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Nutrition Checklist for Older Adults

As your loved one ages, it can become more difficult for them to achieve a well-balanced diet and obtain proper nutrition, which helps keep them healthy and strong. Fortunately, there are simple things you can do to help them achieve good health and proper nutrition.

Overcoming Obstacles to Good Nutrition

Your body changes significantly as you age — and [so does how you eat](#).¹

“A well-balanced diet can be hard to achieve as adults age,” says LaTresh Walker, Health Care Director at [Highgate at Temecula](#).² “This could be due to a number of things, such as failing eyesight due to macular degeneration, difficulty using appliances, not able to drive any more to be able to go shopping, medication changes, poor dental health, difficulty chewing and swallowing, memory loss, and much more.”

Maybe you notice that your mom isn’t eating a balanced diet or that your dad hardly eats at all. If your loved one doesn’t eat enough, doesn’t eat the right foods, or loses the ability to absorb certain nutrients, it can cause health issues or make health conditions worse.

Using the Nutrition Checklist for Older Adults

This Nutrition Checklist for Older Adults offers more than 25 tips to help family caregivers cope with common problems that can make it harder for older people to eat healthily. Challenges that are addressed include:

- Dining alone
- Problems chewing or swallowing food

1 <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/nutrition-and-seniors-why-your-moms-appetite-may-have-changed>

2 <https://www.highgateseniorliving.com/communities/temecula>

- Food tasting different
- Lack of appetite
- Physical problems making it hard to eat
- Food and medicine interactions
- Dehydration

“A well-balanced diet requires planning, preparation, and cooking to make it happen,” says Steve Lin, Health Care Director at [Highgate at Vancouver](#).³

These simple tips will help support your loved one to eat healthy, well-balanced diet, cope with changes that affect their appetite and eating, and make mealtime enjoyable again.

Dining Alone

Think about some of your most favorite meals. Did you eat them surrounded by loved ones — or sitting at a table by yourself?

Eating is a social exercise, and food is often a symbol of love and security. However, [many older adults live alone](#).⁴ “Cooking for a family is easier because there is motivation to feed your family well,” says Steve Lin, Health Care Director at [Highgate at Vancouver](#).⁵ “When it is just you, people sometimes resort to something easier while sacrificing nutrition.”

If you had to eat alone day after day, how long would it be before you stopped cooking elaborate dinners and started microwaving frozen dinners?

Studies have shown that [eating alone is associated with a host of unhealthy traits](#),⁶ including loneliness, social isolation, unhealthy food choices, and

³ <https://www.highgateseniorliving.com/communities/vancouver>

⁴ <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/nutrition-for-seniors-table-for-1-the-dangers-of-dining-alone>

⁵ <https://www.highgateseniorliving.com/communities/vancouver>

⁶ <https://time.com/4995466/eating-alone-metabolic-syndrome/>

inadequate fruit and vegetable consumption.

That's why it's so important to help your loved one safely experience the joy of eating with others. Although this is more challenging now due to the coronavirus pandemic, there are still some things you can do to try to help if your loved one is tired of cooking for one and eating alone. Here are some ideas:

- ❑ Try to share meals with your loved one.
- ❑ Consider varying where your loved one eats. If the table seems empty when no one is there, eat on the porch when the weather is nice.
- ❑ Look for local “congregate meal events” hosted by places such as senior centers, churches, and other community organizations.
- ❑ Stop by a nearby assisted living community for lunch. Eating in the dining room and [socializing with peers can help create friendships](#).⁷
- ❑ Check your local [Area Agency on Aging](#)⁸ for details and information on whether volunteer drivers or specialized transit services are available to assist with transportation.

Pro Tip: “If you’re having a hard time getting a loved one to eat enough, the No. 1 way to help is to sit down and eat with them.”

