

# Healthy Eating for Older Adults



Food Pyramid guidelines for  
adults aged over 65

This booklet is for adults aged over 65 who are in good health, mobile and living at home. It has been developed in partnership with the FSAI (Food Safety Authority of Ireland), the HSE, the Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute and safefood. The aim of this advice is to help you stay well, by **nourishing your body with healthy food and by staying active every day.**





## Top Tips

Following these tips will help keep you nourished and strong so you can live your life to the full.

### Eat well

A healthy diet will keep your muscles and bones strong. This will help to prevent falls and ensure you live an independent life for as long as possible.



### Eat enough high-quality protein in at least two meals a day

High-quality protein promotes and maintains good muscle strength as you age. Muscle loss can lead to frailty and a higher risk of falls so choose foods from the Meat (and alternatives) as well as from Milk (and alternatives).



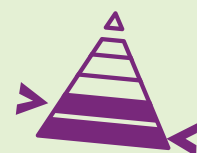
### Boost your B vitamins

B vitamins support brain function as we age. Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables, high-quality protein foods, cereals and milk with added B vitamins to ensure you are getting enough.



### Choose high fibre foods

Eat wholemeal breads and cereals, plenty of vegetables, fruit and salad every day to ensure you are getting enough fibre to help prevent constipation.



### Maintain your best weight

Your Best Weight is a weight you can maintain while living your healthiest and happiest life. Many older adults are carrying extra weight. Don't focus on how much you weigh, instead eat well and be active.



### Daily vitamin D

You need to take a 15 microgram (µg) vitamin D supplement every day of the year. A good diet and sunlight is not enough to keep your bones strong and prevent falls.



### Portion size matters

This is important for everyone but especially if you are not that active. Cut down on sugary snacks such as biscuits and cakes and salty snack foods such as crisps.



### Be active every day

Small bouts of exercise for 10-15 minutes several times a day is much better than doing all your activity in one go. Strengthening exercises are also important.



## Older adult's food pyramid

The food pyramid shows how much of what you eat overall should come from each shelf to achieve a healthy, balanced diet.

The shape of the food pyramid shows the types of foods and drinks people need to eat most for healthy eating. It is divided into six shelves and each provides you with the range of nutrients and energy needed for good health. Healthy eating is all about choosing the right amounts from each shelf. You will find advice on choosing food on pages 6 to 15.

### Foods and drinks high in fat, sugar and salt



**Foods from this shelf should not be eaten every day  
– maximum once or twice a week**

### Fats, spreads and oils

Foods from this shelf provide essential fats, but use these in very small amounts.

### Meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans and nuts

Foods from this shelf are the best sources of high-quality protein and iron, for strong muscles and healthy blood.

### Milk, yogurt and cheese

Dairy foods are the best sources of the calcium you need to keep your bones strong. Low-fat is best. These foods are also high in protein.

