



DEPARTMENT OF **PUBLIC HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES**

January 2026 Nutrition Article **Digestion Importance**

The digestive system plays a vital role in nutrient absorption and waste elimination. As people age, the digestive process can slow down, leading to issues like constipation, GERD, and other gastrointestinal disorders. These changes can have a significant impact on overall health and well-being. By understanding and addressing these changes, older adults can maintain a healthy digestive system and improve their quality of life.

Considering the digestive system is an operation that runs all the way from your mouth to your anus – with its sole purpose to break down what you need to live (ahem ... food) and deliver all nutrients to the organs and systems that rely on them – it's worth thinking of it as one of the most essential functions supporting your overall health.

Malnourishment

Older adults may require fewer daily calories compared to younger people, but they still have similar or even higher nutrient needs.

Malnourishment occurs when someone is not consuming enough important nutrients – water, vitamins, minerals, carbohydrates, fats, and proteins. As a result, their body cannot function well. It can affect a person's ability to participate in everyday activities and can negatively impact their quality of life. Someone who is malnourished is more likely to experience physical and mental decline and have a higher risk of serious illness.

You can't always tell if someone is malnourished by looking at them. Malnourished older adults may be either underweight or overweight. For example, an obese person may be eating enough calories, but they are not getting the key nutrients they need to stay healthy.

In the United States, malnutrition in older adults is surprisingly common. According to recent studies, about one in four adults aged 65 and older is malnourished or at risk of malnutrition.

Hunger Signals

Unfortunately, as we age, eating becomes more influenced by the hormones that regulate hunger – and those hormones cannot be trusted. Much like driving without a gas gauge to tell us when we're nearing empty, we'd have to rely on knowing our tank size and usage, so we don't get stuck on the side of the road. As our need for fuel (ie., food) stays constant but our signals fade, being intentional about eating becomes increasingly important.

The trustworthiness of hunger signals in older adults can be undermined by several factors. Over time, a natural decline in taste and smell can make food less appealing. Slower metabolism reduces calorie needs, which can lead to a lower hunger drive. Hormonal changes may further disrupt appetite, and certain medications can cause nausea, alter taste, or create dry mouth. Social factors, such as loneliness or social isolation, can also reduce interest in eating and increase the risk of unintentional weight loss.

Together, these issues can lead to misinterpreting hunger cues and increase the risk of malnourishment or other health issues. Training yourself to eat regularly, even when you don't feel hungry, helps support a healthy digestive system.

Routine of Eating

Habits are built through repeated behavior — good, bad, or neutral. Our brains rely on this process to automate actions, so we don't have to spend excess energy constantly thinking through every task. From the way you sign your name to how you brush your teeth or eat certain foods ... repetition shapes routine.

The same is true for eating consistently to support health. Because habits form through repeated behavior, they can also be changed over time. Many older adults, for various reasons, do not eat enough throughout the day. They have repeated certain patterns until the brain treats them as automatic. For example, folks who “aren’t hungry” for breakfast have just trained their brain not to expect food at that time.

A consistent eating routine — based more on schedule than appetite — helps older adults keep their digestive systems running more smoothly. With limited hours in a day, how are older adults going to get the nourishment they need (see: [Dietary Guidelines: Chapter 6](#)) if they are not routinely taking in the required nutrients? Setting alarms, treating eating as a task, keeping quality foods available for each meal and snack, and repeating this daily helps build the habit of eating in a way that supports good health for older adults.

Quality Food

When it comes to our digestive health, it's very important to remember your digestive system is the engine that allows your body to receive the nutrients it needs to keep you alive. As we age, that engine — and all of its parts — gets older, too, so keeping it as clean and supported as possible becomes essential for healthy aging.

Eating quality foods on a routine schedule, regardless of hunger signals, not only feeds the engine what it needs but also helps keep out the unnecessary additives (the synthetics in much of what Americans consume) that can clog the system and promote disease.

Building a routine of daily intake that includes wholesome fruits and vegetables, clean proteins — both animal (flesh you cook yourself and/or eggs) and plant (beans, nuts, seeds) — along with basic and whole grains ([Whole Grains A-Z](#)), and limited clean dairy (check ingredient lists and choose items you can make yourself) is the key.

Jaime J. Larese, MS, RDN, NBC-HWC is a registered dietitian nutritionist and nationally board-certified health and wellness coach working in Montana. If you're interested in scheduling a nutrition consult with Jaime, visit: bit.ly/4d21owg. If you're on Instagram or Facebook, follow her @jlnutritioncoaching + @thefoodstoeat

Recipe of the Month

Homemade Jam

Replace sugar-laden jams with fresh fruit and add it to oatmeal or yogurt or spread it on toast.

INGREDIENTS:

- 2 cups of raspberries (or berry of your choice)
- 2 Tbsp chia seeds

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Place raspberries (or other berries) in a saucepan.
2. Cook over medium heat.
3. Stir and cook until the berries break down.
4. Remove from heat and let cool.
5. Add chia seeds and let it sit to gel.
6. Stir
7. Store in a container and refrigerate

