

Senior Health

Growing old gracefully

How many vibrantly healthy and energetic elderly people do you know? Unfortunately when we reach our senior years many of us suffer for a lack of energy, joint and muscle pains, poor circulation, poor memory, and digestive disturbance. However, so many of the symptoms can be managed and eased through diet. You don't have to sit back and just accept your discomfort as though your symptoms are part and parcel of growing old. By changing the way you eat and by taking a few specific nutritional supplements you can start to restore a sense of vitality.

If you are not sure where to start, or if you have read conflicting information in the press, then this article should help to give you a focused approach on how to achieve better health.

Looking after your bones

Osteoporosis is a progressive disease in which the bones gradually become weaker and weaker, causing changes in posture and making the individual extremely susceptible to bone fractures. Whilst it is known to be a problem for older women (1 in 3 over the age of 50) it also commonly affects men (1 in 12 over the age of 50). It's a frightening condition because it is accompanied by very few symptoms. The only signs are a reduction in height or frequent fractures and once you have been diagnosed it seems as if the damage has already been done with little you can do to reverse the process. It's true that bone regeneration does slow down in the later years and certain contributory factors like long term medications, smoking, drinking, taking steroids and having an acidic diet can all start to take their effect.

>However, you don't have to resign yourself to a life of waiting for your bones to literally crumble away. Some of the contributory factors you may not be able to change, like the use of long-term medications, but you can learn how to keep your body in an alkaline state, which helps to slow down the progression of this disease. The strength of your bones is very dependent on your acid-alkaline balance. If your body becomes too acidic then alkaline minerals (such as calcium) are removed from bone stores to buffer this acidity back into a more preferred alkaline state. These alkaline minerals were originally deposited into your bones to provide strength and resilience. If your body spends more time in an acidic rather than alkaline state then your bone density can become compromised very quickly.

Foods and drinks that push the body towards acidity include tea, coffee, carbonated drinks, sugar and sugar snacks like biscuits and cakes, red meat and alcohol. If you want to protect your bones

then it's a good idea to keep these foods and drinks down to a minimum. You can help your body maintain an alkaline balance by eating more alkaline forming foods and drinks including filtered water, fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, lentils, pulses and millet. As you can see an alkaline forming diet tends to be one that contains more vegetarian sources of protein and plenty of water.

Tips for healthy bones

- Avoid acid forming drinks such as coffee, tea, hot chocolate and carbonated soft drinks.
- Increase calcium by snacking on nuts and seeds to help build bone strength.
- Increase magnesium by eating at least 2 green leafy vegetables a day to boost bone minerals.
- Consult a personal trainer and start a regular weight bearing exercise programme to increase bone density.

Switch off joint pain

As we age, the wear and tear on joints and muscles can become more and more apparent. It becomes a vicious cycle of pain and inflammation, from conditions such as osteo and rheumatoid arthritis, which make us less mobile, which in turn contributes to increased stiffness and progression of these diseases.

Although you can't turn back the clock to refresh damaged cartilage and bone you can learn how to switch off the pain and inflammation. Your body creates the sensation of pain and inflammation by producing pro-inflammatory hormones at the site of damage. These hormones attract the attention of specific immune cells, which trigger heat and swelling to immobilise the area. This process generates a high level of 'free radicals' or toxic chemicals, which damage the joint cells and cartilage and make the inflammation even worse. This pro-inflammatory cycle is exacerbated by eating foods that are high in saturated fats.

To switch off this process the body needs to firstly clear up all the 'free radicals' by pouring in a high level of antioxidants and it needs to produce anti-inflammatory hormones, which actively suppresses any more inflammation from taking place. These anti-inflammatory hormones are made from fatty acids found in foods that contain omega-3 and omega-6 oils and antioxidants are found in highly coloured fruits and vegetables.

By reducing our foods rich in saturated fat – cheese, red meat, fried food, ice-cream, cream and butter and by increasing foods rich in Omega-3 and 6 oils – oily fish, nuts and seeds along with eating plenty of antioxidants – blueberries, raspberries, cherries, pumpkin, sweet potato, carrots, peas, apricots, mango and pineapple you can reduce your body's ability to produce pro-inflammatory hormones and boost your ability to produce anti-inflammatory hormones which literally switches off your pain.