### Wholemeal cereals and breads, potatoes, pasta and rice

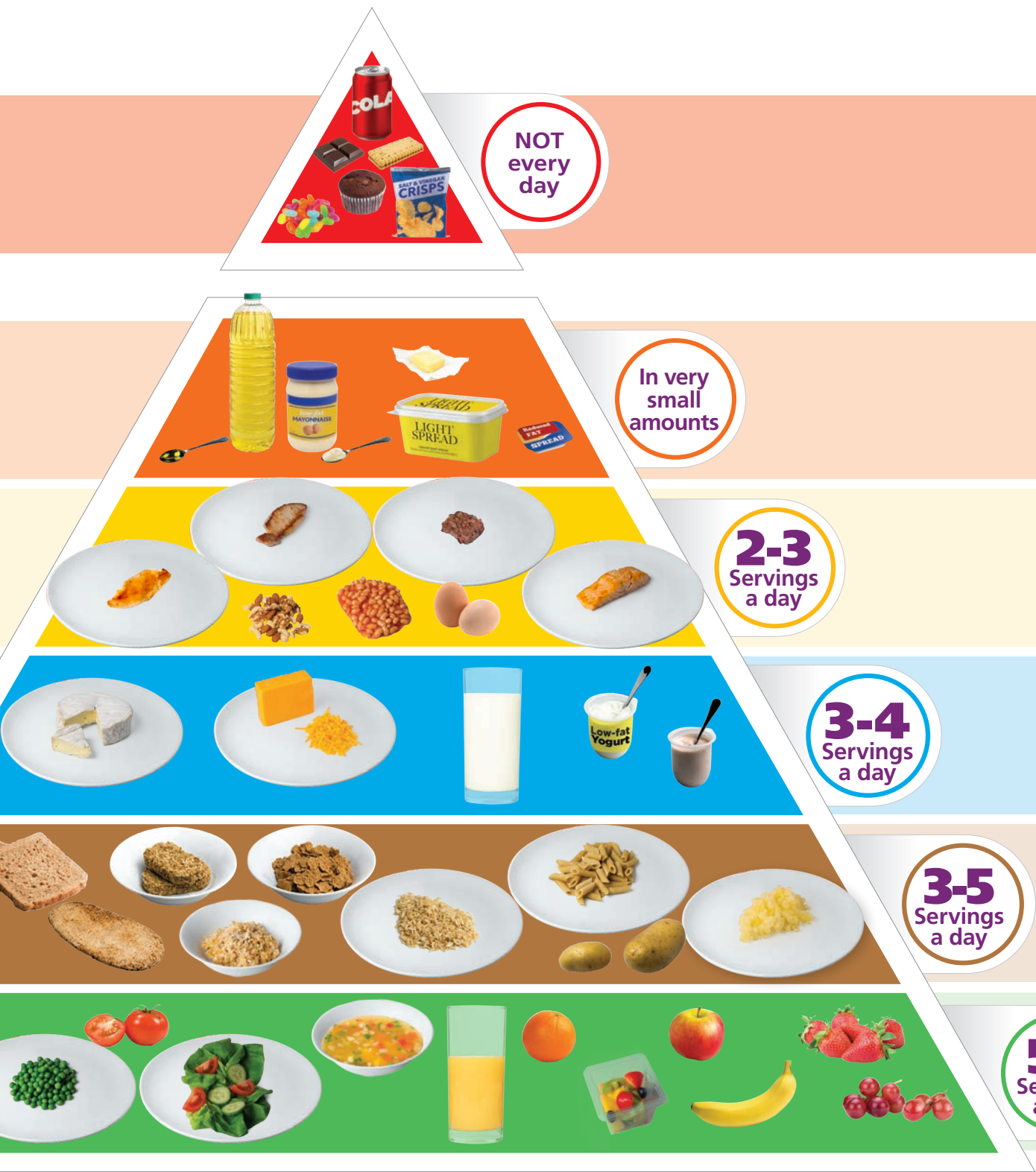
Choose high-fibre foods from this shelf to help prevent constipation.

### Vegetables, salad and fruit

Choose brightly coloured fruits and vegetables – they are good sources of vitamin C to help your body absorb iron.







## Drink fluids every day

Your body needs plenty of fluids to work properly, to stay well hydrated and to reduce the risk of constipation.

**Women should aim to drink 6–8 glasses of fluids every day and men should aim for 8–10 glasses.**

Water, low-fat milk and sugar-free drinks (including tea and coffee) all count towards your daily total. Ensure you drink some water, milk or other fluids each day to make sure you are staying well hydrated. When the weather is warm or when you are active, your body is likely to need more than this.



### Tea

If you like to drink tea, drink it between meals and not with your meals. Strong tea can interfere with your body's ability to absorb important minerals like iron.



### Are you drinking enough?

Don't wait until you feel thirsty to have a drink. Get into the habit of drinking water throughout the day.

