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# EXPLORING AGING: The what and why of senior dieting

Monday, March 22, 2010



I do a lot of reading on issues relating to senior health and wellness and it always amazes me how many articles make a big deal out of things that should be common sense. You know the ones I mean—they lead with headlines like “Exercise is good for seniors!” and “A healthy diet can reduce seniors’ risks of obesity!”



It seems there’s a neverending supply of studies — and a never ending corps of senior health reporters — that exist specifically to remind us that older bodies work in largely the same way as younger bodies. The impression in many of these pieces seems to be that there’s such a fundamental difference between an older adult’s body and a younger adult’s body that the average person would think that different rules should obviously apply to each.

Remember the six basic questions of reportage? They are Who, What, When, Where, Why and How. So many senior health reporters seem to stop at the ‘What’ of the story and just barely touch on the ‘Why’. That is one reason I found Patti Neighmond’s recent piece for National Public Radio titled “Why We Gain Weight As We Age” so enjoyable.

Apparently, it’s all about our muscles. As we age, our muscles shrink. No one knows quite why this is, although the working

theory is that our body’s stem cells can’t keep up with the damage that years of activity has inflicted on our various muscle groups.

Unrepaired muscle cells can’t burn calories as effectively, so the percentage of fat in our body continues to rise while the percentage of muscle continues to fall. If you maintain your same caloric intake over the years, it takes your body longer and longer and burn the same number of calories.

“Countless studies have shown that exercise—even among individuals in their 80’s—works,” Neighmond says. “It actually helps the muscle cells get bigger.”

Exercise works! Muscles are still muscles, even if they are shrinking, and joints are still joints, even if they ache. Of course, the good news is exercise can help with both of those problems, if you do it right.

Another recent article came from nutritionist Sveta Bhassin of the India Times. In “Diet dos and don’ts for senior citizens,” she offers some really compelling advice related to nutrition and science. It ranges from the profoundly useful (egg whites are a good source of protein to help repair those damaged muscle cells) to the commonly sensible (spread your food intake out into six or seven small meals each day to make nutritional absorption easier).

Bhassin’s piece is especially interesting because, as a resident of India, she offers some food globe-democrat.com/.../exploring-agin...

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alternatives (vegetarian paneer, rotis bread, fenugreek seeds) that you don't get in American senior health reportage. (Although I would probably suggest adding some sort of sweetener to the oats porridge which she recommends as an "excellent breakfast for seniors.")

I'm 52 years old—right in those transitional years between what people think of as young and what people consider to be old. So day by day, I'm learning that the rules about health don't change as you age; they just get enforced more strictly. No matter what our ages are, we still need to eat right. We still need to exercise. And we still need to be smart about both.

*Roxanne Hinkle has an educational background in social work and psychology. She has been a licensed nursing home administrator for more than 25 years. She is currently an administrator with Lutheran Senior Services in St. Louis.*

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