— Steve Lin, Health Care Director, Highgate at Vancouver

⁷ <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/wont-you-be-my-neighbor-making-friends-in-assisted-living>

⁸ <https://www.n4a.org/>

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Problems Chewing or Swallowing Food

If you notice your loved one is reluctant to eat or they appear to have a difficult time chewing, they may have a problem with their teeth, gums, or dentures. Some medical conditions, such as [dysphagia](#),⁹ make swallowing difficult or painful. Ill-fitting dentures can become uncomfortable or even cause painful sores and irritation.

Here are some things you can try to ensure your loved one doesn't avoid eating meat, fruits, or vegetables and miss out on important nutrients:

- ❑ Arrange a dental appointment to ensure the health of their gums and teeth and, if applicable, that their dentures fit. Make regular dental checkups to prevent serious problems from developing.
- ❑ Prepare softer, creamier foods, which are easier to consume for those who are experiencing oral discomfort. For example, rather than a steak or pork chop, opt for fish, [plant-based proteins like beans and lentils](#),¹⁰ recipes that include ground meat, or cuts that can be cooked until tender.
- ❑ Avoid foods that are difficult to chew thoroughly, like raw carrots.
- ❑ Serve meals with healthy sauces that help moisten ingredients and facilitate chewing and swallowing.
- ❑ Make sure to serve water with meals.

⁹ <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/dysphagia/symptoms-causes/syc-20372028>

¹⁰ <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/whats-the-food-like>

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Food Tasting Different

As you age, [your senses change](#).¹¹ You lose taste buds, so food you used to love eating might not be as tasty as it once was. Your sense of smell also changes, so food can seem more bland or sour.

Taste and smell are important for healthy appetite and eating. If your loved one is experiencing a dulling of their senses, they might also not feel as hungry. Here are some tips for making meals more appealing:

- ❑ Try adding color and texture to make your loved one's food more interesting. For example, try eating brightly colored vegetables like carrots, sweet potatoes, broccoli, and tomatoes.
- ❑ Use aromatic ingredients, such as onions, garlic, ginger, celery, or carrots, at the start of cooking to create deeper flavors and aromas.
- ❑ Encourage your loved one to experiment with flavoring their food with a little butter, olive oil, a squeeze of citrus, cheese, nuts, or fresh spices and herbs like sage, thyme, or rosemary.
- ❑ Cut back on drinking alcohol or smoking to improve sense of taste.

Pro Tip: "Variety can be helpful. Try different textures and colors. If your loved one is adventurous, try different cultural foods. You can also appeal to old memories by going to restaurants that your loved one used to frequent."

— Steve Lin, Health Care Director, Highgate at Vancouver

¹¹ <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/smell-and-taste>

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Lack of Appetite

If your mom keeps telling you she's "just not hungry," there could be a few reasons why: If your loved one is feeling sad or [depressed](#),¹² they might experience a loss of appetite. Lack of appetite could also stem from lower levels of physical activity.

Instead of assuming your loved one doesn't wish to eat, it helps to identify what the difficulties are and make adjustments. Here are some things you can try:

- ❑ Ensure your loved one gets physical activity. Encourage simple exercises, such as going for a walk, practicing tai chi, or washing dishes.
- ❑ Offer five to six small meals or snacks instead of three larger ones.
- ❑ Spritz [essential oils](#),¹³ such as peppermint and citrus, on warm washcloths for your loved one to use to wash their hands before mealtime to help increase their appetite.
- ❑ Check with their doctor to make sure that there are no treatable causes for their loss of appetite, such as depression or medication side effects.

Pro Tip: "Find food that they like and offer it to them. If they aren't a big eater, give them smaller portions at meal times or offer snacks throughout the day. Keeping them active and busy throughout day will help them build up an appetite, too."