#### Keep a look out for the signs of dehydration:

- dark-coloured urine
- passing small amounts of urine
- headaches
- lack of concentration

Check with your GP if you're concerned about any symptoms.



**Remember to  
drink fluids every day**

 **8-10** glasses  
every day

 **6-8** glasses  
every day

**Make sure to drink plenty  
of water. Keeping hydrated  
is so important.**

## Keep protein on the menu

You may find it difficult to eat as much as you used to.  
Try having smaller meals, with healthy snacks in between.

### High protein meal ideas



2 poached eggs on wholemeal toast



Baked beans on wholemeal toast



Mixed vegetable omelette



Pork and vegetable noodle stir fry



Lentil soup with wholemeal bread



Tuna, sweetcorn and lettuce in pitta bread



Chicken, lettuce and tomato sandwich on wholemeal bread

### Snack suggestions high in protein



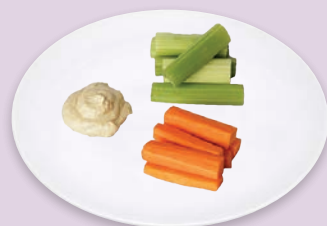
Yogurt with chopped fruit



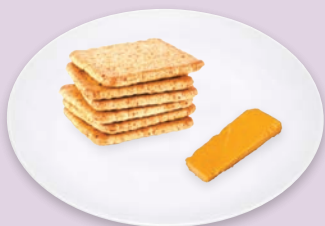
Bowl of milk pudding with berries



Stewed fruit with low fat custard



Hummus with vegetable sticks



Crackers and cheese



#### Top tip

Adding some dairy like milk, cheese or yogurt to meals and snacks can increase your protein intake when your appetite is reduced.



#### Did you know?

High protein foods are important as they prevent muscle loss. You can include high protein foods in meals and snacks throughout the day.



## Choosing foods from the food pyramid

# Vegetables, salad and fruit



Base your meals on plenty of foods from this food group and enjoy a variety of colours. This is the one food group where more is generally better!



## Healthy eating advice

### Eat five or more portions every day

Eating five or more portions of fruit and vegetables a day can help prevent heart disease and some types of cancer. They are also low in calories and can help to control body weight. Fruits and vegetables are full of vitamins, minerals and fibre, and are low in fat.

Fruit juice or smoothies can be counted as only one portion a day.

### Stock up on fruit and vegetables

There are many varieties to choose from, including fresh, frozen, dried and tinned. Frozen and tinned can be useful to have in your freezer or store cupboard. Choose fruit tinned in juice rather than syrup (which contains lots of sugar) and vegetables in water rather than brine (which contains lots of salt).

### Get the fibre your body needs from fruit and vegetables

Getting enough fibre is important for older adults for the maintenance of normal bowel function and the prevention of constipation. Vegetables, salads and fruits are a great source of fibre.

### Choose foods and drinks rich in vitamin C

Foods and drinks rich in vitamin C help the body absorb iron. Have some fruit or vegetables or a glass of orange juice with meals or with iron-rich foods like fortified breakfast cereal. Fruit, especially citrus fruit, green vegetables, peppers, tomatoes and potatoes are all good sources of vitamin C.

### Try to include a range of colours

When buying fruit and vegetables, try to include a range of colours (think of a rainbow) as the different coloured options contain different vitamins.



Aim to have five to seven servings  
from this shelf every day

## What is a serving?

Each of these examples shows **one serving** from  
the vegetables, salad and fruit shelf



**1** medium apple



**1** medium orange



**1** medium pear



**1** medium banana



**6** strawberries



**10** grapes



**16** raspberries



**100g** tinned fruit



**2** mandarin oranges



**2** plums



**2** kiwis



**40g** dried fruit



**½ cup** cooked vegetables  
– fresh or frozen



**1 bowl** salad – for  
example lettuce,  
tomato, cucumber



**1 bowl** homemade  
vegetable soup



**150ml** unsweetened  
fruit juice

## Choosing foods from the food pyramid

# Wholemeal cereals and breads, potatoes, pasta and rice



Starchy foods such as wholemeal bread, wholegrain and high-fibre cereals, rice, potatoes and pasta are a great source of energy, fibre and B vitamins and should be used as the basis for meals.



