exercise habits. They know that good food can't guarantee healthy aging, but they're certainly willing to give it their best shot.

— Lynn Grieger, RD, CDE, cPT, is a health, food, and fitness coach in southwest Vermont and online at www.LynnGrieger.com. She was born in 1958 and is a certified member of the baby boomer generation.

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Stats on Boomers1

- There were 78.2 million baby boomers as of July 1, 2005.
- Approximately 50% of baby boomers are female.

- Three hundred thirty baby boomers turn 60 every hour of every day.
- In 2004, people aged 45 to 54 (the heart of the baby boomer generation) spent \$2,695 annually on healthcare. Those aged 55 to 64 spent \$3,262, and those aged 65 and older spent \$3,899.