Studies have also shown that a particular family of foods called the 'Nightshades' contain a chemical substance that can activate pain and inflammation associated with arthritis. By avoiding these foods you can also help to reduce pain and inflammation. Potatoes, tomatoes, chillies, aubergine and peppers are all included in this family and should be avoided if you have arthritis. Many people who suffer from arthritis have also found that supplementing with an antioxidant complex and fish oil to be of great benefit. Other useful supplements include Glucosamine sulphate and Chondroitin which provide the building blocks of cartilage and therefore may help increase the formation of new cartilage.

Tips for pain free joints

- Cut back on foods high in saturated fat to reduce pro-inflammatory hormones
- Increase foods rich in omega-3 and 6 fats to increase anti-inflammatory hormones
- Increase foods rich in antioxidants to clean up free radicals
- Avoid Nightshade family foods to reduce activating pain and inflammation
- Supplement with fish oil, glucosamine sulphate, chondroitin and antioxidants to help support joint integrity

Save your eyesight

It's not uncommon to worry about your eyesight as you get older since many elderly people suffer from a drastic decline in eyesight and experience poor night vision. The eye is a fragile area of the body as is made up of a complex system of muscles, specialist light receptors and a lens. Just like cartilage found in joint spaces the lens in the eye is very vulnerable to free radical attack and decay. This coupled with a general decline in the activity of the specialised light receptors can lead to a reduced level of sight.

Nutrients that are important for eye health include antioxidants such as vitamins A, C and E; these nutrients protect eye tissue from damage caused by free radicals. Another powerful antioxidant that is important for eye health is lycopene which protects the eye against cataract development through its antioxidant properties, tomatoes are a rich source of this nutrient.

Recent studies have also proposed that two specific types of 'carotenoids' (another family of antioxidants) called Lutein and Zeaxanthin are also important for eye health. Lutein and Zeaxanthin are found naturally in vegetables and fruit. Lutein is found in yellow peppers, mango, bilberries and green leafy vegetables such as spinach and broccoli. Zeaxanthin can be found in orange peppers, broccoli, corn, spinach, tangerines, oranges and eggs.

Avoiding sugar rich foods is also an important factor for maintaining eyesight since excess sugar and insulin in the body can lead to damage of the lens tissue. Swapping sugar snacks for savoury

snacks can help to reduce this factor. Being dehydrated also has a negative impact on eye health so replace teas and coffees with filtered water.

Smoking in particular causes harm to the tissues of the eye and is strongly associated with two common age-related eye diseases: cataract and macular degeneration. Cigarette smoking increases the levels of free radicals in the body which accelerate ageing and also affects the body's ability to absorb or extract necessary vitamins and minerals from food. These factors are known to damage eye tissue and therefore can affect eye health.

Tips for protecting vision

- Prevent dehydration by drinking at least 1 ½ litres of water a day
- Wear sunglasses with good UV protection in bright sunlight
- Increase antioxidant intake to prevent free radical damage by increasing your intake of brightly coloured fruit and vegetables
- Stop smoking!!

5 ways to age gracefully

- Stay mentally active – participating in mentally stimulating activities such as playing cards, doing crossword puzzles, and reading, learning to play an instrument or a new language can all help maintain memory.
- Eat less sugar and refined carbohydrates – these foods contribute to the development of diabetes type II which is one of the fastest growing health problems. This condition accelerates the aging process and if uncontrolled can lead to a wide range of other health problems.
- Regular physical activity – 30 minutes of aerobic activity most days of the week improves mood, increases flexibility, strengthens bones and improves cardiovascular capacity. Some studies also suggest that that exercise helps circulation to the brain improving mental capacity.
- Drink more water - every tissue, cell and organ is composed of water and functions optimally only in the presence of adequate water levels. Degeneration associated with ageing will occur at a quicker rate if you are dehydrated. Don't use thirst to help you determine when you should be drinking water, because this will mean that you are already dehydrated.
- Eat super foods – this includes foods that have a very high antioxidant capacity such as prunes, blueberries, blackberries, kale, strawberries, spinach and raspberries that all help quench free radical damage that contributes towards the ageing process.