## Healthy eating advice

### Choose high fibre

Choose higher-fibre, wholegrain varieties such as whole wheat pasta, brown rice, or simply leave the skins on potatoes.

### Start each day with a healthy breakfast

Breakfast cereals are a great way to start the day – porridge oats are one of the best.

Choose fortified breakfast cereals as they are an excellent source of B vitamins and iron. Older adults can become deficient in B vitamins and iron which can affect your cognitive function. Foods fortified with B vitamins and iron help maintain your brain function as you age.

### Fibre is important for gut health

The fibre from these foods helps to prevent constipation. This reduces the risk of some common gut disorders. Remember to increase the amount of fibre-rich foods slowly – otherwise you may have some discomfort, wind and bloating. Fibre absorbs water like a sponge, so make sure you drink more water as you increase your fibre intake.

### Avoid raw bran sprinkled on your food

Raw bran sprinkled on your food interferes with your ability to absorb iron, calcium and other valuable nutrients from your food.





Aim to have three to five servings from this shelf every day

## What is a serving?

Each of these examples shows **one serving** from the wholemeal cereals and breads, potatoes, pasta and rice shelf



**½ cup** dry porridge oats



**½ cup** unsweetened muesli



**1 cup** flaked type breakfast cereal



**2 thin slices** wholemeal bread



**1½ slices** wholemeal soda bread



**1** pitta pocket



**2 medium** potatoes



**4 small** potatoes



**1 cup** plantain



**1 cup** yam



**1 cup** cooked rice



**1 cup** pasta



**1 cup** noodles



**1 cup** cous cous



### Serving guide

Use a 200ml cup to guide serving size for cereals, cooked rice and pasta.

## Choosing foods from the food pyramid

# Milk, yogurt and cheese



Low-fat milk and dairy foods such as yogurt and cheese are important sources of protein, calcium and vitamins A, D and B.



### Healthy eating advice

#### Have 3 to 4 servings a day

The protein found naturally in dairy foods helps to maintain strong muscles. Vitamin D is needed to help absorb calcium and therefore plays an important part in strengthening bone.

#### Go for low-fat

Reduced-fat or low-fat varieties are lower in fat but just as rich in important nutrients such as calcium and protein. These are very important as you get older.

#### Look after your bones

Milk in sauces and milk puddings are a great way to help you get enough calcium. Calcium is needed to help build strong bones. Semi-skimmed and skimmed milk contain as much calcium as whole milk.

#### Read the label

If you use a plant-based drink instead of milk choose an unsweetened, fortified soya drink with added calcium. Other plant based drinks can be low in calcium and protein, so remember to check the label.



Aim to have three to four servings from this shelf every day

## What is a serving?

Each of these examples shows **one serving** from the milk, yogurt and cheese shelf



