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## Nutrition needs for 'very old' Web Posted: 06/28/2009 12:45 CDT

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**Siobhan Walsh** - Siobhan Walsh

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As people live longer, demographers have begun to make a distinction between the "young old," or people 75 or under, and the "very old" or "old old," those who are more than 75 years old.

The very old have special nutrition needs that research shows is directly linked to maintaining quality of life. At the same time, the very old are entering a time of life when many rely on others to help them.

Society's very old often require the same hands-on care and attention we give young children. Left to fare for themselves, many aging adults will simply forget or fail to eat a proper diet, stay hydrated and maintain an active lifestyle.

"Eating a wide variety of foods provides a good source of important nutrients," says Amanda Lott, registered dietitian and director of food service at Morningside Manor, a long-term care community. "Simple lifestyle modifications and dietary changes are a large part of preventative health."

Regardless of someone's age, it's never too late to shed bad habits, such as smoking or regular snacking on processed junk foods that are high in fat and salt and low in vitamins and minerals.

A good start to each day includes morning servings of fresh or canned fruit, cereal with a good fiber content, and skim milk or yogurt, which contain calcium.

"For the older adult, breakfast is crucial in helping to start the day off on the right foot," says Lott.

Skipped meals any time of the day can lead to trouble. Seniors benefit from routine. Regular meals are the best way to make sure daily requirements of calcium, vitamins A and C, beta carotene and protein are met, all of which work to mitigate health problems and chronic disease, such as diabetes.

Seniors who overeat or are inactive, on the other hand, can suffer from obesity or the development of hypertension, cardiovascular disease, diabetes and cancer.

Caregivers can help seniors stay healthy by limiting consumption of red and processed meats and high-fat foods, such as butter and cheese. Fish, beans, chicken and turkey are leaner, protein-rich alternatives. High-fiber foods such as cereal and popcorn, can help prevent constipation.

An active lifestyle, adapted to an individual's age and abilities, is also important in the equation. This can be a daily walk around the block, with sunlight being a natural source of Vitamin D, or it can mean spending a few minutes stretching each morning, including those who are wheelchair bound. Light hand weights help maintain upper body strength.

Sedentary seniors can see the benefits from participating in programs such as Matter of Balance, which feature gentle exercises that can help avoid crippling falls.

Caring for the very old is a gift, both for the senior and the caregiver. And as the population ages and men and women live longer, there are more and more people who depend on others to help keep the last years of life healthy ones.

If you are interested in participating in a Matter of Balance class or volunteering to become a program leader, contact the Bexar Area Agency on Aging health programs coordinator, Burma Hyde, at (210) 362-5220 or email her at [bhyde@aacog.com](mailto:bhyde@aacog.com)

*Siobhan Walsh is a registered dietitian. Her Smart Choices column appears every other Monday in SA Life. Email her at [siobhanrd@yahoo.com](mailto:siobhanrd@yahoo.com).*

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