

# Module # 3: Healthy Aging

# **Geriatrics, Palliative Care and Interprofessional Teamwork Curriculum**

## **Module # 3: Healthy Aging**

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# **Geriatrics, Palliative Care and Interprofessional Teamwork Curriculum**

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#### I. Overview

There is no doubt that the elderly population is increasing at a tremendous speed. Therefore, it is crucial that elderly people be proactive in leading healthy and active lifestyles. Such lifestyles may be achieved regardless of where the elderly live, whether it is in an acute, long-term, or community setting. Diet, proper nutrition, routine health examinations, regular socialization, and social support are just some of the ways that aid in improving psychological, physical, and emotional well-being. It is imperative that health care professionals promote wellness among the elderly population and assist patients in improving their overall physical, mental, social, and emotional state. Health care professionals have the ability to make a profound impact on the lives of elderly people by helping them achieve optimal wellness through education, outreach, and support. Family members, caregivers, and friends may also make a positive difference in the lives of the elderly through their assistance and support as well.

#### II. Learning Objectives

1. Define wellness as it relates to healthy aging.
2. Identify key areas that promote healthy aging among the elderly.
3. Provide a framework for ways in which elderly people may lead healthy lifestyles.

#### III. Diet And Nutrition

It is no secret that proper *diet* and *nutrition* are vital in maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Eating balanced meals, limiting red meat intake, and taking vitamin supplements all lead to healthy aging. There are several ways in which elderly people may improve their health through proper diet and nutrition.

## 1. Diet

The term *diet* refers to the actual sum of food that is consumed by a person. Diets among the elderly population may differ tremendously due to varying chronic illnesses or other conditions that require certain types of dietary restrictions. Common diets among the elderly include low-fat, low-calorie, or high-fiber diets among others. Increasing dietary fiber intake by eating an increased number of fruits, vegetables, and grains is a common goal for many people trying to improve their overall health. Research has shown that one's diet plays a clear role in developing major diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, cancer, and stroke. <sup>1</sup> Since heart disease, cancer, and stroke are considered to be three of the four leading causes of death, having a healthy diet will certainly help minimize the risk of such deadly diseases. Elderly people should discuss their diet with their primary care physician or with a registered dietician to ensure that they are following the diet best suited for them. The *Journal of Nutrition* has published a modified food pyramid that is geared toward people over seventy years of age and is very helpful in breaking down the different types of foods that are necessary for older adult consumption (See Learning Resource A). <sup>2</sup>

## 2. Nutrition

*Nutrition* is a process that refers not only to the consumption of food and other nourishing substances but to the subsequent breakdown and extractions of the nutrients contained in such substances that help aid in bodily function. Many elderly people do not have an adequate dietary intake, resulting in nutrient deficiencies. Calcium and iron deficiencies are prevalent among the elderly and may be minimized through regular supplementation. Taking a *multivitamin* is a great way to supplement a healthy diet and ensure that necessary nutrients are being consumed. Local pharmacies contain a plethora of multivitamins that are geared toward older adults. It is important that elderly people speak with their health care provider to determine which type of multivitamin is best for them. In addition to taking a multivitamin, elderly people should drink large quantities of *water* to maintain hydration and proper organ function. Elderly individuals should also speak with their health care provider to determine how much water consumption is necessary to improve and maintain their overall health.

#### IV. Exercise

Sustaining a regular exercise regimen is very important to improve wellness and health among the elderly. Physical activity is so important because it will help maintain *mobility*, which becomes increasingly difficult as people age. Also, taking part in regular exercise will help eliminate a sedentary lifestyle. This may significantly minimize the risk of developing coronary heart disease as well as reduce the rates of obesity, diabetes, osteoporosis, and hypertension. Some types of physical activities that are most beneficial to older adults include walking, gardening, resistance training, light weights, yoga, tai chi, and other forms of light to moderate exercise. It is important that elderly people work with their health care providers to come up with individually tailored exercise regimens.