**1 glass (200ml)** milk or fortified milk



**1 glass (200ml)** unsweetened soya drink fortified with calcium



**1 bottle (200ml)** yogurt drink



**2 thumbs (25g)** hard or semi-hard cheese such as cheddar or edam



**2 thumbs (25g)** soft cheese such as brie or camembert

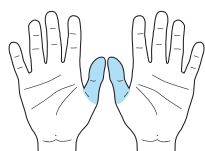
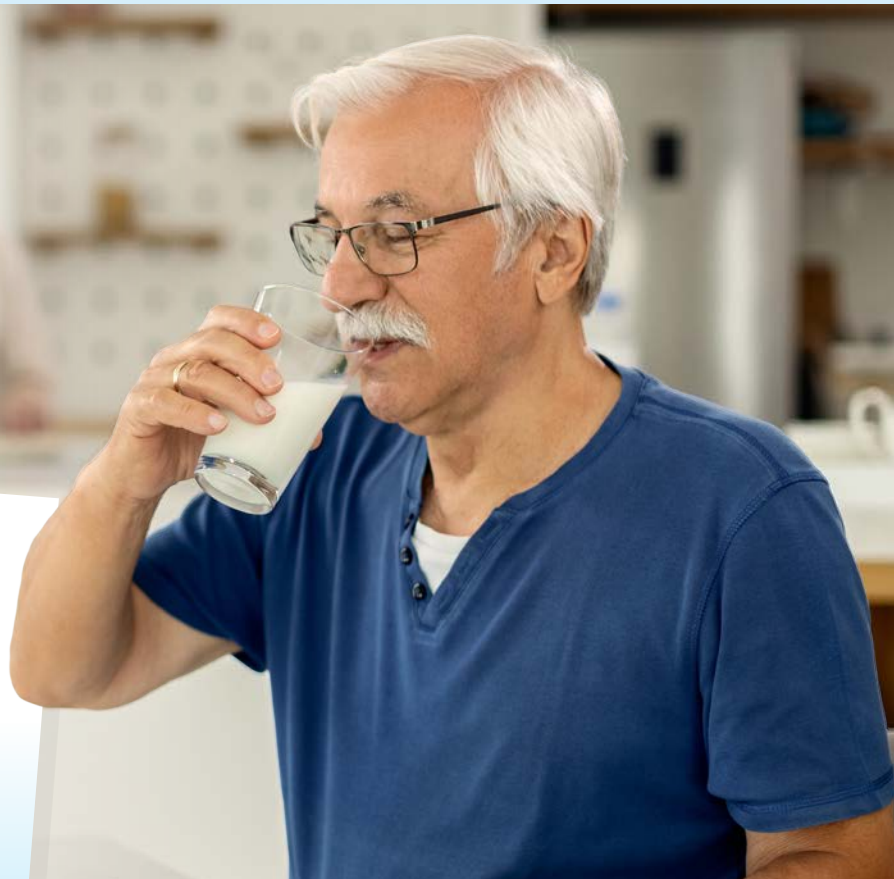


**1 carton (125g)** yogurt



### Look for fortified milk and yogurt

Fortified milk and yogurts can contain a range of added vitamins, minerals and protein. They can be a great choice to help you meet your daily nutrition needs so remember to check the labels.



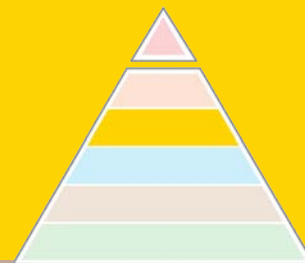
### Serving guide

Use the width and depth of your two thumbs to as a guide serving size for cheese.



Choosing foods from the food pyramid

## Meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans and nuts



Eat high-quality protein in at least two meals a day. This will help protect muscle and keep you strong.

Choose foods such as meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans, peas, lentils and nuts.



### Healthy eating advice

#### Eat protein rich foods

Choose lean fresh meat, poultry (without skin) and fish. Choose eggs, beans and nuts to include some meat-free meals in the week too.

#### Choose fish

All fish is a good source of protein, aim to eat it once or twice a week. Oily fish, such as salmon, mackerel and pilchards also contain omega 3 fatty acids, which are good for your heart, and should only be eaten once a week.

#### Eat iron-rich foods

The best source of iron is red meat, but iron is also found in pulses (such as peas, beans and lentils), oily fish like sardines, and eggs. Consider having a small glass of orange juice to enhance iron absorption from meats and vegetables at meal time.