— LaTresh Walker, Health Care Director, Highgate at Temecula

¹² <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/5-warning-signs-of-depression-in-older-adults>

¹³ <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/does-holistic-healthcare-really-make-a-difference>

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Physical Problems Making It Hard to Eat

If your loved one has [Parkinson's disease](#),¹⁴ stroke, [arthritis](#),¹⁵ or any number of other health conditions, it can make it harder for them to cook and feed themselves. Mobility issues may make them unable to shop for and/or cook their own nutritious meals, and strength and coordination issues can make it challenging to actually eat.

If your loved one struggles with physical issues that make it hard to eat, here are some things you can try:

- ❑ Work with an occupational therapist who can make individualized recommendations, such as rearranging things in the kitchen, making a custom splint for their hand, or giving your loved one special exercises to strengthen their muscles.
- ❑ Encourage independence by [adapting cooking and serving dishes and utensils](#)¹⁶ to make eating easier.
- ❑ Serve food that can be eaten easily with hands, such as hard-boiled eggs, small sandwiches, egg rolls, and orange segments. Finger foods enable your loved one to eat independently, helping to maintain their dignity and control at mealtimes.
- ❑ Find a meal delivery provider near you on the [Meals on Wheels America website](#).¹⁷
- ❑ Hire a [home care aide](#)¹⁸ who can provide assistance with things like grocery shopping, cooking, eating, and cleaning.

14 <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/dementia-alzheimers-parkinsons-mild-cognitive-impairment-whats-the-difference>

15 <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/6-arthritis-pain-relief-tips-for-older-adults>

16 <https://www.independentliving.com/category/kitchen-and-cooking-aids>

17 <https://www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org/find-meals>

18 <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/infographic-the-key-differences-between-in-home-care-and-assisted-living>

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Food and Medicine Interactions

Some medications, such as Alzheimer's drugs, some anti-depressants, cardiac drugs, antibiotics, and stimulants, have side effects that can affect your appetite or your body's ability to absorb key nutrients.

- ❑ Ask your loved one's doctor¹⁹ or pharmacist if any of their prescriptions or medical treatments could be causing a direct reduction in appetite or other related symptoms, such as constipation, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, bad tastes in the mouth, or dry mouth.
- ❑ Be sure to ask about any food-drug interactions whenever your loved one's doctor prescribes a new drug.

Notes:

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has a slight shadow on the right side, suggesting it's resting on a surface.

19 <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/5-tips-for-communicating-with-your-parents-doctor>

Dehydration

The [risk of dehydration](#)²⁰ is higher among older adults. Your loved one might have a reduced sense of thirst, so it's easy to forget to drink enough. Some medications have a diuretic effect. It might be challenging to get up to get a drink when they're thirsty.

Unfortunately, dehydration is [one of the most prevalent reasons for hospitalization](#)²¹ among people over 65. Here are some tips for increasing your loved one's fluid intake:

- ❑ Leave drinks in a place where they can both reach and see them, such as on a coffee table in the living area.
- ❑ Serve flavored and colored water and foods with high water content, such as watermelon, strawberries, oranges, cucumber, soup, and yogurt.
- ❑ Avoid drinks with salt or added sugars.
- ❑ Offer your loved one prompts and encouragement to drink.

Pro Tip: "Provide them with small water bottles, and each time they finish one, give them a special treat in between or at meal times. If your loved one does not like the taste of water, try offering them vitamin water or flavored drops or packets that can be added to the water for a different taste."

— LaTresh Walker, Health Care Director, Highgate at Temecula

²⁰ <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/aging-wisely-article/seniors-and-hydration>

²¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4621229/>

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Most family caregivers face challenges like these at some point. These simple tips will help you empower your loved one to eat healthily, cope with changes that affect their appetite and eating, and make mealtime enjoyable again.



This checklist is brought to you by Highgate Senior Living, an industry-leading assisted living and memory care provider offering a holistic approach to care. Pioneering change in the senior living industry, Highgate is committed to creating a unique and desirable living option where each resident can live a life of purpose.

Visit our website at www.highgateseniorliving.com to learn more.

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