



## A Decade-by-Decade Guide to Eating Your Way Healthy for Women

By Linda Formichelli

Eating the same way in your 40s as you did in your 20s? Ignoring your nutritional needs when you're 60? Not you! Build your best, healthiest body by adjusting your diet and eating habits to address the specific needs of each decade.

### 20s: Bone Building

In your 20s, you're still building up bone density, so this is the decade to help your bones grow strong and healthy. "You really want to make those bones as dense as you can while you're young, during those bone-growing years," says Ruth Frechman, RD, an Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Spokesperson and author of *The Food Is My Friend Diet*. She calls it "filling the bank" because in later years, your body will lose some of that bone, so the more you start with the better off you are.

Enter calcium, which not only builds strong bones but is also important for healthy muscles, nerves, and heart. You need 1,000 mg per day, so enjoy dairy products, opt for calcium-fortified orange juice and cereals, and load up on beans, leafy greens, almonds and canned salmon with bones.

Young women don't need to pass up dairy products for fear of gaining weight. Instead choose fat-free or low-fat milk and yogurt, reduced-fat cheese and for a sweet treat pick nonfat calcium-fortified hot cocoa, says Frechman.

### 30s: Baby on Board

These days, women are having babies well into their 30s, which makes folic acid an important nutrient this decade. Folic acid helps prevent neural tube birth defects like spina bifida. Unfortunately, "Many studies have shown that folic acid is one of those nutrients that we tend to run low in," says Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Spokesperson Jeannie Moloo, RD.

For women who plan on becoming pregnant, the 2010 Dietary Guidelines recommend consuming 400 micrograms per day of folic acid from fortified foods and/or supplements, in addition to foods high in folate. Many breads, cereals and grain products are fortified with folic acid; fruits and vegetables are good sources of folate. If you're trying to get pregnant, your doctor may recommend a folic acid supplement.

Moloo also calls the 30s the "prevention decade," meaning, if you haven't already, it's time to start thinking about how to prevent chronic diseases that become more prevalent as we age.

Look to foods containing healthy fats such as omega-3 fats and monounsaturated fats.

- Found in nuts, olive and canola oils and avocados, monounsaturated fats improve blood cholesterol levels, which can decrease your risk of heart disease, and they may help with keeping blood sugar levels in check (potentially helpful for appetite control and reducing the risk for diabetes). A few studies have looked at monounsaturated fats as being beneficial for specifically reducing belly fat, but firm findings are lacking.
- Scientists believe omega-3 fats (found in fish) may influence how fat is used and stored in the body. It's possible omega-3s push fat more toward energy use than to storage in your body. Omega-3s may help reduce body fat with or without cutting calories. Animal studies have supported the theory; human studies are encouraging, but not as conclusive. Add exercise on top of upping omega-3s and you can lose more body fat.

### 40s: Keeping Score

If you haven't been treating your body right, the 40s is where this will start showing up. "You are starting the aging process," says Frechman. "So you really want to make sure you're in tiptop shape."

The 40s are a good time to be vigilant about eating plenty of fruits and vegetables. They're packed with vitamins, minerals, fiber and antioxidants plus low in fat and calories. Adults need at least 2 cups of fruit and 2 ½ cup of vegetables a day. Explore new tastes by trying a new fruit or vegetable a couple of times a month.

Antioxidant supplements are not a substitute for eating a variety of fruits and veggies, as scientists are just learning how different antioxidants work in synergy with one another to keep the body healthy. "With supplements, you don't know for sure if you're getting all of the benefits that you could be getting from the whole foods," says Frechman.

Try snacking on fruit like apples, bananas, and clementines, opt for veggie-packed broth-based soups, salads piled with greens and smoothies with berries. If you don't like the taste of vegetables raw, try roasting them, which makes them sweeter.

Another important nutrient for the 40-and-over set is fiber, which can help protect against heart disease and some types of cancer. Women under 50 need 25 grams per day, but most adults get only about half that amount. Luckily, the fruits and veggies you're eating for the vitamins and minerals are rich in fiber, and whole grains and beans are other good sources.

## 50s: Calorie Counting

The 50s are a time of big changes thanks to perimenopause and menopause. "Hormone fluctuations can be very dramatic, and with hormone fluctuations can come changes in metabolism," says Moloo. "It's a time when women tend to have weight creep on, and it's that very metabolically active fat around the middle, which has been shown to drive diabetes and other health-related issues." So Moloo suggests decreasing calorie intake and increasing activity levels if you start to experience weight gain.

Also essential: Vitamin D is used in every cell in the body, says Frechman. It's essential for bone health and researchers believe it may reduce the risk of some cancers, heart disease and infectious diseases. D is difficult to get from food—the best sources are fortified milk, orange juice, and cereals and also fish like salmon and tuna.

The recommended daily amount of vitamin D recently increased to 600 IU per day for women ages 19 to 70. but the majority of adults don't get enough. Consult your doctor or registered dietitian about your need for a supplement.

## 60s and Beyond: Protein Power

Frechman teaches a class called Feeling Fine After 55, and she finds that many of the women in her class aren't getting enough protein. Protein, along with regular strength building exercise, is essential for maintaining muscle, which we tend to lose as we age. Consuming enough protein may also be linked with bone health.

The average woman needs about 5 to 6 ounces of protein foods each day. Good sources include meat like beef, chicken, fish, pork and lamb. Not a meat eater? You'll also find protein in, eggs, beans, tofu and nuts, as well as low-fat or fat-free milk, yogurt and cheese.

Vitamin B12, which helps your body make red blood cells and keep the brain and nervous system healthy, is another vital nutrient for women over 60. You can get B12 through any food that comes from an animal: meat, fish, dairy products and eggs. However, as people get older they can develop a reduced ability to absorb vitamin B12, says Frechman. She recommends talking to your doctor to see if you need a supplement.

Each decade brings with it specific health concerns—and different nutrition needs. Eat right for your age and you'll sail through the decades feeling great.

---

*Linda Formichelli has written on health and nutrition for Fitness, Health, Women's Health, WebMD, Alternative Medicine, Redbook, Oxygen, and other national magazines. She is based in North Carolina. Visit Linda at [www.lindaformichelli.com](http://www.lindaformichelli.com).*

[www.commonhealth.virginia.gov](http://www.commonhealth.virginia.gov)

The contents of the CommonHealth weekly emails may be reprinted from an outside resource in the area of health, safety, and wellness and is intended to provide one or more views on a topic. These views do not necessarily represent the views of the Commonwealth of Virginia, CommonHealth, or any particular agency and are offered for educational purposes. If you have questions or concerns about this article, please email us at [wellness@dhrm.virginia.gov](mailto:wellness@dhrm.virginia.gov)