#### Limit processed meats

Processed meats such as black pudding, sausages, bacon, chicken nuggets or burgers, should be limited as these meats are high in fat and salt and lower in iron. If cooking these grill or bake the meat on a rack rather than frying. This will allow some of the fat to drain away.



Aim to have two to three servings from this shelf every day

## What is a serving?

Each of these examples shows **one serving** from the meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans and nuts shelf



**2 eggs**



**$\frac{3}{4}$  cup** beans



**40g** unsalted nuts or seeds



**50–75g** cooked lean mince beef



**50–75g** cooked lamb



**50–75g** cooked pork



**50–75g** cooked lean chicken or turkey



**100g** cooked fish



**100g** cooked tofu



**$\frac{3}{4}$  cup** lentils



### Serving guide

The palm of your hand, width and depth without fingers and thumbs, shows how much you need in a day.

## Fats, spreads and oils



Some fat is needed in your diet but it is important to keep an eye on the overall amount of all fats, spreads and oils you eat as they are all high in calories.



### Healthy eating advice

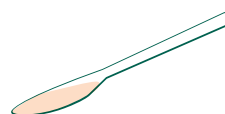
#### Use small amounts

Choose mono or polyunsaturated reduced fat or light spreads more often. Choose rapeseed, olive, canola, sunflower or corn oils and measure with a spoon.

#### Use healthy cooking methods

Limit the amount of mayonnaise, coleslaw and salad dressings you use as they also contain oil. Always cook with as little fat or oil as possible – grilling, oven-baking, steaming, boiling or stir-frying are the best ways to cook.

#### Serving guide



##### Butter

If using butter, spread lightly.



##### Reduced-fat spread

Portion packs found in cafes can guide the amount you use. One pack should be enough for two slices of bread.



##### Oils

Use one teaspoon of oil per person when cooking or in salad dressings.



## The top shelf



The top shelf on the food pyramid includes foods and drinks high in fat, sugar and salt. **These are not needed for good health and should not be consumed every day.**

If you are used to having biscuits or buns with tea a couple of times a day, this is a habit that can be changed gradually.



**Maximum once or twice a week in very small amounts.**

There are **no recommended servings** for top shelf foods and drinks because they are not needed for good health.



## Healthy eating advice

### Choose healthier snacks

Instead of having top shelf foods, snack on fresh fruit, yogurt, a small wholemeal scone, wholemeal crackers with cheese or fruit and nut mix to make your snack times more nutritious.

### Reduce salt intake

If you're buying processed foods, remember to check the information on the labels to choose those with less salt.

### Use herbs and spices

Our sense of taste weakens with age. This can lead to more salt being added to food to get the same taste you were always used to. Try replacing salt with pepper, herbs and spices to add flavour to your favourite dishes.

### Reduce sugar intake

To help lower your sugar intake, try to have fewer sugary fizzy drinks and sugary snacks such as biscuits and cakes.

## What about alcohol?

While many people enjoy drinking alcohol socially, alcohol does not contain any nutrients beneficial to health.

**There are no “safe” limits for alcohol, but less is best! If you do drink alcohol, it’s important:**

- to drink alcohol in small quantities, spread over the week.
- to allow at least 2 alcohol free days in the week.
- not to exceed the HSE recommended weekly limit. If you do choose to drink alcohol.

### Weekly limits

 **17** standard drinks

 **11** standard drinks



## Standard drinks

One standard drink equals a ½ pint of beer/lager, a small glass of wine or one single measure of spirits. One standard drink contains between 100–150 calories.

### Examples of one standard drink



½ pint  
of lager/beer



Small glass  
of wine



Single measure  
of spirits

### Remember also that alcohol:

- is high in calories
- may promote snacking which can result in weight gain
- increases the risk of developing certain types of cancer
- increases your risk of falling

## Don't forget your vitamin D

As you get older you need sufficient vitamin D all year round for bone and muscle health.

