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Perspective

Nutritional Interventions in Aging Science: Dietary Strategies for Healthspan Extension

Simon Jack*

Department of Geriatrics, Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, USA

DESCRIPTION

Nutrition plays an important role in shaping health outcomes throughout the human lifespan and its importance becomes even more pronounced with advancing age. As the body undergoes physiological changes, such as reduced metabolic rate, altered hormonal signaling and decreased digestive efficiency, nutritional needs shift. Proper dietary strategies have the potential to slow age-related decline, support organ function and reduce the risk of chronic diseases that commonly accompany aging.

One of the most studied dietary strategies in aging research is Caloric Restriction (CR), which involves reducing daily caloric intake without causing malnutrition. Animal studies consistently demonstrate that CR extends lifespan and improves markers of health across species ranging from yeast to primates. The underlying mechanisms appear to involve reduced oxidative stress, improved mitochondrial function, enhanced autophagy and alterations in insulin signaling pathways. While the evidence in humans is less extensive, clinical trials such as the CALERIE study suggest that moderate CR can improve cardiovascular and metabolic health, providing support for its role in promoting longevity.

Intermittent Fasting (IF) has also attracted attention for its effects on aging. IF typically involves cycles of feeding and fasting, with common patterns including time-restricted feeding or alternate-day fasting. These regimens appear to improve insulin sensitivity, stimulate cellular repair processes and lower markers of systemic inflammation. In addition, fasting triggers a metabolic switch from glucose to fat utilization, producing ketone bodies that may protect against neurodegeneration. Although more research is needed in older adults, early findings suggest that IF could support cognitive and metabolic health with aging.

Beyond energy intake, the quality of the diet is a decisive factor in determining health outcomes. Diets rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes and healthy fats provide antioxidants, vitamins and minerals that reduce oxidative damage and support cellular repair. In contrast, diets high in processed foods, refined sugars and saturated fats contribute to inflammation, insulin resistance and cardiovascular disease all of which accelerate biological aging.

The Mediterranean diet is a well-studied example of a dietary pattern associated with healthier aging. Characterized by high consumption of olive oil, fish, nuts, fruits, vegetables and moderate wine intake, this diet has been linked with reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and cognitive decline. Its benefits are believed to arise from a combination of anti-inflammatory nutrients, polyphenols and favorable lipid profiles. Longitudinal studies in European populations have shown that adherence to this diet correlates with longer lifespan and greater functional independence in old age.

Another dietary approach that has gained attention is the DASH diet (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension), designed to lower blood pressure through a nutrient-rich eating pattern emphasizing fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat dairy. Although originally targeted at hypertension, the DASH diet has shown broader benefits, including improved cardiovascular outcomes and reduced risk of age-related conditions.

Micronutrients also play significant roles in aging. Adequate intake of vitamin D, vitamin B12, calcium and omega-3 fatty acids is particularly important for older adults. Vitamin D and calcium are essential for maintaining bone health, reducing the risk of osteoporosis and fractures. Vitamin B12 supports neurological function, yet absorption often declines with age, leading to deficiencies that may contribute to cognitive decline. Omega-3 fatty acids, commonly found in fish oils, are linked to reduced inflammation and improved brain health.

Polyphenols, a class of plant-derived compounds, are another area of growing interest. Found in foods such as berries, tea, cocoa and red wine, polyphenols exhibit antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties. Some, such as resveratrol, have been studied for their ability to activate longevity-associated pathways,

Correspondence to: Simon Jack, Department of Geriatrics, Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, USA, E-mail: jacksimon@hotmail.com

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including sirtuins. While results from human trials are mixed, polyphenols remain promising components of a diet that supports healthy aging.

Beyond specific nutrients, gut microbiota is increasingly recognized as a mediator of nutritional effects on aging. Diet shapes the diversity and composition of the gut microbiome, which in turn influences metabolism, immunity and even brain function. With age, the gut microbiome tends to lose diversity, contributing to inflammation and frailty. Diets rich in fiber, probiotics and prebiotics may help maintain a balanced microbiome, promoting resilience against age-related decline.

It is also important to consider the challenges older adults face in maintaining adequate nutrition. Reduced appetite, chewing difficulties, medication interactions and socioeconomic constraints often limit dietary quality. Addressing these barriers requires practical strategies such as nutrient-dense meal planning, fortification and community-based nutrition programs. Ensuring accessibility to healthy foods is an important component of public health strategies to improve aging outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Nutritional interventions represent a powerful means of supporting healthy aging and reducing the burden of age-related disease. From caloric restriction and intermittent fasting to balanced dietary patterns like the Mediterranean and DASH diets, evidence suggests that dietary choices influence longevity by affecting inflammation, metabolism and cellular repair mechanisms. Adequate intake of key micronutrients, incorporation of polyphenol-rich foods and support for gut microbiome health further enhance the benefits of nutrition in older adults.

Although no single diet guarantees extended lifespan, consistent evidence underscores the role of nutrition as a modifiable factor in aging. Personalized dietary strategies, accounting for genetics, lifestyle and medical history, will likely become more important as aging science advances. By adopting and sustaining health-oriented dietary practices, individuals can significantly improve their chances of aging with greater vitality, resilience and independence.