

Incorporating Seafood Into Older Adult Meals

Why Seafood Matters for Older Adults

Seafood, particularly omega-3-rich fish, is a key component of a healthy diet and a priority protein source for older adults. Seafood provides a unique combination of nutrients especially important for aging. It offers high-quality protein to prevent sarcopenia, increases omega-3 fatty acids for heart and brain health, supplies vitamin B12 for neurological function, delivers vitamin D for bone health, and provides potassium for blood pressure regulation.

Recommended seafood intake is approximately 8 ounces (about 2 servings) per week, with a focus on omega-3-rich options. Regular consumption is linked to a reduced risk of heart disease, stroke, and sudden cardiac death.

Meeting the seafood recommendation can be challenging due to temperature control, cost, and supply chain factors. This tip sheet focuses on practical, operationally feasible strategies. These include canned, pouched, and shelf-stable seafood. These options allow senior nutrition programs to incorporate seafood regularly while maintaining food safety and Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) compliance.

Health Benefits of Seafood for Older Adults

- **Healthy heart:** Omega-3 fatty acids (EPA and DHA) in fatty fish reduce inflammation, lower triglycerides, and reduce risk of heart disease and stroke.
- **Brain health:** Regular seafood consumption is associated with reduced cognitive decline and may help manage depression symptoms.
- **Muscle preservation:** High-quality complete protein supports muscle maintenance and helps prevent sarcopenia.
- **Bone health:** Fatty fish such as salmon and sardines are among the few natural food sources of vitamin D, which supports calcium absorption and bone strength.
- **Eye health:** Omega-3 fatty acids support retinal health and may reduce risk of age-related macular degeneration.
- **Anemia prevention:** Seafood is one of the richest natural sources of vitamin B12, a nutrient of special concern for older adults.

Operationally Feasible Options for Senior Nutrition Programs

Canned and pouched seafood eliminates the primary operational challenge of temperature maintenance while providing the same nutritional benefits as fresh or frozen options. They are also shelf-stable, cost-effective, easy to portion, and require minimal preparation, making them ideal for both congregate and home-delivered meal programs.

Table 1: Recommended Canned or Pouched Options (Low Mercury, High Omega-3)

Seafood	Protein (3 oz)	Omega-3 (EPA + DHA)	Key Nutrients
Canned salmon (with bones)	21 g	High	Vitamin D, vitamin B12, calcium
Canned light tuna (in water)	24 g	Moderate	Vitamin B12, potassium
Canned sardines (in water or olive oil)	21 g	Very High	Vitamin D, calcium, vitamin B12
Canned mackerel	20 g	Very High	Vitamin D, vitamin B12
Pouched salmon	21 g	High	Vitamin D, vitamin B12
Pouched tuna	24 g	Moderate	Vitamin B12, potassium
Canned crab	16 g	Low-Moderate	Vitamin B12, zinc
Canned clams	22 g	Moderate	Vitamin B12 (very high), iron

Sodium note: Choose canned seafood labeled “no salt added” or “low sodium” where feasible or drain and rinse to reduce sodium content.

Mercury note: Light tuna is lower in mercury than albacore/white tuna. Sardines, salmon, mackerel, and clams are all low-mercury, high-omega-3 choices.

Meal and Menu Ideas Using Canned/Pouched Seafood

These preparation ideas are designed for congregate and home-delivered meal programs, requiring minimal equipment and no temperature-critical fresh seafood handling:

Tuna-Based

- Tuna salad on whole grain bread or with whole grain crackers and sliced vegetables.
- Tuna noodle casserole with whole grain pasta, peas, and low-sodium cream of mushroom soup.
- Tuna and white bean salad with olive oil, lemon, and herbs.

- Tuna pasta bake with tomato sauce and vegetables.
- Tuna melt on whole grain English muffin with reduced-fat cheese.

Salmon-Based

- Salmon patties (canned salmon, egg, whole grain breadcrumbs, herbs), baked, not fried.
- Salmon and potato casserole with dill and capers.
- Salmon salad with celery, onion, and plain yogurt instead of mayonnaise.
- Salmon spread on whole grain crackers as an appetizer or light protein option.
- Salmon pasta with olive oil, garlic, spinach, and lemon.

Sardine-Based

- Sardines on whole grain toast with sliced tomato and herbs (one of the most nutrient-dense, cost-effective options available).
- Sardine and white bean stew with tomatoes, garlic, and kale.
- Sardine pasta with olive oil, capers, and whole grain pasta.

Clam/Crab-Based

- New England-style clam chowder (reduced sodium, with potato and vegetables).
- Clam sauce over whole grain pasta.
- Crab cake patties baked (canned crab, egg, herbs, whole grain breadcrumbs).
- Crab and vegetable casserole.

Mixed Seafood

- Seafood chowder using a combination of canned clams, salmon, and potatoes.
- Seafood pasta bake with canned tuna and salmon, tomato sauce, and vegetables.
- Seafood rice casserole with mixed canned seafood, brown rice, and vegetables.

Casseroles and Mixed Dishes: A Practical Strategy

Casseroles and mixed dishes are particularly effective for incorporating seafood into SNP menus because they:

- Stretch a small amount of seafood across a full meal portion.
- Combine seafood with vegetables and whole grains in a single dish, simplifying menu compliance.
- Are familiar and appealing to the older adult population.
- Can be prepared in bulk and portioned easily.
- Travel well for home-delivered meals when served at appropriate temperatures.

