

Common Choice vs. Nutrient-Dense Foods

This tip sheet is based on general guidelines for older adults. Individual needs vary depending on health conditions, medications, and other personal factors. Participants should consult with a doctor or registered dietitian to determine the nutrient intake that is right for them.

Common Choice	Nutrient-Dense Choice	Explanation
White rice, white bread, white pasta	Brown rice, whole-grain bread, whole-grain pasta	Reduce refined grain intake and increase dietary fiber intake.
Yogurt	Plain, full-fat or low-fat yogurt (no added sugars) with added fruit	Choose dairy without added sugar. Adding fruit may increase added sugar and should be monitored.
Butter	Avocado oil or olive oil	Choose minimally processed healthy fats rich in beneficial fatty acids.
Sweetened milk or flavored milk	Plain milk without added sugar	Choose dairy without added sugar when possible.
Processed/cured beef (e.g., sausage, hot dogs)	Unprocessed meat	Avoid highly processed meats and prioritize whole, unprocessed protein sources when possible.
Smoked, salted, or canned meats, poultry, and seafood	Unprocessed meats, chicken, turkey, and fish with no added salt	Decrease sodium intake.
Salt	Herbs and spices	Decrease sodium intake.
Fried chicken	Grilled chicken breast	Decrease fat intake.
Regular hamburger bun with beef patty	Whole-grain bun with grilled chicken patty	Increase dietary fiber intake and decrease fat intake.
French fries	Baked sweet potato fries	Increases vegetable variety along with a decreased fat intake.

Brownie	Fruit salad	Decrease fat/sugar intake. Fruit salad contains natural sugar, not added sugar. Whole fruits contain fiber, vitamins, water, and natural sugars, so if controlling sugar content, pay attention to serving sizes.
Pasta with cream-based sauce	Pasta with mixed vegetables and tomato sauce	Decrease fat intake while increasing vegetable consumption.
Salted vegetables	Seasoned vegetables (i.e., herbs and spices other than salt)	Decrease sodium intake.
High sugar, ready-to-eat cereal	Whole-grain ready-to-eat cereal fortified with vitamin B12	Decrease added sugar intake, increase dietary fiber intake, and increase vitamin B12 intake. Whole food sources of vitamin B12 (e.g., eggs, meat, dairy) are preferred, when possible, for older adults.
Meat-based chili	Bean or vegetable chili	Decrease saturated fat intake and increase plant-protein intake.
Boiled vegetables	Roasted or steamed vegetables	Decrease nutrients loss during the cooking process.

Consider the regional population being served when planning menus. Make sure that meals contain variety in color, texture, and food choice. Minimize highly processed, packaged foods in menu planning.