

## DIETARY GUIDELINES FOR OLD AGE

### **Ques. - Who is an elderly person?**

**Ans.** Individuals of 60 years and above (WHO) constitute the elderly. In India, the elderly constitute about 7 percent of the total population (Census, 2001) and by 2016 AD, this is likely to increase to 10 percent.

### **Ques. - How are the elderly different from other age-group?**

**Ans.** Ageing affects almost all the systems of the body, and is associated with several physiological, metabolic and psychological changes.

The changes include decline in:

- Physical activity
  - Digestion, metabolism
  - Bone mass
  - Muscle mass.
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- Failing eye-sight and impaired hearing may also occur.
  - Low appetite as a result of loss of taste and smell perception, dental problems, atrophic changes in GIT, constipation and decreased physical activity could lead to overall decrease of food intake and poor absorption of nutrients.
  - Inability to prepare food, economic dependency and other psycho-social problems adversely affects the health and nutritional status of the elderly.
  - There is a decline in immune function with advancing age, which leads to decreased resistance to infectious diseases. The increased parathyroid hormone (PTH) secretion in the elderly leads to increased bone turn over i.e. osteoporosis.
- Similarly, elderly individuals are at increased risk of osteomalacia i.e. defective bone mineralisation due to lack of exposure to sunlight and poor diet.

### **Ques. - How can the elderly lead an active life?**

**Ans.** - In general, majority of the health problems among the elderly are nutrition related. Consumption of nutritious foods rich in micronutrients including antioxidant vitamins & minerals and fibre, comfortable level of physical activity will enable the elderly to live active and meaningful healthy lives, without being a burden on society and their family members. Uncomplicated ageing can also be quite productive, say in the domestic sphere.

### **Ques. - What are the common diseases among the elderly?**

**Ans.** Resistance to disease declines in the elderly. The common ailments in the elderly are degenerative diseases such as arthritis (joint diseases), osteoporosis, osteomalacia, cataract, diabetes, cardiovascular (stroke, heart diseases) problems, neurological (Parkinson's, Alzheimer's) and psychiatric (dementia, depression, delirium) disorders and cancer. Besides these, the prevalence of respiratory, gastro intestinal tract (GIT) and urinary tract infections is common among the elderly.

### **Ques. - What type of diet should the elderly eat?**

**Ans.** As people grow older, they tend to become physiologically less active and therefore need fewer calories to maintain their weights. The daily intake of oil should not exceed 20 g. Use of ghee, vanaspati, butter, and coconut oil should be avoided.

They need foods rich in protein such as pulses, toned milk, egg-white etc. The elderly population is prone to various nutritional deficiencies. Therefore, the elderly need nutrient-rich foods rich in calcium, micro-nutrients and fibre.

Apart from cereals and pulses, they need daily at least 200-300 ml of milk and milk products and 400 g of vegetables and fruits to provide fibre, micro-nutrients and antioxidants. Inclusion of these items in the diet improves the quality of the diet and bowel function. Flesh foods and eggs add to the quality of diet.

The diet needs to be well cooked, soft and less salty and spicy.

Small quantities of food should be consumed at more frequent intervals and adequate water should be consumed to avoid dehydration (hyponatraemia – lower than normal levels of blood sodium) and constipation.

**Ques. – How can elderly remain fit and active?**

**Ans.** Exercise is an integral part of maintaining healthy life. It helps to regulate body weight. The risk of degenerative diseases is considerably decreased by regular exercise. Exercise schedule should be decided in consultation with a physician.

**POINTS TO PONDER**

- Eat a variety of nutrient-rich foods.
- Match food intake with physical activity.
- Eat food in many divided portions in a day.
- Avoid fried, salty and spicy foods.
- Consume adequate water to avoid dehydration.
- Exercise regularly.
- Body composition changes with advancing age, and these changes affect nutritional needs of the elderly.
- Elderly or aged people require reduced amounts of calories, as their lean muscle mass and physical activity decrease with ageing.
- Elderly are more prone to diseases due to lowered food intake, physical activity and resistance to infection.
- Good /healthy food habits and regular comfortable level of physical activity are required to minimise the ill effects of ageing and to improve the quality of life.
- Elderly need adequate amounts of protein, carbohydrates, fat, vitamins, minerals and dietary fibre.
- Elderly need more calcium, iron, zinc, vitamin A and antioxidants to prevent age-related degenerative diseases and for healthy ageing.