**Most people living in Ireland do not get enough vitamin D from their diet or from sunlight on their skin.**

The Department of Health recommends that if you are aged 65 and older, you should take a **15 micrograms (15µg)** vitamin D supplement every day to ensure you get the essential amount of vitamin D you need.



**Choose a supplement that contains 15 micrograms (15µg) of vitamin D**

This can be:

- a multi-vitamin supplement that contains 15 micrograms (15µg) of vitamin D,
- a calcium and vitamin D supplement that contains 15 micrograms (15µg) of vitamin D, or
- a vitamin D-only supplement that contains 15 micrograms (15µg) of vitamin D.



**Vitamin D supplements prescribed by a doctor or nurse**

If you are currently taking a vitamin D supplement that has been prescribed by a doctor or nurse that contains more than 15 micrograms (15µg), you should continue to take the supplement as prescribed.

### Foods that provide vitamin D

Older adults should also try to include foods that naturally contain vitamin D, such as oily fish and eggs, and foods that have vitamin D added – for example, vitamin D fortified milks, yogurts, breakfast cereals.





# Stock your store cupboard

Having a well-stocked kitchen makes cooking healthy meals quicker and easier.

Here are some of the basic ingredients for your shopping list to ensure that you can always rustle up a healthy, nutritious meal or snack. This is handy for bad-weather days when you don't feel like shopping, if you have a cold, or even if you are just tight for time.



## In the cupboard



Baked beans, mixed beans and chickpeas



Canned tuna and sardines



Canned soups



Canned tomatoes, tomato puree and passata



Tomato pasta sauces



Pasta & rice



Wholegrain breakfast cereals and porridge



Dried fruit



Mixed nuts



Nut butters



Lots of herbs and spices



Onions, garlic and ginger



Powdered milk and custard powder



Pitta pockets



Potatoes

## Top tips



### Stock up your cupboard

It is always a good idea to have some longer life foods in your store cupboard such as tins of tuna and sardines, baked beans, cans of chicken or lentil soup, tinned and dried fruit, dessert rice, and custard powder.

### Heat chilled and frozen foods all the way through

You might not always feel like cooking so try tinned, chilled and frozen ready-made meals. Always make sure you heat chilled and frozen food until it's steaming hot all the way through.



## In the freezer



Minced beef, turkey and chicken fillets



Fish fillets and prawns



Frozen vegetables and sliced peppers



Frozen herbs



Frozen fruit and berries\*



Bread and tortilla wraps



## In the fridge



Milk



Fresh soups



Yogurt



Eggs



Cheese



Unsweetened orange juice

\*Frozen fruit and berries need to be boiled for 1 minute, to reduce the risk of food poisoning.

### Vary what you eat

Dinner doesn't always have to be meat and two veg, some days it is fine to have beans, scrambled eggs or tuna mixed with sweetcorn and light mayonnaise on toast.

### Milk is a good source of calcium and protein

Have milk on cereal, in teas and coffees, as a drink with snacks and dinner and as a dessert such as custard or rice pudding. You need calcium for your bones.

### Stay warm

Hot meals and drinks help to keep you warm, so have regular hot drinks and eat at least one hot meal a day if possible. Eating regularly helps keep energy levels up during winter.

## Physical activity

If you are generally fit and have no health conditions, be active every day.

You need at least 150 minutes of moderate physical activity per week to keep yourself healthy and well. This can be divided into shorter and longer sessions. Shorter sessions of 10 to 15 minutes all add up. Aim for 30 minutes a day at least five times a week.

Spreading your activity out throughout the day rather than just once a day is much better.

Time your activity before meals that include protein. This helps build muscle.

Don't over exert yourself. Small and steady bouts of exercise are effective to maintain muscle strength.



**Talk to your doctor, public health nurse or community physiotherapist, if you have difficulty:**

- lifting or carrying 10 pounds (for example, the weight of a heavy bag of shopping),
- walking across a room,
- moving from a chair or bed,
- climbing a flight of 10 stairs, or
- if you have fallen in the past year.