#### V. Preventive Care

The most effective ways that elderly people are able to lead healthy lifestyles and promote healthy aging are to take preventive measures to improve their overall wellness. This may be achieved by doing the following:

##### 1. Routine Medical Check-ups

Too often, people begin to neglect their health as they get older and make fewer visits to their primary care physician. Unfortunately, many people wait until something goes horribly wrong with their health before getting screened for routine check-ups. Having annual cancer screenings and doing annual blood work to check for diabetes, blood sugar, cholesterol, and triglyceride levels may help prevent health problems down the road. Also, having knowledge of medical conditions that exist in one's immediate family is imperative because it may help determine the risk for developing a particular condition at some point later in life. In addition, knowing the history of illness throughout one's family may help project life expectancy.

##### 2. Sleep

Sleep is perhaps one of the most overlooked factors that may help increase wellness and improve overall health among the elderly. The reality is that many elderly suffer from *insomnia* and find themselves having difficulty either falling asleep or remaining asleep. While there is an array of prescription medications that help people with their sleep, there are other natural ways that the elderly may abide by to increase their sleep. This may include following a sleeping schedule, reducing caffeine intake or any other stimulants that may interfere with sleep, and regularly exercising. Speaking with a health

care provider to discuss best sleep strategies is the most effective way to alleviate this problem.

### **3. Socialization**

Research suggests that social engagement and maintaining social connections and activities may help prevent cognitive deterioration in old age and may be associated with better health status in older adults.<sup>3</sup> Thus, baby-boomers as well as current elderly should remain active and involved in the community and amongst peers to the best of their ability. There are several activities that are available to seniors throughout various communities. Health care professionals as well as caregivers, family members, and friends should encourage the elderly to remain active and increase their socialization. For those people living in the community, senior centers offer a vast array of social activities that promote social engagement. For those individuals living in acute or long-term settings, many of the facilities offer several types of social activities as well. Elderly people should feel encouraged to reach out and get involved, and health care professionals should keep abreast of current resources available so that they may refer them to their patients whenever appropriate.

### **4. Home Safety And Fall Prevention**

Home safety is one of the largest concerns among elderly people. This is due to the fact that people want to remain in the home as they age. Therefore, it is crucial to take steps to safeguard the home in order to prevent falls and other injuries, which may result in institutionalization. The following tips may significantly help elderly people reduce the risk of falling in their homes:

- Wear shoes and slippers with non-slip soles. Avoid wearing socks only- they might cause a slip due to their material.
- Use caution if the bathroom floor becomes wet. If the bathroom has handrails, hold onto them when getting up or down. Install non-slip strips in the bathtub.
- Never leave any clothes, magazines, bags, or other objects lying around on the floor.
- Remove or secure any loose rugs or mats.
- Make sure hallways and staircases are well-lit. When walking up or down stairs, hold onto a handrail or use a cane.

## 5. Senior Centers

Elderly people should be aware of local senior centers throughout their communities, as they offer some of the most valuable and current resources. Most senior centers have a wealth of information about issues pertaining to the elderly including retirement, long-term care, prescription drugs, and legal assistance. In addition, many senior centers offer a plethora of activities and events that promote socialization between older adults living in the community. The New York City Housing Authority provides a detailed list of Senior Centers throughout all five boroughs of New York City and is an excellent resource for elderly people as well as health care professionals working with them. Current information is available at

<http://www.nyc.gov/html/nycha/html/ccshtml/seniorcenters.shtml>.

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**VI. References**

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Preventive Task Force. (1996). Guide to clinical preventive services (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) Alexandria, VA: International Medical Publishing.

<sup>2</sup> Russell, R.M., Rasmussen, H., & Lichtenstein, A.H. (1999). Modified Food Guide Pyramid for People over Seventy Years of Age *Journal of Nutrition*. 129:751-753.