Tips for Seafood Casseroles

- Use canned or pouched seafood — no temperature-critical fresh fish handling required during prep.

- Combine with high-fiber vegetables (e.g., peas, spinach, broccoli, carrots) to increase nutrient density.
- Use whole-grain pasta, brown rice, or potatoes as the grain or starch component.
- Season with herbs and spices (e.g., dill, lemon, garlic, parsley, paprika, thyme) rather than excess salt.
- Use olive oil or a small amount of butter rather than cream-based sauces to manage saturated fat.
- Bake rather than fry for consistency with recommended nutrition intake.

Food Safety for Senior Nutrition Programs

Older adults are at increased risk for foodborne illness, making food safety a critical consideration for seafood service.

General Guidance

Safe internal temperatures:

- Fish and shellfish: 145°F
- Casseroles containing seafood: 165°F

Canned and pouched seafood food safety tips:

- Check cans for dents, bulging, or rust before use. Discard or avoid damaged cans when possible.
- Once opened, transfer unused canned seafood to a covered container and refrigerate. Use within 3-4 days.
- Pouched seafood is shelf-stable until opened. Use immediately after opening.
- For home-delivered meals, including canned or pouched seafood in shelf-stable meal kits eliminates cold-chain requirements entirely.

Fresh and frozen seafood:

- Thaw frozen seafood in the refrigerator, never at room temperature.
- Keep cold during transport, maintaining an internal temperature of 41°F.
- Avoid serving raw or undercooked seafood.

Seafood and Mercury: What Senior Nutrition Programs Should Know

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recommend that older adults choose seafood from the “Best Choice” list, which is low in mercury and safe to eat 2-3 times per week. The following, commonly available, affordable seafood options are all on the FDA/EPA Best Choice List:

- Salmon
- Light canned tuna
- Sardines

- Cod
- Tilapia
- Shrimp
- Pollock
- Catfish
- Clam
- Crab
- Flounder
- Haddock
- Trout

Limit or avoid swordfish, shark, king mackerel, tilefish, orange roughy, bigeye tuna, and marlin. These are high in mercury and not recommended for regular consumption.

Albacore/white canned tuna is safe but higher in mercury than light tuna. Limit to one serving per week.

Table 2: Nutrient Comparison: Top Senior Nutrition Program-Friendly Seafood Choices

Seafood (3 oz cooked or canned)	Protein	Vitamin D	Vitamin B12	Omega-3	Cost
Canned salmon	21g	High	2.6 mcg	High	Low-Moderate
Canned light tuna	24g	Low	9.3 mcg	Moderate	Low
Canned sardines	21g	High	7.6 mcg	Very High	Low
Canned mackerel	20g	High	16 mcg	Very High	Low
Canned clams	22g	Low	17 mcg	Moderate	Low-Moderate
Baked/broiled salmon	21g	Very High	2.6 mcg	Very High	Moderate-High
Baked tilapia	22g	Low	1.9 mcg	Low	Low-Moderate
Baked cod	15g	Low	0.9 mcg	Low	Moderate

DRI Compliance: Seafood's Contribution

A single 3-oz serving of seafood contributes meaningfully toward the SNP one-third DRI per meal requirement:

- Meets or exceeds the one-meal protein requirement for most older adults.

- Provides a significant portion of the daily vitamin B12 DRI (2.4 mcg), which is particularly important for older adults with absorption challenges.
- Contributes to vitamin D intake (600-800 IU/day), especially fatty fish such as salmon and sardines.
- Supports potassium goals (2,600-3,400 mg/day).

Nutrition Education Tips for Participants

- Educate participants that canned fish is nutritionally equivalent to fresh fish. Many older adults are unaware that canned salmon and sardines provide the same omega-3s and protein as fresh options.
- Highlight canned salmon and sardines for bone health. Their soft, edible bones are an excellent source of calcium, which is especially valuable for participants who do not consume dairy.
- Seafood is one of the few whole food sources of both vitamins D and B12, making it uniquely valuable for older adults who commonly under-consume both.
- Encourage participants to try seafood mixed into familiar dishes (e.g., casseroles, pasta, soups) if they are hesitant about eating fish as a standalone entrée.
- The nutrient recommendations in this tip sheet are based on general guidelines for older adults. Individual needs may vary depending on health conditions, medications, and other personal factors. Participants should consult with their doctor or a registered dietitian to determine the nutrient intake that is right for them.

Visit the Nutrition and Aging Resource Center website for more resources on [Nutrition Education](#) and [Nutrition Guidelines](#).

Resources

- [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#)
- [Advice About Eating Fish](#) (FDA and EPA)
- [Selecting and Serving Fresh and Frozen Seafood Safely](#) (FDA)
- [Food Safety for Older Adults](#) (FDA)
- [Omega-3 Fatty Acids](#) (NIH Office of Dietary Supplements)
- [Vitamin D](#) (NIH Office of Dietary Supplements)
- [Vitamin B12](#) (NIH Office of Dietary Supplements)
- [Food Data Central](#) (USDA)
- [Sustainable Seafood](#) (NOAA)
- [Fish and Omega-3 Fatty Acids](#) (American Heart Association)
- [Nutrition Services and OAA Requirements](#) (ACL)

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