**Read the physical activity booklet, developed in partnership with the Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists, for ideas and tips on how to stay active and flexible.**





# A guide to being active

Check out the ideas below to help you stay active.



## Moderate aerobic activity

**Aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity every week.**

Moderate aerobic activity includes walking, dancing or even pushing a lawnmower.



## Muscle-strengthening exercises

**Try muscle-strengthening exercises 2 or more days a week.**

Muscle strengthening activity includes digging, carrying groceries, step aerobics, hand-held weight exercises (lifting tins of beans!) or yoga.



## Household activities

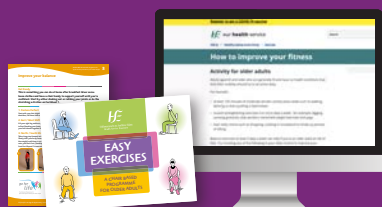
Daily chores such as shopping, cooking or housework are an easy way to be active. They break up periods of sitting.



**Balance exercises at least two days a week can help to improve your stability.**

**Try including any of the following in your daily routine:**

- yoga, tai chi or pilates,
- backwards and sideways walking,
- walking on your heels and your toes,
- standing up from a sitting position, and
- standing on one foot.



**For more information** on balance, strengthening and flexibility exercises, visit the HSE website at [www2.hse.ie/wellbeing/how-to-improve-your-fitness.html#older](http://www2.hse.ie/wellbeing/how-to-improve-your-fitness.html#older)

# Staying at your Best Weight

Your Best Weight is a weight you can maintain while living your healthiest and happiest life.

Many factors can affect your weight, like your age, your genes, your gender, your lifestyle and family habits, your sleep, and how you manage stress. Some of these factors can mean that staying at your best weight gets harder as you grow older. If you're not at your best weight for you, it can affect your mobility, which can affect your health and your quality of life as you get older.

Changing everyday behaviours can help you manage your weight. If you are living with obesity, it's important for you to seek specialist support. Your GP is best placed to talk to about this.

## Healthy habits for a healthy life

Following the four key healthy habits below can lead to moderate weight loss and better physical and mental health.

1. Being active
2. Getting a good night's sleep
3. Managing stress
4. Eating a healthy and varied diet

## Advice to manage weight

If you need to lose a few pounds to reach your best weight, do this slowly and gradually. The best way is to eat a healthy diet with good-quality protein while enjoying being physically active.

## Be mindful of what you eat and drink

Different foods have different nutrients so try to have a variety of meals throughout the week. Follow the food pyramid healthy eating guidelines and tips about portion size to help you lose weight slowly while making sure you include plenty of low-fat protein foods and drinks to keep your muscles strong.

## Start making some small simple changes to your diet



### Shopping and planning

- Fresh produce is almost always the best option. When it is not available, try healthy tinned and frozen foods – they are easy to store and prepare.
- Buy wholemeal and wholegrain breads, cereals, pasta and brown rice where possible. These are more filling.
- Make sure your store cupboard is stocked with key everyday ingredients, for example pasta, rice, and eggs.
- Plan your meals for the week so you know what you will be eating in advance. You can find more help with developing your food plans at [www.safefood.net/how-to/meal-plan](http://www.safefood.net/how-to/meal-plan).



### Cooking and eating

- Use healthier cooking methods such as grilling or baking, rather than frying or roasting with oil or fat.
- Try to keep to 3 meals and 2–3 snacks a day.
- Add more fruits and vegetables to your diet. At mealtimes, aim for half of your plate to be vegetables or salad.
- Try not to have foods that are high in calories, sugar and fat every day. Most contain very little nutrition. Limit them to small amounts at the weekend.

The information in this booklet is based on the Food Safety Authority of Ireland's 2021 report – Scientific Recommendations for Food-Based dietary guidelines for older adults in Ireland.