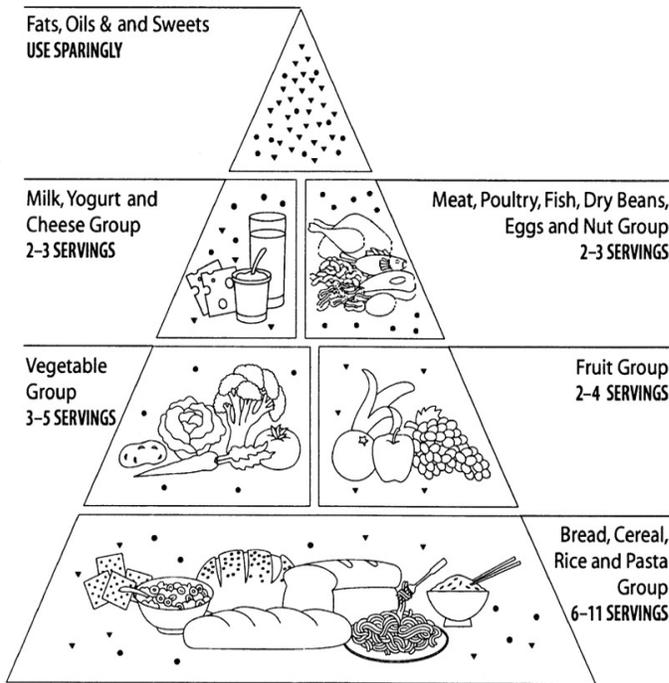
<sup>3</sup> Bassuk, S.S., Glass, T.A., & Berkman, L.F. (1999). Social Disengagement and Incident Cognitive Decline in Community-Dwelling Elderly Persons. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 131(3) 165-173.

## Learning Resource A

### Modified Food Guide Pyramid For People Over Seventy Years Of Age

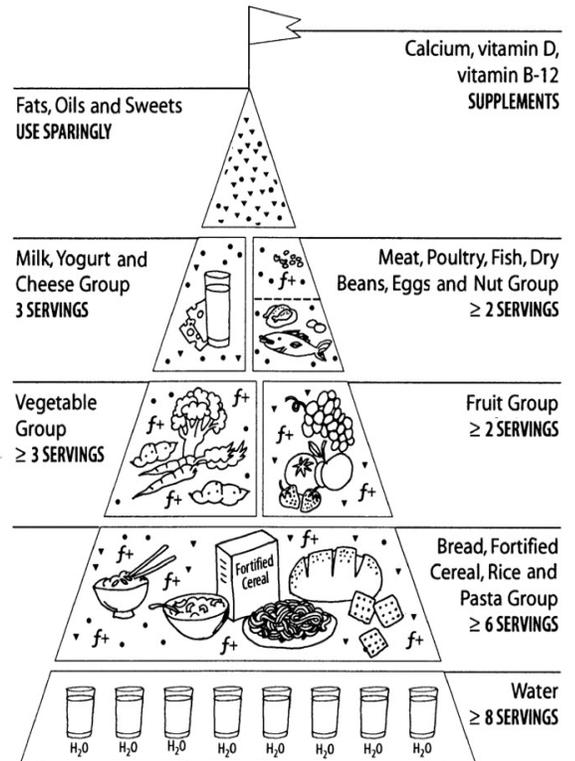
\* This information may be found at <http://jn.nutrition.org/cgi/content/full/129/3/751> as referenced in the *Journal of Nutrition*. 1999;129:751-753.

**Original Food Guide Pyramid**



• Fat (naturally occurring and added)  
 ▼ Sugars (added)  
 These symbols show fat and added sugars in foods.

**Modified Food Pyramid for 70+ Adults**



• Fat (naturally occurring and added)  
 ▼ Sugars (added)  
 f+ Fiber (should be present)  
 These symbols show fat, added sugars and fiber in foods.